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'England on auction' in Weblo virtual world



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by Glenn Chapman
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SAN FRANCISCO (AFP) - An online virtual world playfully branded "Monopoly on steroids" is offering England to the highest bidder, with the winner to be crowned king or queen.

The website Weblo.com, a reality-based virtual world launched in December of 2006 by a Montreal-based firm of the same name, announced it was putting "England on auction."

Bidding begins Thursday and is expected to top 70,000 dollars by the time the auction gavel drops July 12.

California is the most costly Weblo "property" to date, bought at auction for 53,000 dollars, according to company spokesman Sean Morrow.

"We thought we could break out of the mold by not just letting someone be the president of a country, but the virtual king or queen," Morrow told AFP.

"We already have teams of Weblonians, citizens of Weblo, expressing interest."

The monarch of Weblo's England not only has the opportunity for prestige and profits at his or her own Weblo profile page, they get a percentage of all financial transactions in a virtual equivalent of taxes.

Unlike Internet virtual worlds of Second Life and Entropia Universe, members of Weblo are represented by MySpace-like profile pages rather than animated characters called "avatars."

Instead of fantasy planets or islands such as those in Second Life or Entropia, Weblo virtual properties are web pages themed for places, people or things from the real world.

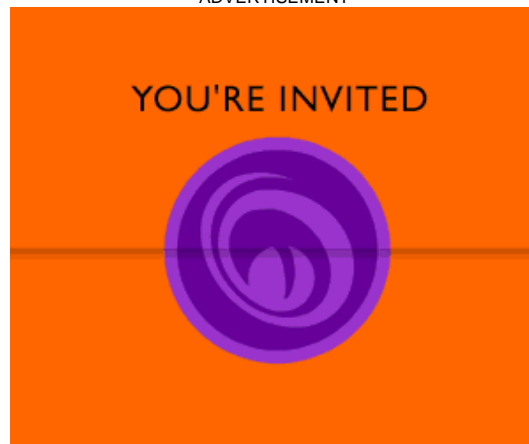
"The real-world element of Weblo sets us apart from other virtual worlds," Morrow said.

"People have an affinity to their home towns, schools, the houses they grew up in -- so people are registering them as profiles. With Weblo you build a profile of yourself and favorite things and have a chance to monetize it."

Weblo properties vie for visitors with updates of news, photos, video, journal entries or other content in keeping with the theme, whether it is California, Paris Hilton, or England.

Owners share in online advertising revenues that rise with the popularity of their in-world

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"You promote sites, cities, celebrities the same way you would a MySpace page, but at Weblo you get paid," Morrow said. "If you own Paris Hilton on Weblo you can update how she is doing in jail to keep users coming back."

Weblo shunned avatars, betting people prefer a simple Monopoly game-format to the complexity of maneuvering avatars about animated terrain.

"Virtual worlds in general are a concept that scares the average person, figuring out how to move the avatar in that world," Morrow said.

"Monopoly has been around a long time and being compared to Monopoly-on-steroids is neat. If you can attach a picture to e-mail you can participate in Weblo. There is no learning curve."

Membership at Weblo is free and the website claims nearly 40,000 members.

"We're babies," Morrow said. "But we're out of the gate and running quickly."

The next major property to be put up for sale may be the United States, with an auction timed to coincide with the presidential election in 2008.

"That is another great avenue for exploration," Morrow said of the idea. "Anything that is out there in the real world can be brought in to the Weblo world."

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