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THE BIG INTERVIEW: Weblo.com's founder Rocky Mirza explains how he's creating a better world

New virtual reality game gives you the chance to rule the world

by Amber Maitland published on 21 September 2006

Ever fancied being President of the United States? Or wanted to take control of the City of London from Ken Livingston? In Weblo world, you can.

The brainchild of Rocky Mirza, and financed in part by former MySpace chairman Richard Rosenblatt, Weblo offers users our world for their taking in the virtual one. It's based on four distinct foundations - real estate, politics, domains, and celebrities - each of which offers real-world revenue channels for canny entrepreneurs.

"The plot of the story is based on the real world," explains Mirza. "Unlike other virtual games, we believe that in the future, games won't be only be played in the virtual world, but also in the real world, and we're leading."

Weblo is a carbon copy of the real world that gives users the ability to, first of all, buy and sell real estate. So, for example, the first option is to buy your own house in Weblo, for around \$2. All monetary transactions are carried out in real-world US dollars. Every scrap of land in the real world is for sale in Weblo at launch; California is the most expensive state at \$50,000, while London is a relative bargain at \$475.

"If you bought London in Weblo, you would become mayor of London, so you can make bylaws, and collect revenue from advertising and collect taxes," says Mirza. Anyone that buys property in London then pays you taxes of various sorts in real money.

The prices for real estate are dynamically generated, so that the more users there are

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"living" and "working" in a particular city, the greater the value of property. Prices also depend on how many citizens of Weblo there are online.

The second element to Weblo is domain names. Mirza explains that Weblo has essentially created a secondary market for domain names, where real-world domains can be bought within Weblo. For example, at launch, shoes.com and London.com will be available for purchase. Users have a choice when searching to search for hits within or outside of Weblo. But inside domain names can be linked to external sites; Weblo has created an internet within an internet.

The domain within Weblo will also feature advertising, just like every other website. Domain-name owners make money from people clicking on ads, and the revenue from that is shared by Weblo, the owner, and other owners linked to the domain-name owners' real estate.

The next facet of Weblo is the management of celebrities. Initially, Mirza envisioned selling celebrities to the highest bidder, but for legal reasons, this didn't fly. Instead, each new user will get to choose a celebrity to manage on Weblo. "So if you choose Paris Hilton, you're responsible for all the content, all the news, etc, on her page. You're her manager."

Each page is ranked in terms of popularity with other Weblo users, and from this you generate revenue. Weblo has put contingencies in place that let real-world celebrities represented on Weblo to cash in and take a share of the profit generated from their status in Weblo world.

So that users don't run amok, Weblo has drawn up a code of conduct. "There are certain negative things not allowed," says Mirza. A manager who is demonising his or her celebrity would be asked to stop or booted out.

Finally, Weblo addresses politics by running the virtual world as it should be run. In a big

marketing move, Mirza plans that once the US president of Weblo world has been elected, he or she and another world leader from a country currently opposed to the US will be brought together in the real world to discuss matters. "We're going to bring the two virtual presidents together in the real world, give them a team of experts and give them five days to resolve matters." They'll get all the trappings of fame and fortune, complete with limos, body guards, and plush hotels.

"We're going to release to the real world, what can't be done in the real world, our virtual presidents can do."

Of course, there are certain anomalies in Weblo that work differently in the real world. In terms of buying real estate, users can purchase ground and buildings in any country, but if you're a resident of the UK and you buy a Canadian property, you have to pay a fee (probably around \$1.50) to become a Canadian citizen in order to sell that property. However, Weblo believes in the spirit of multi-nationality, so there's currently no limit to how many countries you can be a citizen of.

At the moment, Weblo has to generate hype to attract members, but that shouldn't be hard. Before the real marketing push, the website already had around 2,400 people on the waiting list to sign up. "New York costs \$30,000, but we have some people willing to mortgage their houses to get these states. They know they're going to be able to make money from it. It's theirs for life." Weblo property can even be willed to inheritors; this is not a short-term proposition.

Weblo is offering advanced registration of accounts until 25 September, and these pre-registered users will then be able to take part in a one-day land grab pre-sale from 5pm BST on the 25th. The main site will be open to all on the official launch on 26th September.

The membership levels include basic, which is free, Bronze, Silver, Gold, and VIP. Advertising

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profit share is scaled according to these memberships, as is regular property cost. All levels get a celebrity to manage, and all can register multiple domain names per day.

"With Weblo world, we're trying to create a better world," says Rocky Mirza.