

Web Sites Track the Two-Headed Eagle

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Many of us put pencil marks on banknotes when we were kids, hoping to get them back someday. Thanks to the Internet, tracking bills online has become possible and is gaining popularity in Russia due to two special web sites.

Founders of Cupura.ru and Roobex.ru said they got the idea from a similar American web site called WheresGeorge.com, which was launched in 1999 and is still popular.

“Everything started in the United States when a \$20 bill with a note saying “learn my story on WheresGeorge.com” wound up in my hands,” said Roobex.ru founder Anatoly Rakhmailov, who lived in the United States for six years before returning to his native Russia.

Rakhmailov, 29, said he was surprised to see “a huge number of people” on the U.S. web site, “who really wanted to know ... who owned the bills they had once held in their hands.”

Rakhmailov launched the Russian analogue of WheresGeorge.com in March 2009 “just for fun.”

On Roobex.ru interested users can register bills by inputting serial numbers and leave comments on how the money was spent.

“I wanted to diversify the process of entertaining and communicating in the Internet amid common fanatical interest in social networks,” Rakhmailov said in e-mailed comments.

Kirill Sorokin, who created the other tracking web site, Cupura.ru, together with his two friends, said the project had been launched “for pleasure” as well.

Cupura.ru and Roobex.ru, which currently have 1,489 and 1,907 regular users, respectively, were launched as noncommercial projects. But while Roobex.ru provides an opportunity for placing banner advertisements, Sorokin said his web site would never be commercialized.

“No advertising, no commercialization was planned for this project initially. And we don't plan to commercialize it in the future,” he said in an interview.

Roobex.ru currently brings no profit, said Rakhmailov, who lives in Rostov-on-Don.

To start tracking, users register bills and get notifications by e-mail when the next user registers the same bill. The logic is simple: The more bills a user registers, the higher the probability he'll hear about one of them again.

More than 60,000 bills are currently registered on Cupura.ru, while the figure for Roobex.ru stands at almost 49,000.

Dmitry, who works at a car service center in Khabarovsk, has registered a total of 1,676 bills on Cupura.ru since the beginning of the year, which has made him second in the top-20 users rating.

Dmitry, 30, who didn't want to provide his surname, said he had started registering bills as a matter of hometown pride, to compete with neighboring Komsomolsk-on-Amur in the Khabarovsk region.

“I was registering more and more bills, and finally noticed that I was in fifth place. Second place was sort of a personal ambition,” he said by telephone.

Cupura.ru users in Khabarovsk registered a total of 2,070 bills as of Dec. 1. The figure for Komsomolsk-on-Amur stands at 711.

Moscow and St. Petersburg with 9,870 bills and 4,560 bills, respectively, top the list of active cities.

Rakhmailov said tracking movement of bills wasn't a breathtaking process by itself, “but if we add each user's personal participation ... an element of intrigue is added to the game.”

Users of the sites are interested in what the bills were spent on, while some say they get a rush just out of registering bills.

Boris, a 23-year-old Cupura.ru user who has registered 1,364 banknotes as of Dec. 1, said tracking bills had “turned into a sport” for him.

“I register bills almost every day, as soon as I get them,” said Boris, who has been using the web site for about two months, after seeing a television report about the project.

“I got involved in the process and specially set aside bills of different denominations. I try to change big bills in a store,” he said in e-mailed comments. He also said there had been no confirmed sightings of his bills yet.

He said he didn't want his surname mentioned in the newspaper.

Another user of the web site, Andrei, 24, who lives in Chelyabinsk, said he had 14 hits already, having registered 1,031 bills. He said Cupura.ru had brought him back to his childhood.

“I remember that I was writing down serial numbers of bills as a kid just in case I got them back,” he said in e-mailed comments. He refused to provide his surname as well.

To make the game more interesting, most users leave amusing comments while registering their bills.

“The bill has clearly seen better times in its life ... I got it for change in the No. 12 minibus. There's a note: Find it on Roobex.ru,” said Futurama, a user of that site, in comments about a 10 ruble bill. “Taking this into account, I've brought it back to life by means of an iron,” said the bill-tracking enthusiast, who lives in Omsk.

The champion banknote on Cupura.ru is a 100 ruble bill, which has been registered three times and traveled a distance of 2,355 kilometers from Belgorod to Ulyanovsk, Sorokin said.

The leader on Roobex.ru is a 5,000 ruble note, which moved 3,033 kilometers from Bataisk in the Rostov region to St. Petersburg and was registered five times.

Stamping the tracking web site address on a bill is a common way to attract new participants. Some web site users have their own stamps they use to mark bills.

Sorokin said there is a risk that banks may consider stamped bills to be damaged. “But practice shows that banks accept such bills without problems,” he said.

In Sorokin's experience, cashiers don't reject stamped bills, either. “They are just astonished,” he said, and ask what the stamp means.

Cupura.ru founders, who live in Novosibirsk, stamped about 2,500 bills and disseminated them in various stores when they launched the web site in June 2009.

Until recently the Central Bank didn't withdraw bills with extraneous markings, but according to new rules issued in February, bills bearing stamps or “unrelated notes” of more than two characters are considered worn-out and must be withdrawn from circulation.

“Thus, putting any stamps or written notes on bills significantly lowers the possibility of their eventual registration in the systems like Cupura.ru and Roobex.ru,” Central Bank spokesman Vladimir Khrustov told The Moscow Times.

“Marking a bill with a note or a stamp makes it useless for further circulation and leads to

additional costs for the Bank of Russia related to replacement of such bills,” he said in e-mailed comments.

Khrustov added, however, that such bills are valid and must be accepted in stores.

The Central Bank plans to launch its own banknote tracking system aimed at improving the quality of bills and fighting forgery.

The bank said it had “an opportunity to use bill counters with the function of reading serial numbers” to monitor circulation.

First Deputy Chairman of the Central Bank Georgy Luntovsky said earlier this year that the bank was developing an online system that would track banknotes by serial numbers and create a database of their movement.

A total of 5.8 billion banknotes valued at a total of 5 trillion rubles were in circulation as of Oct. 1, according to the Central Bank.

Rakhmailov said he has no intentions of coordinating his project with the Central Bank.

“We have no need to cooperate with [them] so far, because we ... have different purposes,” he said.

But Sorokin said he would try in the future to partner with the Central Bank by providing it with some statistics from his site.

The Central Bank said it wasn’t planning any interaction with the web sites.

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