Governance of Virtual Worlds

Foundations of Interactive Game Design
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March 7, 2007
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 most MMOs, 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?