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## Wednesday interview: Weblo founder Rocky Mirza on social networking for profit



Relationships, eh? When they start, it's about establishing a connection and getting on well. But at some point, they always become more about money. Which is an only *slightly* contrived way of introducing [Weblo](#), a new virtual world where the networking is more financial than social.

Members can buy and sell property and virtual domain names, as well as become the online publicity manager for a celebrity of their choice. All this based on real-world assets too, from buildings to celebs, while the domain names are the same as ones owned out on the 'real' Web.

Confused? Founder Rocky Mirza says the service is already a roaring success, having launched last week. I asked him what Weblo is aiming to do, why he thinks it'll be a success, and whether there are legal issues around creating and selling virtual versions of real-world places and celebrities.

"It's been excellent so far," says Mirza. "Every major city is already sold, and people are buying domain names like there's no tomorrow. California went for \$50,000, every major state in the US

and Canada has gone, and we're pulling in around \$92 a minute since we launched. It's a whole new space we're creating here."

Let's wheel back a minute. When you join Weblo, you can pay real-world money for in-world assets, including buildings and cities, but also domain names - even if they've been taken in the real world. The world has its own cyber-marketplace where you can then resell stuff and buy from other users. And the big idea is that besides paying out money, you can also make it from a variety of methods, including advertising, domain redirection and - if you own a city or state - 'taxes' from every virtual property bought in that area.

It's all a bit head-spinning, even if you're comfortable with other virtual worlds like Second Life and Project Entropia, where people have been paying real cash for virtual assets for a while now. Mirza says the concept of Weblo appeals to a wider cross-section of people.

"The target market was 18 to 36 year-olds, but we're getting people up to 60 and beyond," he says. "A lot of people aren't involved in any other games on the Internet. Some people like the business aspect, and some are getting involved for fun or entertainment. In many cases, it's not being perceived as a virtual world. It's a second chance of getting what you missed out on before, for example with the domain names."

Weblo has been designed to appeal to a broad range of users too, without the 3D graphics that make many other virtual worlds inaccessible if you've got an average computer. Weblo's launch of "an internet within an internet" is intriguing though, allowing people to buy domains like cars.com or music.com and then direct Weblo users to whatever site they like, when they type that address in within the world.

Isn't this on dodgy grounds legally though, allowing people to pay for domains that have already been registered outside Weblo, and letting them make money from them?

"We would have launched Weblo a long time ago, but the legal slowed us down," admits Mirza. "It wasn't just domain names. We were planning to sell celebrities, but the lawyers came back and said we couldn't do that, so we're giving them away, one-per-person, on a first-come first-



served basis. So we're not selling the celebrities or profiting from them."



Yes, the celebrities. How this works is you sign up to manage the Weblo 'rights' of a specific celebrity (I'm guessing Paris Hilton has gone, but you might still have a shot at Nikki from Big Brother), and can then create a mini fan-site all about them, making money from reselling these rights to other users, or from ads placed on your mini-site.

I have to be honest, and wonder why if you wanted to run this kind of site, you wouldn't just do it as a fully-blown website, rather than within a newly-launched virtual world. But the proof will come if people start making money in Weblo from their chosen celebrity more easily than they would from a regular website.

The other interesting thing about Weblo is its political aspects. Users will be able to be elected as president or prime minister of specific countries in the virtual world, and Mirza has ambitious plans to bring the Weblo leaders together for a real-world summit. If nothing else, it should provide an intriguing glimpse into how people's politics differ in a virtual world from the real one. Mirza is already planning further features though, based on user feedback.

"People have been telling us we should be selling sports teams like Manchester United," he says. "We're also thinking of starting a psychiatrist programme, where people can take a test online to become a psychiatrist on Weblo, and then charge people 10 or 15 cents to give them advice on, say, relationships. So we have many ideas."

I'll be honest, Weblo is one of those ideas that sounds plain crazy from the outside. Yet that doesn't mean it won't be a roaring success. Part of its financing comes from Richard Rosenblatt, former chairman of MySpace - a fact that's been trumpeted in the press releases for Weblo, which implies the company is keen to win over the doubters, who probably said the same things about MySpace in its early days. Watch that space in the coming months to see if Weblo can take off to a similar degree.

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