

Naples Daily News

Online game offers virtual ownership for real money

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Want to own a city?



What about a state? Or maybe a landmark, like the Statue of Liberty or even the Eiffel Tower?

You can through Weblo, an online game the inventor likes to call “Monopoly on steroids.”

Unlike Monopoly, the game takes real money. You can buy any property in the real world except those others have already claimed and don’t want to sell.

Members can purchase everything from their homes to their hometowns. Cities, states, airports, and even celebrities are up for sale at weblo.com.

But don’t expect to buy Naples. It isn’t for sale.

Neither are Bonita Springs, Estero or Fort Myers. At least, not right now.

They were snatched up months ago, and their owners are now virtual mayors. No hard politicking involved here — just money.

The “mayor” of Naples is also the mayor of more than 100 other cities, including Bonita Springs, St. Petersburg and Jacksonville. He also owns Cape Canaveral, “In case I have rockets I need to launch,” he quips.

And though he has no political aspirations, he's Florida's virtual governor, having picked up the state for \$18,000 and change.

"I targeted Florida," said Rick Schwartz, a Boca Raton resident and entrepreneur who makes a living investing in Internet domain names. "I wanted Florida. "It's one of the fastest growing states and obviously it's a prosperous and wealthy state."

He purchased about 130 cities in four states on Weblo the same day the game launched last year.

He wasn't quick enough to get Miami, Fort Lauderdale, or Orlando.

"They were snapped up immediately," Schwartz said. "So I snapped up whatever I could snap up."

Why Naples?

"I looked for larger population centers in affluent areas," Schwartz said.

On Weblo, buyers can build profiles and pages to support their empire. Schwartz hasn't developed his sites yet. The idea is to create interesting sites with information and pictures to draw other viewers — and potentially other buyers who are willing to pay more for your assets.

Owners can make money in several ways. They can resell properties for a profit and they can collect fees whenever anyone clicks on the random ads posted on their pages.

"The more people that go to your site, the more likely they are to click on the ads," said Scott Ledingham, a Weblo spokesman.

Virtual mayors or governors get fees whenever purchases are made in their cities and states. Mayors collect 5 cents for every \$10 spent in their city, while governors get 25 cents for every \$100 spent in their state.

Earnings are paid out monthly.

Though he hasn't developed his sites yet, Schwartz has earned \$500 on all his properties. He estimates he's invested \$50,000.

"Florida and California are probably my biggest holdings," he said.

Those holdings include five airports. Among them are the Jacksonville Naval Air Station and Langley Air Force Base.

He even purchased Weblo's headquarters in Ottawa.

“I figure if I buy them, I own them, right?” he joked.

To make money, you’ve got to take risks, he said.

“If you’re scared to lose money, you’ll never make a lot of money,” Schwartz said. “Most people don’t lose enough to win enough.”

He admits he spends virtually no time on the site. “I really need to hire someone to do this,” Schwartz said.

Though Naples, Bonita Springs and Fort Myers aren’t for sale, there are plenty of other cities available. And they’re affordable too.

(This reporter purchased the Naples Daily News and Southwest Florida International Airport each for \$3 and change, including the deeds and asset protection that keeps ownership secret. Neither of the properties had been registered.)

Other properties purchased in Southwest Florida include Fort Myers Toyota, Edison & Ford Winter Estates, Babs Bead Warehouse and Waterside Shops.

The owner of the Ritz-Carlton, Naples, who has earned 2 cents, is accepting offers for his property.

So is the owner of Naples Municipal Airport, who has made 4 cents on his investment so far and has actually taken the time to develop his page with a photo gallery and information about Naples and the general aviation airport. In his description, he calls the airport a “gateway to paradise” and encourages visitors to use it. His site has generated more than 70 hits so far.

Many members have amassed cities, celebrities and properties. Ledingham at Weblo likens it to collecting baseball cards.

On the first day, Weblo offered all properties at \$1. That included the Empire State Building, which recently resold for \$250.

The cost of cities and states depends on their size and population. Boston was initially purchased for \$36. It recently sold for \$480.

Because of its smaller size, Naples came at a bargain price: \$5.

New York City first sold for \$387. It has not resold.

To date, Weblo users have purchased more than 3,700 cities in the U.S. and more than 7,500 worldwide.

Las Vegas has sold three times. First it went for \$35, then for \$430, and finally for \$2,300.

Seattle was bought for \$40 and sold for \$2,000. Buffalo went for \$19 and sold for \$450. Dallas was purchased for \$58 and sold for \$1,000, netting the owner a \$942 profit.

States are a lot pricier than cities. California went for \$53,000 and has not resold, Ledingham said.

Delaware was originally bought for \$1,157 and resold for \$1,601.

In Canada, Ontario resold for \$16,900, giving the original buyer a \$5,350 profit.

There are 31,000 assets owned on Weblo now, including celebrities, domains, cities, states and other properties.

The owner of Quebec has made \$800 since Weblo launched last September, Ledingham said.

“It’s kind of like a mix of monopoly, MySpace and Wikipedia,” he said. “Our boss likes to call it ‘Monopoly on steroids.’”

His boss is Rocky Mirza, an Ottawa businessman who developed online auction and trading sites uniqueauction.com and swapedo.com, and thebuz.com, where you can post content anonymously.

Weblo now has nearly 25,000 members worldwide. It’s growing all the time. Want to play?