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BUSINESS

A Virtual Empire Pays Off

■ **In Online World, Users Own `Real' Places - And Profit From Them**

June 17, 2007

By REGINE LABOSSIERE, Courant Staff Writer

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

Jameson signed on to the website when it came out in September after he'd gotten frustrated by other virtual world websites 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.

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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 Life and There.com.

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.

After joining the site, the Weblo user builds a profile, creating an avatar name, and maybe even uploading a picture. This process is similar to that of other social networking sites, such as MySpace.

Once users have a profile, they can start building an empire, such as creating a free fan site for a celebrity or buying buildings, homes, businesses, airports, cities, states and countries.

"They're all connected to your network, and they're open for other people, and you want them to be open because there's a significant way to make money," Morrow said.

To make money, users usually build up each profile page for each fan site and

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each property they've purchased. Building up a profile includes putting pictures, factual information and video up on the page. For example, Jameson's Lake Buena Vista page has a news article about a Disney World hotel, links to Disney World places, more than 100 photos of the city and the theme park, and reviews by people who have visited the site.

"That's what's happening. People are building these really phenomenal sites," Morrow said. One user bought Las Vegas for \$38, built up the page and sold it for \$430. The buyer then continued to work on the site and sold it for \$2,300, Morrow said.

Weblo provides several ways to make money. One way is to fix and flip the profile page, similar to buying and flipping a house. Another way is to attract traffic to the site. Depending on the user's membership level, after there have been 10,000 hits to a page, the user can make \$5 to \$10 for every 1,000 hits to that page. Users have to pay taxes to each other, so businesses in Hartford must pay taxes to the Hartford mayor. Weblo also shares advertising revenue with members. All real money that a virtual user earns comes on the 15th of every month to an account through Weblo.

"I believe the Internet will trend this way," Morrow said. "We're starting to see the end of the days where companies like MySpace and YouTube are cashing in, and those sites that have been built on the backs of users are not compensating those users."

Odin Wright, founder of The V3 Group, a Greenwich-based company that creates virtual environments for corporations, said people in the Internet industry are seeing virtual worlds, such as Weblo and Second Life, as the next evolution in MySpace.

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