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Posted on: Sunday, December 23, 2007

Hawaii sites fetch real cash in virtual world

By [Andrew Gomes](#)
Advertiser Staff Writer

In real life, a subsidiary of Massachusetts Mutual Life Insurance Co. owns the JW Marriott Ihilani Resort & Spa. But someone from a small Quebec city calling himself FrÃ©dÃ©rick online also claims to own the luxury O'ahu hotel, and is offering to sell it for \$300.

FrÃ©dÃ©rick "owns" the Ihilani in a virtual property world that's attracted thousands of people who have invested real money acquiring assets with the expectation they can resell them for more or earn advertising revenue from Web sites featuring their property.

The virtual world called Weblo is the creation of Canadian company www.Weblo.com Inc. that claims to have sold more than 25,000 pieces of real estate, including about 10,000 "cities" that initially were offered for as little as \$5.



Aloha Tower Marketplace: \$8 Investors put up real money for Hawaii's sites on Weblo's online parallel paradise.

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Honolulu: \$19.

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Hawai'i, with its pricey real estate and notoriety as a tropical paradise, has been popular on Weblo's so-called virtual parallel universe, with people purchasing a host of assets including 'Aiea, the Hawai'i Convention Center, Hilo High School and the Mormon temple in La'ie.

Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park is for sale by its owner at \$7. Hilo's Rainbow Falls can be yours for \$500.

Kane'ohe resident Stuart Kiyota wanted to buy Kane'ohe, but it was taken. Instead he spent \$8 for Windward Mall, Kahala Mall, Aloha Tower Marketplace and Kualoa Ranch. "It sounded like fun," said the 35-year-old sales representative for a local wholesaler. "It's kind of like Monopoly. ... I thought, 'What would I like to own?' "

The "mayor" of Honolulu is Andy Jonson, a microbiologist from Montreal, Canada, who paid \$19 for Hawai'i's most populous city.

Someone else from Canada became Hawai'i's "governor" by paying Weblo \$1,301 for the state.

Weblo proclaims "the world is for sale — virtually" and describes itself as Monopoly on steroids. Airports and hotels are among some of Weblo's more common assets, as are landmarks.

Weblo users have bought the USS Arizona Memorial, the Mission Houses Museum and Aloha Stadium. Even obscure property is on the site, such as a Koloa, Kaua'i, bed-and-breakfast that hasn't been in business for more than a year.

"I found the site and just thought that the entire concept was really cool, and if you're any good at marketing and the Internet, you can actually make money," said the "owner" of Maui's Grand Wailea Resort Hotel & Spa in an e-mail. "I'm also enjoying the social aspects of the site as well."



JW Marriot Ihilani Resort & Spa: \$300.



Hawaii Volcanoes National Park: \$7.

Some observers chalk up Weblo to a largely frivolous novelty like buying deeds to pieces of the moon mixed with Web sites for posting original or borrowed content like MySpace and YouTube.

Weblo's business model, however, also emphasizes its tie to advertising shared with members.

Weblo.com Inc. was established in September 2006 by Rocky Mirza, an Internet entrepreneur who obtained backing from former MySpace chairman Richard Rosenblatt and \$5.6 million in venture capital financing.

The company claims 72,000 members and initially sold cities for as little as \$5, though the minimum price today is \$25. Real estate smaller than a city or town — anything with a street address qualifies — can be bought for \$2 from the company. Other property on Weblo includes copies of Internet domain names and celebrity fan sites.

For instance, someone on Weblo has claimed www.MichelleWie.com, which has no real link to the official Web site of the Hawai'i golf pro but does include videos of Wie via YouTube and is available for \$95. Michelle Wie as a celebrity likeness asset on Weblo can be bought for \$200 from someone in Washington state.

For each asset, owners are given a stock Web page on Weblo to develop with everything from photos and descriptions of the property to personal blogs and video. In some ways, the Web pages are similar to those on MySpace and Facebook, allowing members to form social networking groups.

Reach Andrew Gomes at agomes@honoluluadvertiser.com.

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