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Virtual world, real earnings

Users of Weblo can buy buildings, parks, states -- and make money on them

REGINE LABOSSIÈRE, *The Hartford Courant*

Mike Jameson owns 700 cities, including Washington, Lake Buena Vista, Fla., (home of the Walt Disney World Resort); and Manchester, Conn., the town where he lives.

Jameson is not a big developer or politico. 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 Web site when it came out in September. He had gotten frustrated by other virtual world sites, which he said were too hard 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 NFL's Pittsburgh Steelers play, for \$2. He sold it to another Weblo user for \$150.

"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 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 phenomenon of virtual worlds, where people create avatars (online versions of themselves) and create worlds where they can fly, walk, drive and meet people all around the real globe. Major companies have been using virtual worlds 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.

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 -- there are more than 30,000 members -- the Weblo user builds a profile, creating an avatar name and maybe even uploading a picture.

Once users have a profile, they can start building an empire, such as creating a free fan site for a celebrity or buying virtual properties.

"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 each profile page for each fan site and each property they've purchased. Building a profile includes putting pictures, factual information and video 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.

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