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Civil Society in *Second Life*

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Abstract: The original premise of *Second Life* was that people really could have a second life. They could be a postman or a shop clerk by day, but by night, they could be a DJ or a builder and earn a living. People took this seriously and did just that to the extent of even quitting their day jobs. The consequence of this is that the lives of the people in *Second Life* and the institutions they make are a type of civil society.

I. What is Civil Society?

“Civil society refers to the arena of un-coerced collective action around shared interest, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family and market, though in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market are complex, blurred and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power. Civil societies are often populated by organizations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organizations, community groups, women’s organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, trade unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy groups.”¹

This often-used definition could easily define the many virtual worlds that populate the internet. For example, the original premise of *Second Life* was that people really could have a second life. They could be a postman or a shop clerk by day, but by night, they could be a DJ or a builder and earn a living. People took this seriously and did just that to the extent of even quitting their day jobs. The consequence of this is that the lives of the people in *Second Life* and the institutions they make are a type of civil society. *Second Life* supports real life registered charities, community groups, women’s organizations, and faith-based organizations. There are professional associations and business organizations as well as social movements and advocacy groups. Virtual worlds need to be taken seriously. They are not merely an Etch-a-Sketch platform. Linden Labs did not create this world just for professors to play and experiment with, although there is room and opportunity for that. Just as there is scope for people to really earn their living there.

Moreover, the most important thing to remember is that these groups organically grew up from the people who chose to associate, live and work in *Second Life*. Large non-profit organizations and foundations tend to think of *Second Life* as merely a tool to reach an audience as opposed to a country or place that they should become a part of. However, the citizens of *Second Life* are not merely a passive audience upon which these foundations, corporations or universities may simply peddle their ideological wares. The citizens of *Second Life* are the same everyday people as real life with the same *savoir faire*, sophistication and disinclination to be marginalized. If institutions take a cavalier attitude to these citizens, they risk being ignored, becoming irrelevant or being resisted in the same way that they are ignored,

¹ *What is Civil Society?* Centre for Civil Society, London School of Economics (2004-03-01) at http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CCS/what_is_civil_society.htm

deemed irrelevant and resisted in the real world. Some have not learned that in the real world and use the same high-handed methods in *Second Life*.

An example of this attitude can be found on Democracy Island which was set up by the ICAIR Foundation and Institute for Information Law and Policy, New York Law School. It was designed to help overcome the difficulties associated with civic participation and engagement in real space.² It was intended to combine the best of town hall meetings with the convenience of web-conferencing which would allow agencies and interest groups to consult with the public and allow the public to organize civic fairs.

The island was not really successful among the everyday residents of *Second Life*. It worked well as a teaching tool for people who wanted to role-play in a vacuum without the bother of outside contrary agents. The real problem lay with the assumption that democracy can be inflicted upon people from the top down. It cannot be done. Democracy must be built from the ground up. Why should the builders of Democracy Island feel they should be rulemaking and adjudicating for everyone in *Second Life* merely because they proclaim themselves experts? No one elected them nor were they appointed by a legitimate democratic government.

II. Types of Civil Society within *Second Life*

Michael Edwards divided up civil society into three distinct concepts: civil society as associational life; civil society as the good society; and civil society as the public sphere.³ “Each of these three schools of thought has a respectable intellectual history and is viable in the discourse of scholars, politicians, foundations and international agencies, but it is the first – civil society as associational life – that is dominant. It is Alexis de Tocqueville’s ghost that wanders through the corridors of the World Bank, not that of Habermas or Hegel. Indeed, the first two schools of thought are regularly conflated – it being assumed that a healthy associational life contributes to, or even produces, the good society in predictable ways – while the public sphere is usually ignored.”⁴

Second Life is distinctly an associational life which may lend itself to good society. I will return to that idea momentarily. The focus in this paper is on the public sphere within *Second Life*; how *Second Life* can be used to influence democracy and political life. The political elements of many civil society organizations attempts to facilitate better awareness and a more informed citizenry, who make better voting choices, participate in politics, and hold government more accountable as a result.⁵

Democracy Island attempted to provide a place where government agencies could solicit public comment on proposed rules and where interested and affected individuals could engage in deliberative dialogue with their elected officials. Currently, most people rarely know that a rulemaking is taking pace or why it is relevant to them. Instead, a set of Beltway or Brussels based interest groups dominate the process. Few of those consult with their constituents or grapple seriously with the legitimate interests of the other side. Their goal is to advocate a position, not to inform the process. Where citizens participate, they tend to do so by means of standard-form postcards and have no chance to inform themselves about the real

² See, Democracy Island’s web site at <http://dotank.nyls.edu/DemocracyIsland.html>

³ Michael Edwards, *Civil Society*, (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2004)

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verbas, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (New York: Sage Press, 1989)

issues. The consequence is that agencies are deluged with uninformative input, the reading of which has to be outsourced to consultants. Hearings are expensive to run and sparsely attended. Without serious dialogue among citizens, experts and industry stakeholders regarding what would be the best outcome to serve the public interest, the resulting rules lack legitimacy.⁶

In the European Union, the European Commission initiated the Civil Dialogue in order to give the institutions of society, and not only the governments and businesses, a voice at the policy-making tables in Brussels. However, it has a long way to go to accommodate the divergent interests of non-governmental organizations and citizens groups. In the United States, the government has committed itself under the E-Government Act of 2002 to move to an entirely on-line rulemaking system. Neither promises much improvement.

The current practices are based almost entirely on written comments. Public participation is a one-way process of commenting on an already-written draft, rather than a deliberative dialogue early enough to make a difference. There is no serious effort to educate participants in order to generate more informed participation. Nothing about the current process encourages participants to consider the public, rather their own private interest. In fact, moving the paper-based process to the web is just as likely to result in “notice and spam” as it is to produce any improvement in the quality of citizen participation. Although the governments are attempting to enhance “citizen centred” electronic government and move operations on-line, there seems to be no plan to take advantage of the unique characteristics of digital media to make government more participatory and deliberative.

Nor will this be actually possible in *Second Life*. Whatever metaphors the Lindens are using to sell simulated land for “countries,” they do not want a democracy. Philip Rosedale believes “code is law.” He does not believe in representative democracy. His ideology is a funny unconscious amalgam of anarchocapitalism of the *Snowcrash* variant and hippie socialism. He enjoys having all kinds of groups doing their thing and making money. They will not be allowed to be part of the decision-making process at Linden Lab. Citizens of *Second Life* have been battling to wrest a public space away from this group of well-meaning but ruthlessly authoritarian game-god/California Silicon valley tekkies.⁷ This is a problem cropping up all over the internet, not just in *Second Life*. Coders say that only code is law; thus only privileged technicians can run the society. And as such a private company, even one open sourcing its products, cannot be a democracy.

Others like Prokofy Neva believe that *Second Life* residents of the paying tier should have a seat on the corporate board because they generate an estimated eighty percent of Linden’s annual revenue. She sees this as taxation without representation. Philip Rosedale is a modern day King George. Unfortunately, there can be no Boston Tea Party because King George can simply click and delete not only the ships and tea; he can band the rebels from the harbour forever.⁸

The Lindens have tried to downplay this impression by providing what could loosely be described as four types of public spaces. The first space is Governor Linden land which has amphitheatres, bridges, roads, etc. This space is now the subject of a debate because of the Department of Public Works and its projects. The Lindens used to hold town halls; they stopped, when they got too antagonistic and

⁶ Democracy Island, supra.

⁷ Prokofy Neva, Reply to Tony Curzon Price’s post entitled “Credibility Gap” March 1, 2008 at http://secondthoughts.typepad.com/second_thoughts/2008/03/the-civil-socie.html

⁸ Ibid

people grieved them. They circled the wagons. Now they have “office hours” and sometimes a few private meetings with select people. They periodically bring eight special people they select for merit to their offices in San Francisco, all-expense paid. It is called “SL Views” and it makes up a kind of elite council. They get to preview features, comment on them, and from their area of expertise, they participate in a kind of “democratic centralism.”

That public space, with its cosseted and privileged elite, is fake even within an artificial world. Although it was intended to look like a press conference, but there was no independent media. Now, the Lindens hold very choreographed “press conferences” where journalists are vetted and cleared to come and ask questions. Some, like the Herald, boycott them as too staged.

The second type of public space is the space of people in the independent press, like the Herald, and various autonomous societies or sim governments, like the Independent State of Caledon and Neufreistadt. This second space is a loose community of bloggers, people who hold discussion groups, and people who create independent societies of all affinities who are arrayed all along the political continuum.

The third kind of public space is the largest and most diverse. It is where civil society is mostly likely to be found. It comprises all of the various kinds of people actually living *Second Life* as an immersion who pay tier fees. They create the clubs, live music halls, tropical cabanas, and mass culture which are scorned by the elites who look down on these people as merely losers going to strip joints. But when you have 50,000 of them logged on at any one time, you have what can be called a Tier Nation. They have interests. They have politics. They have lives. These are the salt of the earth types in the real world, the people who institutions want to influence and manipulate. They are the ones who are creating the society; a society generating \$1.2 million a day business.⁹

When the Lindens ignore their wants and needs, i.e. in something like the Copybot saga, Tier Nation rises up and shows itself to be well organized. This is especially true of those who make real money and have something to lose, such as the dressmakers, storeowners, and rental agents. They react virtually as they would act in reality. They shutter all their stores and log off *Second Life* until the Lindens declare, for example, that Copybot a Terms of Service offense. They can be forced to change their policy. One independent citizen alone will not change their minds, but hundreds of owners who feel lied to and damaged can make a difference. Those people show up at meetings; they organize themselves into groups quickly and efficiently using the available technology. These people matter because they pay Lindens’ bottom line. This sort of influence distresses the Lindens who wish to get rid of this problem by moving to open-source, grid-level services, and deal with corporations or universities or governments and not individual proprietor customers.

The last public space currently in *Second Life* is for the corporations, foundations, and universities. It can be described as the Consulting Nation. It comprises various Silicon Valley start-ups, tekkies who used to be furries but now got a job with IBM or Cisco, university administrators with lots of Digital Arts or Communications Department cash to spend. Glenn Linden keeps figures on these people and bemoans that they still make up only 15 percent of the island purchases. The Consulting Nation also consists of various progressives and intellectuals who want to use *Second Life* as a tool, mixed in with some mainstream university

⁹ *Second Life*’s home page at <http://www.secondlife.com>

researchers, and corporations with advertisement budgets to build something in *Second Life*. It represents a kind of urban techno-progressive elite not “the world” or “the planet.” Ironically, this mix of people tends to become more and more immersed in *Second Life* without realizing it. They buy plants from the plant lady. They go to the clubs the tropical cabana girl runs. They mix more with the locals.

At the end of the day, the people who gather in *Second Life* want to participate in the building of a new world, not just shooting space invaders. They do not act alone. They collaborate in this pursuit, and what they are pursuing is a civil society.