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Technology



In the online world, users can build an empire and make real money from it

In Weblo.com, members buy and sell airports, cites, states, celebrity fan sites.

By Regine LaBossiere Special to The Morning Call

Mike Jameson owns more than 700 cities, including Washington, D.C.; Lake Buena Vista in Florida (home of the Walt Disney World Resort); and Manchester, the town where he lives.

Jameson is not a big shot developer or politico. Rather, he's a real estate agent. But in the virtual world of Weblo.com, anyone can own any real property, such as a building, an airport, a city, a state, a country.



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Lehigh Valley Local Links

And, in the Weblo world, users can make real money off their virtual properties.

For virtual Lehigh Valley properties, that real money is often measured in pennies.

A user named "nrmillions" owns Easton and has made 24 cents. The owner of Emmaus, a user named "Isacc," has earned 14 cents.

Jameson signed on to the Web site when it came out in September after he'd gotten frustrated by other virtual world Web sites that he said were too hard for him to use. In the real world, Jameson sells real estate in Connecticut and Massachusetts. In the virtual world, he owns 195 properties, 94 airports, 760 cities, 13 states, 17 celebrity fan sites and 1,430 domains, and counting.


He has earned hundreds of dollars off individual sales. For example, Jameson said, he bought Heinz Field, where the National Football League's Pittsburgh Steelers play, for \$2. He sold it to another Weblo user for \$150.

Manchester, Enfield, Groton, New London and West Hartford are among the 140 Connecticut municipalities of which he is mayor. Someone else snatched up Hartford -- more on that later.

"What I liked about it was the concept, the idea. I think the first week I heard about it, I pretty much bought every town that was available in Connecticut," said Jameson, who uses Weblo to advertise his real estate business. "From there, I just kept growing. Obviously, the demand is going to be there. Virtual networks are growing drastically."

The creator of Weblo, Rocky Mirza, seized on an opportunity to join the growing phenomenon of virtual worlds, where people create avatars (the online versions of themselves) and create their own worlds where they can fly, walk, drive and meet people all around the real globe. Major companies have been using virtual worlds to their advantage by creating business meetings in-world (as it's called when someone is using the virtual world) or by creating a virtual product and having virtual consumers test-drive it. The most famous virtual worlds are Second

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Life and There.com.

In the real world, nrmillions, the user who purchased Easton for \$3.50, is a Boston accountant named Neil Ratna. He went to college at Penn State University and lived in King of Prussia, Montgomery County, before moving to Boston recently. He snatched up properties in Pennsylvania and elsewhere hoping to make money if Weblo traffic picks up and real estate agents want to invest on his virtual cities.

For his user profile, Ratna posted a picture of Michael Douglas' character Gordon Gekko in the 1987 film Wall Street. But Gekko, with his slicked back hair and famous line "greed is good," would be disappointed in his virtual protege. Ratna has invested less than \$2,000 in virtual Weblo properties since November and owns 87 cities, including many suburbs around Philadelphia. So far, his total return is about \$17, he said.

"I definitely see a potential to make money owning cities," Ratna said. "The membership is still growing. I invested for the long term and not the short term."

And what do his friends think of him throwing down real money for fake cities?

"Almost all of my friends think I'm crazy," Ratna said. "Anything virtual, they don't seem to value. I don't think the investment is that big compared to other investing. If Weblo even got up to 1 million or 2 million users, there would be a lot of traffic revenue, and online advertising revenue."

Sean Morrow, director of marketing at Montreal-based Weblo, said Mirza was driving around and thinking about how people, including him, have made money on the Internet. He was looking at the real world and thinking how hard it was for people to own buildings. The idea spiraled from there.

"Our virtual world is parallel to the real world. ... In our parallel universe, it pays to play, and that's what's cool about it," Morrow said.

The payoff comes because players -- such as the guy who bought Heinz Field from Jameson -- are willing to pay real U.S. tender for the right to claim virtual properties online.

There are more than 30,000 Weblo members. Fifty percent are in the United States; most of the rest are in Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia.

Here's how it works: A person joins the site by entering any of the five levels, with the first level being free and the others paid memberships. The higher and more expensive the level, the more benefits a Weblo user can reap.

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