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Virtual properties paying off

By **REGINE LABOSSIÈRE**, *The Hartford Courant*

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Mike Jameson owns more than 700 cities, including Washington, D.C.; 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, after he had gotten frustrated by other virtual world sites that 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.

"It's never too late to become who you might have been."
-George Eliot

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"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.

"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.

Weblo also shares advertising revenue with members.

"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 Connecticut-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.

"I think the true value is, even if it's a virtual space, you still have the opportunity to interact and share an experience with a human being that's in a live setting, and you get a chance to be creative. (People can say) 'I've always wanted to be an architect, I can build a house? Let me do it,' " said Wright, whose avatar name in Second Life is Liam Kanno.

He called Weblo.com an "exciting venture."

"Certainly in virtual environments, people are trying to create new means of generating capital," Wright said.

Rick Schwartz knows about new means of earning money. He made millions by buying thousands of domain names before the Internet was cool, and then selling them.

Schwartz lives in Boca Raton, Fla., and owns 5,000 domain names that see almost 4 million visitors a month, he said.

And he is hoping that by having joined Weblo early on, he will help create a pathway for people to earn a living off the Internet.

"It'll be one of those overnight successes that take one or two years to catch on. I've seen a lot of crazier things on the Internet. If you're going to play, you might as well try to cash in a little bit," Schwartz said.

He is the governor of four states, including Rhode Island and Florida, the mayor of 128 cities and the owner of 18 domain names within Weblo and one property, Weblo's headquarters.

"All I can say is, you have to do things in life when everyone thinks you're crazy for doing it so everyone thinks you're smart on the other end," Schwartz said.

Jameson's avatar is HamptonBeach, named after his favorite beach in New Hampshire and a town that, not surprisingly, he owns in-world.

"Because it relates directly to real property in the world, it's just a great marketing tool," Jameson said. "I think it's the next Internet."

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