Governance of Virtual Worlds

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Announcements

• Final project due date has been extended
  – Projects now due Monday, March 13
  – Week from today, beginning of class

• Upcoming talk
  – Thursday, March 16, 3-5pm
  – Social Sciences 1, #328 (Ethnographic Library)
  – Ethical Code: Aesthetics and Contingency in the Making of a Virtual World
    • Thomas Malaby, Univ. of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
  – Examines ethics are encoded in Second Life
More Announcements

• Considering adding an independent study game design class next quarter
  – Would meet once a week, Tues, 3-5pm
  – Could do Thursday 3-5pm instead
  – Basic idea is to have 2 person teams and develop 5 games over the quarter, one every 2 weeks

• Video Game Club meeting
  – Tuesday, 6:30pm
  – Simularium, E2 180
Governance in Virtual Worlds


• Any collection of people will have conflicting common or individual interests
  – Politics emerges naturally from this situation to allow negotiation among conflicting choices

• Virtual worlds therefore have politics
Would you support a dictatorship?

- Virtual worlds are not democratic
  - There are no elected leaders, representatives, city councils, mayors, judges, etc.
- Typical form of government is
  - Isolated moments of tyranny
    - Interactions with customer service representatives
  - Embedded in widespread anarchy
    - Generally there is no functional government
- If you play an MMO, you are supporting a dictatorship 😊
  - But it’s just a game…
The Tyrant

• The “Coding Authority”
  – This represents the company that owns the virtual world, along with the developers who work for this company
  – For WoW, it is Blizzard and its developers
  – The Coding Authority reserves for itself dictatorial power over everything in the world
  – Within the world, its powers eclipse even those of real-world dictators
  – Powers are spelled out in the EULA and the Code (or Rules) of Conduct for the world
    • The vast majority of users enter the world without realizing what these documents require.
A strange sort of despotism

• Unlike most despots, the governed in virtual worlds pay monthly dues, and have a choice of other despots
• There is much incentive to keep inhabitants happy, and paying their dues
• “Perhaps, then, this is the best possible form of government: a highly efficient despotic regime that, thanks to competition with other despotic regimes, does its best to provide legitimate services for the people.” Castronova, p. 208
Despotism or Anarchy?

- Hard to find any governance at all
- Interactions with customer service representatives are infrequent
  - They frequently do not take action based on a used request
- Due to this, the Customer Service State is very hands-off
- Leads to a state of anarchy (lack of government)
What about Guilds?

• Guilds are an institution within the game that could potentially provide government-like features

• Guilds are typically run politburo-style
  – Close group of friends controls leadership and membership
  – Democratic guilds are uncommon

• Guilds typically operate in their own best interests, not for that of society as a whole

• Guilds are often the most flagrant violators of social norms
Why Anarchy?

• There is no incentive for anyone to govern

• Coding authority:
  – Good government costs too much
    • Would require too many customer service representatives
    • Chief drawback to Customer Service State: will provide the minimum level of services to retain population
    • Leads to a minimalist state
  – But, do not want to cede real power to users
    • Makes game world unpredictable, creates new power center
Discussion: Democracy?

• Is democracy the answer to poor governance in virtual worlds?
  – Have multiple countries in the virtual world
  – Each with its own (elected) government
    • Some territories may remain anarchic
  – Governments have real powers
    • Can tax, jail, evict, kill, etc.
  – If a bad government gives citizens the urge to migrate, they would only have to leave the territory, not the world

• Key question: how to integrate AI into the governance structure of the world
Thought Questions

• How far does this go?
  – At what point do people develop stronger ties to their virtual nation than their real world nation (if ever?)
  – Imagine a realm of overlay nations on top of existing nations
  – At what point does a virtual world become a real nation?
  – How can citizens ensure the longevity of a virtual world even after it is no longer economically viable as a product?