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Why global chat relay is a bad idea

It's interesting how often references to the former global chat network in AWTeen are appearing in recent flame wars. Often, one side has a beef with the other because that person made a disparaging remark against the other across global chat. Many of the alleged abuses of powers also involve the global chat network: for example, digigurl was recently accused of muting people for little cause, and Tony M has been accused of monitoring the chat over the bot even when people wanted logs to remain private.

Whether these accusations are true or not, they highlight the potential for abuse of the global chat network. In recent months, use of the network has become almost a right, and those who are denied access for whatever reason take up arms against the Caretakers. I propose that the global chat network is partially responsible for many of the problems that led to the recent shakeup, and I suggest that reducing the scope of the chat network is the best path forward for the continued development of AWTeen.

First, the chat network provides too much power to those in control of it, and some of those given power are likely to abuse it. Most of its administrative functions, such as muting and banning from the network aren't necessary; that's what the eject right is for. A troublemaker who can't speak will simply turn to property vandalism or some other method to cause trouble, but one who is ejected will have a period of time to cool down, and the situation will likely be resolved successfully.

Furthermore, Activeworlds was designed to be an environment simulating the real world. That is, when someone is standing near someone else, they will "hear" that person. It's common sense, and easy to understand. When someone moves out of chat range, that ability to hear (and the corresponding ability to speak) goes away. But with global chat, the location-based conversational ability of AW is eliminated, turning AWTeen into a big IRC channel with fancy graphics - a step back. As anyone who regularly uses IRC knows, IRC is ripe with spammers and troublemakers, and popular IRC channels provide people with an easy way to attack others, if they so choose.

While one would think being able to talk to more people would be a good thing, in reality that ability actually destroys the community little by little. One of AWTeen's strengths years ago was always its sub-communities. Towns, games, and bot play areas were both contained within, but also separate from, the rest of the world. Like townships within counties, these groups of people began to congregate and associate with each other, but still remain involved in the greater community of the world. Members could attend public meetings and make their ideas known in forums and E-Mails to the world staff, but they could also stick to themselves and concentrate on their particular pastime when they wanted.

Think hard - when was the last time you came across one of these strongly defined sub-communities? The world used to be rife with them - I can remember many such groups that would spend hours developing their towns. They would even argue over leadership positions within the towns. When global chat was introduced, however, events of the greater world started intruding on these small communities. Dedicated builders became turned off by the intrusion into their peaceful area. Yes, they could turn off the chat by using commands, but they would have to actively do so, and their friends probably did use the network, meaning they would have to turn it back on to chat with their friends.

Finally, global chat is not scalable to the numbers of visitors AWTeen needs to be aiming to draw. Imagine 75 people visiting AWTeen, all talking at once.

Instead, we should look into scaling back the global chat relay into zones, like Strike Rapier's Eclipse Evolution can do. Host big events over global chat. Allow users to create zones within certain cities and paintball arenas and other locations, but don't have the whole world as part of one zone. And there's no need for private messages, because that's why telegrams exist.

If we scale back global chat, we can not only reduce personal attacks and abuse of power, but we can also contribute to the rebuilding of AWTeen's smaller communities, and we can keep AWTeen scalable for future growth. Obviously, global chat wasn't working the way things were before, so it's time for a change. I hope that some of the candidates at least investigate this option in their campaigns.

Posted by Brant in Proposals at 14:03