Sunday, November 11. 2007

Runoffs, and what Flagg can do the next time around

Well, the endgame has arrived. I cast my ballot for Matthew earlier today, and there are only a few hours of voting for the AWTeen elections remaining. With the election drawing to a close, I thought it would be interesting to take a look back at the process while awaiting the winner to be announced.

The most striking detail I noticed was how non-political the elections process was. There was almost a taboo against asking or answering any questions of substance about the candidates' plans for the world. When someone did speak out, the candidates and a few other select citizens chewed the person out on the Activeworlds forums. Furthermore, anyone who chose to speak out against the "chewers" was derided either for "not having a life" or for "taking things too seriously." Well, "seriously," the community needs to have more of an open mind and be willing to discuss the issues that matter.

A large part of this election was a popularity contest. While all elections are popularity contests to a large extent, this one was overly so because no formal debates were held. Strike Rapier had actually called a debate at one point, but the scheduled time didn't work with the other candidates and the idea was dropped. The reason the debate failed, however, wasn't because the candidates wouldn't have been interested in participating in one. Instead, it failed because there simply wasn't enough time to host a debate. Heck, there weren't even really "campaigns," because I didn't notice any signs or E-Mails or anything else pushing specific candidates anywhere else than the AW forums.

Time is an interesting issue that was a problem during this cycle, and has the potential to cause additional issues in February if not addressed. In this election, there simply wasn't enough time for the public to get to know the candidates - especially for those Citizens who did not follow the AWTeen community closely and normally hung out in Alphaworld or elsewhere. I suspect that this group of "periodic visitors" has largely determined the outcome, especially since the Universe welcome message advertised the election. Had there been announced debates and a formal system of posting campaign statements, these voters could have become more informed.

Fortunately, the timeframe of the next election itself will ensure somewhat better planning. With the election date known three months in advance, candidates will be able to get better organized and run campaigns. But perhaps Flagg or someone else could organize a debate well in advance so that all of the candidates can clear their schedules and be available to attend.

Second, in the next election AW, Inc. will have to be concerned with the current Governor taking advantage of the system and manipulating it to his or her advantage to get reelected. For example, the current Governor might change the welcome message to advertise his or her own campaign, or to post signs near ground zero to the exclusion of other candidates. Manipulation of the system could be more subtle, as well. Simply posting names in one order versus another can heavily influence an election, as could having someone with PS mention the Governor's campaign. Because many people who vote in these elections don't visit AWTeen, they might vote for the first name they hear, and a public speaker would be a powerful influence. There would need to be sanctions against the Governor if campaigning occurs using world resources. Most organizations have similar rules prohibiting any candidate from using property owned by the organization for campaigning.

Third, voting should be concentrated into one voting day. Almost every other election across the globe is concentrated into one day, and for good reason: because campaigning doesn't have to go on to scrounge every last vote until the minute the polls close. There could be a major happening that completely changes the vote in the midst of elections week. For example, what if one of the candidates completely blows up and proves that (s)he was not attractive to a large number of people halfway through the voting? The people who voted would have no other option than to leave their votes as cast. A short voting timescale reduces the likelihood of this problem occurring.

But the most important change that needs to be addressed in the next cycle is that a runoff election must be held. A runoff system holds one or several votes until one candidate reaches a clear majority. One method of holding a runoff is to eliminate the candidate with the lowest total in each successive round. Another is to hold only two rounds, with the top two candidates squaring off in the second. The idea is that nobody can win unless (s)he wins 50% of the vote. Currently, a majority is not required, and a candidate can win with only a plurality of the vote.

In this election, I voted against Strike Rapier, not for Matthew. In the current non-runoff system, it benefits me to vote for

the candidate who is most likely to win against the person I hate, not necessarily the best candidate. In a runoff, it doesn't matter who I vote for in the first round, as long as I don't vote for Strike, because Strike would need a majority to win outright. There are undoubtedly others who also "voted against" candidates rather than "voting for" them, and it would be a shame if one candidate wins with 34% of the vote versus 33% for the other two.

In conclusion, this election went very well, but there are significant improvements that could be made to smooth the process in the future. Hosting formal debates, allowing more time for campaigning, guarding against abuse of power, limiting the length of voting, and changing to a runoff system will all improve the voting process and increase the legitimacy of the winner.

Posted by Brant in Procedures at 13:57