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GOVERNANCE

After business and economics, another realm in which outlines are blurred in noticeable ways by synthetic worlds is politics. Chapter 6 gave an initial example of strange politics at work, in its discussion of fairness issues and how they drive powerful if informal political movements outside the synthetic world. There, the point was to illustrate how the movement of interests back and forth across the membrane tended to validate community interests involving virtual occupations. In this chapter I consider a different dimension of politics, the issue of governance.

As with economic activity, the existence of political activity in and around synthetic worlds is not something we should be surprised about. Where there are people, there is an economy and also a polity. However, while to my knowledge no one has written about economic issues as they appear in cyberspace, many have written about political issues. There is already a growing literature on the problems of maintaining social order in cyberspace (Rheingold 1994; Smith and Kollock 1999; Mueller 2002; see especially Reid 1999 and Smith 1999), as well as increasingly sophisticated thinking about the nature of sovereignty and law in cyberspace (Lessig 1999; Ludlow 2001). Even though the issues of community management are well-known, world-builders (actually, their marketing departments) sometimes proclaim that their world is unique in that it allows "player politics." In truth, of course all worlds allow player politics whether in the synthetic world or somewhere else. Any collection of people will have conflicting common and individual interests, and some politics or other will have to be generated so as to regulate those conflicts. One could argue that the code of a synthetic world is effectively its law, but we will see that there is more to the state than just code in these places.¹ However, the unusual forum in which politics occurs here seems to have a dramatic effect on how things work. In particular, there are

issues of ownership and governance that wrinkle the affairs of state significantly. This chapter will describe some of those wrinkles.

Good Governance

Synthetic worlds are a fascinating phenomenon from the standpoint of political theory. Here you have collections of ordinary people thrown into a fantasy environment with varying degrees of communal institutional depth (i.e., group structures, clan structures, voting systems, etc.) including, in some worlds, no depth at all. What kinds of governance do these people generate?²

This question is of relevance to issues that are as old as political theory itself. In the modern era, most political theory would predict that if you were to set loose a crowd of people into an untamed synthetic wilderness, some sort of limited government would arise. Going back to Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651), most conceptions of proper governance have held that we have governments because we want them. If we had none, we would not like the way life would be: nasty, brutish, and short. We therefore have a collective interest in supporting a sovereign, who has the power to coerce individuals to promote the common good. The legitimacy of the sovereign derives from the services it provides to the community. Of course, the mere fact that the government *may* be legitimate, because it is necessary to manage common interests, does not mean that all governments with power in fact are legitimate. There is really no guarantee that a given government will necessarily serve the common good at all. For that, the government must be structured in a certain way; its powers must be restricted and, to the extent possible, harnessed to the interests of the population. Restricting powers, of course, makes a government less able to serve any end at all, including the end of promoting the common good. Therefore a balance must be struck between the ability of the government to act and the requirement that those actions be seen as legitimate services in the eyes of all citizens. The US Constitution reflects intense debates at the time of its founding about the nature of power restrictions and the will of the people. Contemporary democratic thinkers recognize that systems of checks and balances and popular elections can be singularly inefficient, but almost everyone agrees that these kinds of systems offer the best possible sovereigns (Dahl 1991). Many other schemes have been tried, with unquestionably disastrous results.

Taking as given the discovery that good government is government of significant but limited power, political scientists now devote much attention to systems of incentives for gaining and holding power. As mentioned in chapter 4, they have

developed the concept of *institution* as the “rules of the game” governing all collective human action. The premise here tends to be that any individual will exploit any power to her own ends, to the maximum feasible extent, unless constrained in some way by a countervailing incentive. For example, all elected politicians will seek re-election; to do so, they must make themselves popular to the voters; to do that, they must provide services to them. Thus each voter’s voice in Leviathan’s ear should, as a general rule and over the long haul, be at least mildly related to that voter’s interests. And that seems to be the best we can do. At the very least, systems of democratic governance are peaceable and largely unintrusive. Perhaps because of these features alone, the democratic method has now become the dominant mode of authority on Earth.

Thus, on the whole, the lessons of political theory and practice on Earth would suggest that the people of cyberspace, like people everywhere, would desire some kind of limited, effective, democratic governance for the proto-states they are building. Synthetic worlds are indeed a fascinating test bed for ideas about how to govern, just as they are for ideas about business management. Hobbes posited a “state of nature,” a world with no government, as the initial condition from which the game of government supposedly arose. Synthetic worlds don’t really seem to have any explicit government, so we might think of them as a state of nature. Leviathan should have appeared by now, but perhaps he has been replaced already by a system of democratic constraint, as the theory predicts.

Strange Governance

How strange, then, that one does not find much democracy at all in synthetic worlds. Not a trace, in fact. Not a hint of a shadow of a trace. It’s not there. The typical governance model in synthetic worlds consists of isolated moments of oppressive tyranny embedded in widespread anarchy. Basically, the state of nature is never allowed to occur. There is a tyrant in place from the beginning, but an extraordinarily inactive one.

Swarthmore historian Timothy Burke, an expert on political economy issues in contemporary MMORPGs, explains why (Burke 2004). Burke considers the idea of sovereignty in these places and imagines it might be located in any one of three places: in the developers, in user organizations, or in an artifact of gameplay—that is, a player-parliament. Burke concludes that sovereignty is presently not found in any of these places in the vast majority of current worlds. The closest candidate would be the developers, but the relationship between this ostensible sovereign and the state it supposedly rules is, as he writes, “where the virtual state

in MMOG gameworlds gets both seriously interesting and seriously weird.” For reasons involving business competition and the like, the developer-state does not make any effort to legitimize its rule through, say, effective lines of communication or transparent decision-making processes. The net result is a rather mysterious kind of authority, a God whose interest in the people is hard to understand.

In other words, the tyrant here is the coding authority, which reserves for itself dictatorial power over everything in the world. Its basis for government comes from the End User Licensing Agreement (EULA) and Code (or Rules) of Conduct (CoC) documents to which every user agrees when entering the world. To let the reader have a flavor of the content of these agreements, exhibits 1 and 2 at the end of this chapter reproduce a typical set of terms, these having been taken from the popular game *Star Wars Galaxies*. The terms reproduced were those in force on July 4, 2003. They are the law of the synthetic world. Indeed, their tone broadcasts “LAW” and their length testifies to the complexity of managing the common interests of hundreds of thousands of players. I also include the documents in their entirety to emphasize the fact that no user enters the world fully cognizant of what the EULA and CoC require. No one reads them. They click “yes” and go on their way.

What is interesting about these documents is that while they do solicit the consent of governed—you don’t have to agree, after all—they offer no due process of enforcement or amendment. This is *Diktat*: Take it or leave it. Of course, once a user has spent thousands of hours in a world building up valuable assets and friendships, the “leave it” option becomes quite unattractive. Persons in that position, at that point, are being governed by a de facto dictatorship. Even freedom of speech is in doubt—note the clause against “sending excessive unsolicited tells [messages] to a CS Representative.” Send too many letters to your representative in government, and you may wind up being deported.

On the other hand, this is an odd despotism, and one that might be quite benevolent. After all, this despot is in intense competition with other despots for your entertainment dollar. Being a nasty despot rather than a benevolent one will cause the citizens to move away eventually. Thus, because they pay a subscription fee voluntarily, the people do have some power, perhaps more power than an individual vote gives them. For the tyrant, losing citizens means losing revenue. 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.

On still another hand, one looks long and hard to see any governance in synthetic worlds at all. In my experience, and I believe this to be a general truth, actual governing moments happen rarely. I have never even seen one; I’ve never

seen a customer service representative actually do anything. I've had perhaps two conversations with a customer service representative, and both ended with, "I'm sorry, there's nothing that can be done about that." I have heard tales of customer service representatives doing things, but not in my own personal experience. Thus, from my perspective as a long-time player, not despotism but anarchy seems to be the de facto form of government in synthetic worlds. No one is in charge. If there is order, it is spontaneously generated by the player community. If the community of players does not spontaneously generate and enforce a norm for or against some behavior, it goes unregulated. And in my experience, quite a lot of bad behavior is unregulated, far more than on Earth. Indeed, it often seems that anything that people can get away with, they do.

Two classic examples of political breakdown are the cases of player versus player combat, and of role-playing shards. Player vs. player combat, known as PvP, is something of a holy grail to world designers: they would like to have it happen, but they haven't been able to implement rules that allow it to happen in the way they desire. The concept of PvP is pretty natural. The players have weapons and damage-dealing spells designed to help them kill monsters, but there is no logical reason why these things could not be turned against fellow players. It would seem that allowing violence among the players would produce fun gameplay and also add to the social cohesion of the world. If someone swears and you don't like it, you can just kill them.³ *Ultima Online* allowed PvP early on, but the effect was not less swearing, it was more death. Lots more. Onlookers, including some of the developers, were shocked to discover that there are people who think it is fun to do nothing but kill other players over and over and over. Rather than just play the game and use PvP option sparingly, players and entire guilds devoted themselves to the study of how to track down and kill innocents, just for kicks. World populations plummeted. *UO* experimented with reputation point systems (to define outlaws) and the like, but in the end, the designers felt forced to implement controls on the PvP system.⁴ Controlled PvP has now become the norm in the industry. Controls include designating certain shards as completely non-PvP, and also designating certain areas within the world as PvP-disabled. The lesson here is that players, given the opportunity to use weapons and spells against one another, used those abilities to complete destroy what nascent social order the world had. Given the opportunity to get away with murder, players took it.

Similarly, players also joyfully take any and all opportunities to damage expressed community norms whenever possible, as the case of role-playing shards shows. The concept of a role-playing shard is that the community of players agrees to remain in character as much as possible. New players entering such a shard are given an

additional Code of Conduct statement to digitally sign, agreeing that, if this is a medieval world, they will name their character “Arthur” rather than “WestSideSurferDude” and they will only discuss the affairs of the Round Table, not those of NBA players. My experience on several role-playing shards is that after a few weeks in which these rules are followed by most players, eventually they are universally ignored. This happens not because of apathy, but rather thanks to the explicit and expressed policy of certain players to violate them. The Firiona Vie shard in *EverQuest* was designated role-play only, but from its first day there were several very powerful groups of players who had the openly stated intent of *not* role-playing. Apparently many people will gleefully take any opportunity to do outrageous damage to the desires of a community to preserve a certain atmosphere.

What explains these breakdowns? The nature of synthetic world governance—anarchy spiced with occasional profit-oriented tyranny—does not necessarily predict that these failures would have occurred. Why did the tyrant not permanently execute (ban) the killers of *Ultima Online*? And why did the tyrant not enforce the stated role-playing contract on Firiona Vie? The answer is just that this system of governance is not very effective at all. It cannot really get much of anything done.

The Political Institutions of Synthetic Worlds

To see why governance in synthetic worlds is weak, it is important to know something about the institutions that are in force there. The formal governing institution inside the world is the coding authority, and its officers are the customer service representatives. As mentioned, the Customer Service State is not all that “present”; one rarely encounters customer service representatives. They seem to intervene only in cases of severe conflict between users.

The other set of formal institutions is the system of player associations, clubs, and guilds. These are formal enough to have attracted the interests of sociologists (Jakobsson and Taylor 2003). Their format is often part of the world’s code, enabled through a system of user commands (makeguild <name>, invite <player>, makeofficer <player>, and so on). One player forms the guild and is the leader; other players are officers at various tiers; still others are foot soldiers or mere recruits. Rank in the guild confers rights to certain user interface commands, such as sending guild-wide messages, inviting new players to the guild, or accessing guild resources (buildings, bank vaults, etc.). All of these powers are conferred and structured as part of the reigning Code of the world.

Are guilds powerful? Much depends on the nature of the world in which they exist. In some worlds, it is very hard for any player to do things without being a member of a guild. In others, being "gilded," as the saying goes, is not very important. Obviously guild leaders have much more effective control over what guild members do in worlds where guild status matters. Such guilds can do much to regulate the common interests of the members and can provide sovereign-like services to them. In worlds where guild membership is mostly about friendship, however, the guilds themselves are not very effective political organizations.

Guild governance may or may not be legitimate, of course; it is up to the guild's leaders to determine how players are promoted and how leadership offices are filled. Elections are not a general rule. Rather, a politburo style seems to be more common: the guild is run by a small, close-knit group of friends, and if leadership changes, it is passed from one friend to another. And of course, leadership changes when guilds split or merge, which they do somewhat frequently. Still, among those who become deeply immersed in the world, the lattice of guilds and guild memberships is a stable feature of the political environment, not unlike the great families of medieval societies. A number of elite guilds migrate from game to game, maintaining cohesion in the real world as well. Leadership is generally autocratic, but leadership changes while the family itself persists.

Effective or not, legitimate or not, in truth the control area of a guild in any contemporary game is usually only a small part of the overall political landscape. In most worlds, there are many guilds, and no one guild serves as an authority over all events in the entire world. At best, guilds may come together and form covenants or councils, but even these do not seem to command worldwide authority. In many worlds, guilds have the option of making war on one another, but it's an option that does not seem to be taken very often.

The final source of political action in the world is actually AI. Nonplayer characters (NPCs), if they exist, are usually allocated among various *factions* of the designers' creation. Thus, Lashun Novashine, high priest of the Temple of Life, is "on Temple of Life faction," as the saying goes. So are Roesager Thusten and Brother Estle. If I happen to kill Brother Estle, I lose my faction standing with the Temple, which means that, where once Roesager, Lashun, and other NPC members of the Temple used to welcome me with open arms, they will now try to kill me on sight. A player's standing with the various factions in the game world is a numerical rating that can fall or rise as the player does things. Having "high faction" with an NPC group can grant access to special services, favors, and quest assignments. Having "bad faction" turns the player-NPC relationship into a player-mob relationship: each one hunts the other.

Perhaps it is surprising, but I view faction AI as the most effective political power that there is in synthetic worlds, because NPCs do effectively enforce law in some areas. Most cities, for example, are populated by NPCs of the same faction, and they are often programmed to attack anyone who attacks a player who is in good standing with them. As a result, a player being attacked by a monster can run to a city where he is beloved, and the guards will protect him. This maintains the city as a safe zone for those who ally themselves with the city's NPCs. Those who anger the city's NPCs are, of course, unwelcome there. The guards will protect an allied player against these other players. They, unlike guilds and the coding authority, can actually make some territory safe for players who befriend them. Thus in effect they control ground. According to that standard, which you'll recall goes back to Hobbes, NPCs are really the only political authority in a synthetic world, the only group that rewards loyalty with safety.

Outside cities, however, NPCs are scarce and the players are generally on their own. There being no governing agents and no law enforcement, it truly is anarchy. Of course, those who are very immersed in the world and spend much time in close relationships in and between powerful guilds are governed by the informal reputation systems that emerge in any close-knit community. They are safe no matter where they are in the world, because they are associated with a powerful headman or chieftess. But for the vast majority of players, who do not immerse themselves quite as fully, the worlds are politically barren. Customer service representatives are rarely seen; guild officers have little authority outside the cultish inner sanctum of their own society; and friendly NPC soldiers are nowhere to be found.

Given this system of institutions, it is easy to see why open PvP combat results in unpunished massacres. There is really no power to punish the murderers. Certainly, the coding authority does not make itself present enough to accomplish this. Indeed, the argument has been made that, since players on PvP shards supposedly have the power to enforce law on themselves, *fewer* customer service representatives need to be dispatched to PvP worlds. The assumption seems to be that allowing players to be violent with one another is more likely to induce something like an emergent player-enforced government and law. Unfortunately, practical experience reveals that this train of logic has a kink in it somewhere. The history of PvP game worlds exhibits a clear pattern: as players are granted more violent power over one another, political conditions worsen. As a result, life in most PvP worlds, in my personal experience, is

Nasty: People are not nice. They visit cruelties on you with glee.

Brutish: You must either be part of a gang of thugs, or you must cower and hide.

Short: You will die. Often.

These are exactly the conditions that Hobbes used to describe life in the absence of government. There is no better evidence that, in truth, anarchy reigns in synthetic worlds. Left to its own ends, the community of players turns on itself. True, if a player spends a long time in a PvP world and eventually becomes popular among the most power-hungry players, the need for cowering will abate. Still, this is only the law of the jungle.

Similarly, the general absence of authority in synthetic worlds has predictable effects on the prospects for enforcing the norms of role-playing. Customer service representatives are too rare to keep people from ruining the atmosphere. Player guilds might have some effect on norms, except that usually the guilds are themselves the biggest and most open violators of the norms. It is not possible for NPCs to make judgments about whether some player is suitably “in-character” or not.

In sum, none of the worlds, to my knowledge, has ever evolved institutions of good government. Anarchy reigns in all worlds, and just because there is no player combat allowed in non-PvP worlds does not mean that everything is peaceful there. Even if I do not have the ability to shoot a fireball at another player’s head, I still have the power to harass her and make her life miserable. And this sort of thing happens all the time.⁵ While in principle governments could exist in synthetic worlds, in practice they do not. Why not?

Why Anarchy?

In order to understand why governments do things, or do not do things, we have to examine the incentives of the people who might perform governmental roles. This perspective explains everything odd about synthetic worlds. The problem is that no one has the incentive to govern there.

The titular government is the coding authority and its officers are the customer service representatives. Customer service representatives are rare because they are expensive. Mulligan and Patrovsky (2003, p. 239) report that a typical persistent world will receive some 500 emails daily; each one represents a citizen request that will require time to resolve. Governing is a human service industry and human time is costly. Getting good human services on demand is a pricey proposition; that’s why doctors and lawyers are expensive, and also why professors get decent pay even though they spend more time thinking than working. Everyone seems surprised at the taxes we all have to pay, but the fact is, you can’t automate good government. It has to be done by people, and having it done well is both important and expensive.

This fact is perhaps the main drawback to the Customer Service State. A for-profit government will provide just enough service to maintain its population. It does not have to target the service level to make people as happy as possible with the government, as a competitive election system would force it to do. No, it only needs to make sure that people don't switch countries. And this makes the switching cost—the cost of abandoning everything you have in this world and starting up in another (see chapter 5)—a significant political statistic. If switching costs are high, the amount of government service necessary to keep the citizenry sedentary is low. Facing this logic, one world (which will remain nameless) contracted many of its customer service duties to a low-wage English-speaking nation; the workers were given a list of words and told to read through logs of player conversations and, if they saw any word from that list on a player's log, to close the player's account. This policy became generally known to the players only when two were banned after talking about a rape that occurred in their real-life home town; "rape" was apparently a banned word. Their accounts were banned and their appeals ignored. For-profit worlds will seek the cheapest governance that still maintains population levels. The Customer Service State will generally be a minimalist state.

NPC faction AI cannot fill the need for good government because governing requires nuance and judgment, something AI is not very good at. Like sweatshop customer service representatives, AI could also scan player conversations and close the accounts of anyone using the word "rape," but that is obviously not the answer. And no one has the incentive to code NPCs into effective agents of government. The database implications of encoding every NPC with only a binary opinion of each player ("kill/don't kill") are enormous.

This leaves the players themselves. Whether players are given the power to physically attack one another or not, they never seem to advance their political institutions beyond loosely knit collectives of player guilds. Even when guilds become powerful, their use of power rarely feels legitimate in the sense of being in the service of the community as a whole. Rather, they tend to act like a family of mighty people whose projection of their own power happens, coincidentally, to keep the peace on occasion.

What's missing?

Suppose a community of players, angered by the capricious actions of a powerful guild, or those of corrupt customer service representatives, or simply upset at the state of anarchy, decides to form an actual legitimate government. They design a series of offices and declare a set of rules for election to those offices, with voting rights being granted to all players. Suppose some leader emerges from that process and is not, by that event, empowered to dismantle the process itself to

