

Governance of Virtual Worlds

Foundations of Interactive Game Design
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March 7, 2007



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Governance in Virtual Worlds

- Lecture based on 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 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?