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The Free Lance-Star

WEB FUN 'MONOPOLY ON STEROIDS' Build 'empire' in cyberspace WRITER TOSSES THE DICE WITH ON-THE-HOUSE RICCI PURCHASE

Virtual "land rush" sees Fredericksburg, Virginia, the Empire State Building and Justin Timberlake all snapped up by speculators on Weblo, a new social networking Web site.



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By MICHAEL ZITZ

The virtual mayor of Fredericksburg has never actually been here.

But he hopes people will visit it at Weblo.com, a cyberspace world where thousands of people are spending real money on virtual assets.

Virtual cities, virtual states, virtual properties like the Empire State Building and airports like Dulles and Reagan National are changing hands among virtual Donald Trumps.

And virtual moguls bet on the careers of real-life musicians, models and actresses.

Tampa resident Ron Jackson once passed Fredericksburg on Interstate 95 while taking his daughter to college in Pennsylvania.

"Obviously, it's a really famous city historically," he said in a telephone interview from Florida. "I wish we had time to pull off there. We love antiques."

In other words, it's a nice place to read about in history books, and visit, too--in the perfect world where there's time to spare.

Still, a fleeting glimpse of road signs and a flash of Civil War recognition was all it took for the former Tampa Bay TV newsman, weather man and sports reporter to pony up \$5 to become mayor of Fredericksburg on Weblo.

And it might pay off with a substantial profit.

It's a small gamble on both the very real growth of the Fredericksburg area and the virtual growth of Montreal-based Weblo, which has been called "Monopoly on steroids."

A few Weblo "citizens" who got in early have already turned sizable profits.

California sold recently for \$53,000 in real money. Texas sold for \$23,000.

More than 3,000 U.S. cities and over 7,000 cities worldwide have been sold.

The virtual governor of Virginia was trying to sell the commonwealth for more than \$10,000.

Las Vegas recently re-sold for \$2,300. The seller made a \$1,970 profit after buying it for \$430.

Seattle re-sold for \$2,000--a \$1,960 profit.

Virtual governors of states collect "tax revenues"--a percentage of Internet advertising profits generated by virtual mayors of cities in those states.

Virtual mayors collect "taxes" from owners of properties like nightclubs in their cities.

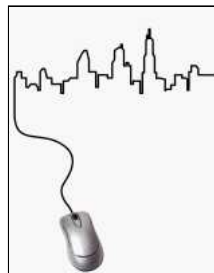
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Weblo places ads on every site and members receive a percentage of the pay-per-click revenue generated from their pages. So far, for most, that's been only pennies.

Weblo resembles fantasy baseball in that users try to buy the virtual rights to music artists on the verge and young movie ingenues at low prices, then, hopefully, sell them high if they break through in the real world.

The promise of Weblo has to do in part with the fact that it can help get Web sites listed high on search engines like Google and Yahoo.



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By MICHAEL ZITZ

Ricci

Rather than dabbling in virtual real estate on Weblo, I tried speculating on celebrities.

When new members sign up for the virtual-world Web site, they each get \$5 to play with free. They can invest more money to buy virtual properties by credit card.

Prior to the recent release of the satirical film "Black Snake Moan" I used part of that house \$5 to buy Christina Ricci, one of the movie's stars.

I spent less than an hour writing a brief, but snide, commentary, posting images of a scantily clad Ricci from the film and doing an interactive poll.

I figured Ricci might have a chance to do well on Weblo because the movie seemed destined to create controversy. In the dark comedy, she's chained by Samuel L. Jackson and dressed provocatively. He's deeply religious and trying to change her wanton ways.

Ricci and "Black Snake Moan" seemed perfect.

Many of the celebrity sites that do the best on Weblo--and the rest of the Internet, for that matter--succeed for the most basic reason imaginable--they feature attractive models and actresses or controversial topics. The film combined both.

But my poll turned out to be a little too dead-on.

"Is 'Black Snake Moan' a bold, brilliant move for Christina Ricci or career suicide?" I asked visitors, who voted on choices including the following:

- a) It'll make Ricci a 21st-century Marilyn Monroe.
- b) It'll kill her career deader than Anna Nicole's.

Unfortunately for my Weblo celebrity site, the correct answer was "b."

The movie was a box-office stink bomb and the site got about 100 hits in a month, earning me 7 cents in ad revenue.

I posted an open letter to Christina on my site pleading with her to help me out by dating co-star Justin Timberlake, then publicly dump him for Jackson.

No dice.

I did get two offers for the site.

Fifteen dollars just before the movie debuted. I foolishly passed, then went weeks without a nibble after the film tanked.

Then, last week, out of the blue, \$12. I jumped at it.

It was a fun way to earn lunch money. But I'm not going to quit my day job.

A few Weblo "citizens" have done much better, though:

Empire State Building: bought for \$1, sold for \$250.

Atlanta: bought for \$21, sold for \$350.

Detroit: bought for \$44, sold for \$214.

Austin, Texas: bought for \$34, sold for \$200.

Denver: bought for \$28, sold for \$250.

District of Columbia: bought for \$33, sold for \$99.

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