

# 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

- From Edwin Castronova, *Synthetic Worlds*, Univ. of Chicago Press, chapter 9, “Governance”, pp. 205-226.
- 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?