



Register | Sign in | Email Newsletters Home Delivery RSS

Home News My Town Sports Business Entertainment Living Columns Opinion Help Jobs Cars Homes Classifieds Shop Place An Ad

Thursday, May 03, 2007

Walnut Creek, California Now:48°F High:63°F Low:45°F 5-day forecast Get weather for:

Most Viewed Articles

- Moss a steal? You won't think that in the playoffs
- Teens' expulsion hearings open
- The draft's good, bad and puzzling
- Traffic plane makes emergency landing on Highway 4 in Bay Point
- Raiders sign seven undrafted free agents, including USC's McFoy
- Antioch police arrest teen tied to \$5 armed robbery

Ads by Google

Make Money Is Simple
With a Proven System You Can Make Money Being Your Own Boss!
wealthoverflowing.com

Global Forex Trading
Free \$50,000 Practice Account With Real-Time Charts, News & Research!
www.Forex.com

I Was Scammed \$2500
Read This Review Now and Get Scam No More. Don't Buy Until You Read.
www.2Simple4You.com/Review/

Make Money At Home
Simply Follow 3 Easy Steps To Earn Massive Residual Profits From Home
www.PluginProfitSite.com

Internet Marketing Secret
How rich marketers hook traffic & maximize cashflow
www.1StepSystem.com

del.icio.us Digg Reddit YahooMyWeb Google What's this?

RePrint Print Email

Your inner mogul is just a few clicks away

• Virtual worlds offer a chance to create new identities buy fake land and make a real profit

By Randy Myers
CONTRA COSTA TIMES
Article Launched: 05/03/2007 03:05:52 AM PDT

SAN FRANCISCO -- More comfortable in board shorts than boardrooms, Erik Christiansen hardly looks like the land baron he virtually is.

His real estate portfolio reveals an empire Genghis Khan would want to conquer.

For \$500, the 28-year old San Franciscan bought the artisan/sailing community of Sausalito along with the hot Mexican tourist destinations Puerto Vallarta and Cabo San Lucas. But the one land grab that amps the co-owner of Sierra Snowboard is Truckee, a coup because he sees crossover marketing for his real-world business.

With a few clicks, anyone can saddle up for a wild ride into the new frontier of virtual real estate, where the land is fake but the profit real. Not everyone visits virtual environs to lasso huge rewards. Christiansen ventured in for the heck of it, hoping it might bolster Sierra Snowboard.

"It's a total pyramid scheme," the entrepreneur said. "It's like trading baseball cards."

Christiansen embarked on this particular shopping spree in Weblo.com, described by its creators as "Monopoly on steroids." Weblo follows in the Web prints of Second Life, a popular 3-D environment created by a San Francisco company in which subscribers create identities -- often thinner and sexier versions of themselves -- to socialize, build communities, sell stuff and, if so inclined, join a sex club.

Marketers and media experts see a gold rush in virtual worlds. A New York expo wrapped up in March to discuss the business opportunities. Another

is planned in San Jose for October.

Advertisement



Cyberspace teems with virtual worlds, some for children, others for adult eyes only.

"I think everybody wants to be in a virtual world," said Sean Marrow, Weblo's marketing representative.

With the backing of Internet heavy hitter Richard Rosenblatt, former chairman of the social site MySpace, Weblo.com is selling virtual cities, states, even landmarks such as the Golden Gate Bridge.

The state of California went for \$53,000 in real, not virtual, cash.

The Sausalito that Christiansen created in Weblo features a YouTube video of the city, weather forecasts and links to his store. Weblo members earn money by selling properties and receiving a share -- based on the number of clicks -- from ads Weblo posts. Owners also profit from clicks to individual sites, rustling up cents. Most hope

someone searching for information about Walnut Creek, for instance, might call up the virtual Walnut Creek instead.

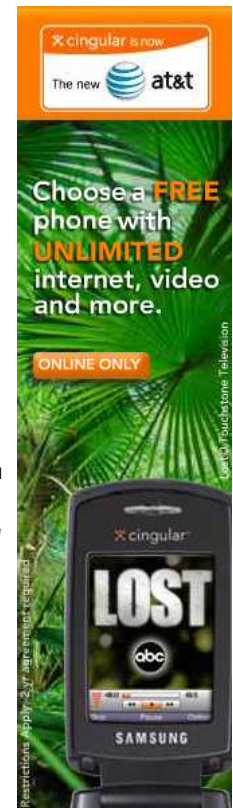
Buyers have plucked Richmond, Martinez and Walnut Creek from the site.

The attraction to creating an alternate life and buying goods might be born out of the unstable times in which we live, said a UC Berkeley professor of practical art and new media

"It's striking that we would start paying real money for virtual properties," said Greg Niemeyer.

"That kind of imagination shows how concerned we truly are about things collapsing. It's like we could transfer things to our server."

For part of 2003, writer Julian Dibbell attempted to make a living from buying and selling goods -- castles, land and more -- in the fantasy world of Ultima Online, a popular role-playing game. He estimated he could have made \$47,000 that year.



"The attraction of selling is that you can make money doing this," said Dibbell, who described his odyssey in "Play Money: Or, How I Quit My Day Job and Made Millions Trading Virtual Loot."

He found there are benefits to ditching the traditional job.

"It's pretty low overhead compared to a lot of businesses," Dibbell said. "You don't have to set up a shop. You don't have to rent a space. You don't even have to leave your house."

Dibbell said he sees little difference between the buying actions of a real person and an avatar -- the character a user creates in a virtual world.

"Why do you want a nice-looking house? Why do you want a car that looks like a person who drives it is virile and sexy? There are a million purchasing decisions people make in their lives that have nothing to do with durability and utility."

He said he sees some of the virtual real estate as another form of gambling.

"In a lot of them, the moneymaking is the game."

No matter the motivations, a bustling network of business specializes in buying, trading and selling Internet goods, from the Internet Commerce Association to Internet Real Estate.com.

The success stories often point to lucrative domain name purchases. Mike "Zappy" Zapolin with InternetRealEstate.com is a rock star in the industry: He bought beer.com for \$80,000 and sold it for \$7 million three months later. He continues to wield a Midas touch in buying and selling domain names.

Zapolin said he sees more opportunities to make money in virtual worlds, but he warns that the content must be top-notch to survive. He singled out Second Life for doing it right.

"The reality is there's a lot out there and a lot of money to be made. You have to separate the reality from the fantasy.

"If you're really doing something interesting and your content is compelling, it will work. But if you're just trying to be like me too, me too, and be on the fringes, I don't think it's going to work."

Rick Schwartz of Florida is betting his Weblo properties will pay off.

Just don't ask whether he owns Iowa. When you're managing 120 cities and four states, little details like that tend to slide.

What Schwartz knows well is that he shelled out \$50,000 in Weblo. The Sunshine State burned an \$18,000 hole in his pocketbook.

Now, this former furniture dealer who once drove through Richmond owns the virtual city. He has no idea what he'll do with it.

A landowner in the real world, he focuses his efforts in juicing up Florida. He, like other Weblo dwellers, hopes to have real businesses advertise to baby boomers and tourists. He doesn't know whether he'll even get past go.

"It's a game, man. If the game catches on, if people get immersed in it, well then, it was a good (investment)."

Reach Randy Myers at myers@cctimes.com or 925-977-8419.

getting VIRTUAL

New to the virtual world? Survey these sites:

- East Bay cities still on the market at <http://www.weblo.com>. Click on properties and then cities under the category tab.
- Create a better-looking you by stepping into Second Life at <http://www.secondlife.com>.
- Buy a castle, clobber monsters in Ultima Online at <http://www.uo.com>.
- Enter the virtual worlds of MTV's "The Hills," "Laguna Beach" and "Pimp My Ride" at <http://www.vlb.mtv.com>.

 RePrint  Print  Email  Return to Top

Comments

Some comments posted here may be reviewed before they are displayed, including submissions with hyperlinks or with language that is flagged by word filters. Please keep your comments respectful of others by avoiding name-calling and other inappropriate remarks.

Recent Comments

Be the first to post a comment using the form below

Post Your Comment

Name:



[Shop Local](#) | [Classifieds](#) | [Jobs](#) | [Cars](#) | [Homes](#)
[Advertise](#) | [News Staff](#) | [Help](#) | [Terms of Use & Privacy Statement](#) | [Copyright](#) | [Site Map](#) | [About MediaNews Group](#) | [RSS Feeds](#)

