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Sunday, October 28. 2007

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

Saturday, October 27. 2007

Major events: the lifeblood of AWTeen

Recently, Matthew asked me a hypothetical question: if there were only the resources to enact one change to AWTeen without any remaining for anything else, what would that one change be? I answered the query without hesitation: AWTeen needs to host a major event, and needs to do it in a well-organized fashion within a reasonable timeframe.

GC has said many times that he liked AWTeen's Inauguration and Generations Days and considers them to be the best events the world has ever seen. While I agree that those were great events, they happened half a decade ago! What has (or has not) happened since that people are still talking about events that happened five years ago? AWTeen should be talking about how last month's event was a success, not those that occurred five years ago.

Activeworlds in general is currently in a slump of major events. In fact, other than the Cy Awards, there haven't been any significant events in the past year - and even the Cy Awards was marred by technological breakdowns. A headline on Mark Randall (Strike Rapier)'s website states it best: "AWNews notes Activeworlds has no News." This lack of news and events comes, puzzlingly, at a time where interest in the main AW universe has increased. In early 2007, universe user totals in the evenings lagged as low as 125, but on Friday, October 26, there were 200 users online at 11:50pm VRT. The lack of happenings certainly isn't a result of AWI support, either: since Flagg was rehired, bingo and other community events have continually drawn respectable crowds, and prizes are regularly awarded.

A major event differs from the regular paintball matches and trivia games in that it stretches across worlds and appeals to members of the greater AW community. Generations and Inauguration Day were examples, but other examples include the AWTeen Reniassance Faire and the Thor weatherbot unveiling. The Reniassance Faire appealed to all because it allowed anyone to take on the personality of medieval personalities, and the Thor unveiling appealed because people wanted to see what the new technology was all about.

Major events are very important for three reasons:
They draw in people from the greater community and get them interested in AWTeen. Many people who attend either have not heard of or have not paid attention to AWTeen before. By entering the world and participating in events, they get to see what the world has to offer. The #1 contributor to new visitors has always been people who discovered the world through big events.
They increase respect for AWTeen within the greater Activeworlds community. A successful and well-organized event endows prestige upon its organizers. People who once saw AWTeen as a haven for "inept kids" or "forum trolls" might change their opinions after enjoying a major event.
They provide the interior AWTeen community something that defines itself and unites people as a group. They create a sense of community, rather than a set of people who build together. Major events require a lot of effort to put on, and many people contribute to their creation. From building to programming to modeling, everyone comes together for a specific cause.
I propose that hosting a major event is the best way to solve the problem of AWTeen's current power struggles and infighting. Simply put, not much is going on now, and people who don't have anything else to do and no greater cause to follow will fight with each other. If everyone got involved in the coordinating of a major event, the focus would shift from the politics to the fun. And hosting an event is a concrete goal that can be achieved in the four-month term of the next Governor.

To add to that, there has never been a better opportunity for organizing a major event than now. Virtual worlds are going through a phase of "rebirth" - a "second coming." It was recently announced that there was over $1 billion invested in virtual worlds across all platforms in the last year. While AW may currently be dwarfed by other online worlds, it stands to share in this huge influx of interest and cash. AW's population has clearly turned around and is now increasing, and despite its struggles AWTeen is the largest and most active community in Activeworlds. If AWTeen can demonstrate it has the mettle to host giant events, it stands to benefit tremendously from the increasing numbers joining the community.

I challenge the next administration to set producing a major event during its tenure as its number one priority. Without events, AWTeen is just another public building world with a few extra features. Let's start brainstorming right now in the comments as to what form this event could take.

Posted by Brant in Proposals at 07:11

Friday, October 26. 2007

A workable system of government for AWTeen

This post has been moved to this blog where it is more relevant. It was previously posted at www.gamesareforchildren.com.

The resignation of JerMe from the AWTeen Caretaker position earlier this month caused a number debates among those active within the world's community. While somewhat (but not entirely) off-topic for this blog, I thought here a better place than an HTML page to post this article because of the ability for users to leave comments.

Some of the discussions over JerMe's resignation involved the world's community and how to improve it, but others were more focused on determining who was at fault in the series of events that led up to the change in leadership. I believe we should ignore the immediate issues of fault, take a step back, and seriously review the issue of AWTeen's government.

Introduction

For those who don't know me, my name is Stephen Sokolowski. In Activeworlds, I go by the name of Brant. I first discovered AW on July 28, 1998 and have been following it ever since. Between July 1999 and February 2005, I held a citizenship, visiting Activeworlds for thousands of hours. More recently, I have stopped in to AWTeen from time to time to catch up on what is going on and to socialize with both new friends and those from years ago.

Half a decade ago today, I resigned from the above-mentioned position of AWTeen Caretaker, having held the role from July 13, 2000 to July 30, 2002. During that time, I watched many changes in the world unfold, and learned some important lessons, both about virtual worlds and also about real-life leadership principles. I participated in or oversaw hundreds of events, and watched the world's population wax and wane over time. Of greater relevance to this article, I also worked within several differing philosophies of management: first, through the AWTeen Core, second, through the Committee Charter, and finally through the Council system, some of which survives to this day.

One would think that it would be easy to take a position as to which of these forms of government was most effective. After all, the Core probably included too many people, or the Committee system had too much bureaucracy, and the Council had too little power, and so on. In reality, it wasn't that easy. Why? Because each time, the initial system morphed into the one that best suited the needs of the world at the time. Sometimes, there was a lot going on, and so the world needed a lot of event coordinators - and people would step up to work on events, even though they were part of other committees. Other times, strict control was needed to keep a location secret, and thus only one of two people were told - and the secret usually didn't get out. Each time the complex charters were created to make running the world more uniform and efficient, and each time all they did was create inefficiency and bureaucracy by hindering the flexibility of AWTeen staff.

How the Caretaker position compares to a corporate manager

To provide an idea of the responsibilities of AWTeen's Caretaker, consider the job of a mid-level manager at a large corporation. That person might have as many as sixty people reporting to him indirectly, through three or four first-level supervisors. He also is probably responsible for interacting with thousands of people outside the organization on a daily basis - and potentially is responsible for millions of dollars in contracts. The actions of the supervisor reflect greatly upon the organization. Such people work long hours and are compensated well for their time.

The analogues to AWTeen's Caretaker position are many. The Caretaker might have several committee leaders working directly underneath, who manage many people underneath them. In reality, the Caretaker is responsible for thousands of dollars, perhaps hundreds of thousands of dollars, in AW, Inc.'s revenue. As one of the only worlds offering tourist access, many tourists visit AWTeen, are impressed with what they see, and pay AW for citizenships.

While still an unpaid position, the Caretaker position is, and will always be, a job, and one that requires hard work and

dedication. It is an extremely demanding position, requiring at least 20 hours a week to perform well. Armchair critics on the newsgroups have little idea how difficult managing such a large world is. At the same time, that hard work should always be voluntary, since the job is non-paying.

The realities of the world

When talking about AWTeen's Caretaker, we need to be realistic in his or her job description. AWTeen is not a true democracy, nor can it ever be. Activeworlds is a business and needs someone from AWTeen to directly report to Activeworlds management when dealing with issues. Consider the response if "the people" voted by majority vote to transform AWTeen into an X-rated world. The uproar from Activeworlds, Inc. would be immediate. As a result, implementing any system of government where there isn't someone at the top is infeasible.

Equally untenable is the practice of having several "Caretakers." If a single person needs to report to Activeworlds, then what actual power do the other "Caretakers" have? Having co-Presidents has been tried in many countries around the world, and the practice almost always fails. Furthermore, just because someone has the caretaker privilege password does not make that person a "Caretaker" of the world. Privileges should always be granted based on necessity. Just because you're higher up in the organization doesn't mean that you're entitled to greater privileges. If your job won't ever require you to eject anyone, then there is no reason why you should be entitled to eject privileges.

The Caretaker is ultimately accountable for what occurs in the world. Stating "it wasn't me, that was a JAM member who just placed porn at GZ" isn't acceptable. If the greater AW community and AW, Inc are both going to hold the Caretaker ultimately responsible, then the Caretaker needs to have to power to uphold that responsibility.

There needs to be one and only one person who makes the final call for all matters.

Other organizations

Now 24 years old and employed as a software engineer that develops software for radio and television stations, I am the last person who should pass judgment on recent happenings in AWTeen and thus will withhold judgement on who was right and who was wrong in recent events. However, I can say that I have held leadership roles in many organizations since I left AWTeen, and there are striking similarities between AWTeen and these other organizations. Most interesting is that the same social principles seem to hold whether people are seeing each other face-to-face, or whether they are meeting only in the virtual world.

Immediately after I left in July 2002, then a sophomore, I joined the student government at my college. At first, I enjoyed the experience immensely, was elected as public relations officer, organized many events and worked on resolving many issues with the campus. Later, I became a producer for a campus television station and produced episodes of a gameshow. Another time, I became a member of a swing dancing club.

Later, however, I quit student government and the television station, and continued my participation in swing dancing. My reason for quitting wasn't that I hated what student government stood for, or despised the quality of the television station's programming; it was that I had become tired of the politics of the organizations. In both unsuccessful organizations, everyone had to have their part of the "power." Instead of working together to achieve a common goal, they argued over obscure points in Robert's Rules of Order, such as who can speak when and what the proper way of addressing people was. The problem became so bad that, in one instance, someone was told to stand at the door to prevent people from entering who were going to be 30 seconds late to the meeting.

With swing dancing, however, people showed up, danced, socialized, and went home afterwards. There were no politics involved. Nobody refused to dance with anyone else because they might appear inferior to the rest of the group, and nobody took a stand against anyone else. We simply learned new styles of dancing, traveled to different places, and had a good time.

Given the choice between being a member of the student government or the swing dancing club, I believe most people would select swing dancing. Who wants to sit in a room all day Saturday and debate procedural matters? Similarly, given the chance between participating in an Activeworlds world where people argue over charters or one where a lot of building an bot programming and graphic design occurs, who wants to participate in a world where everyone argues over who is more important? AWTeen is becoming the student government I described above.

Time limits

Nobody, especially teenagers, wants to do anything for the rest of their lives. Variety is what makes life interesting. In today's job market, it is common for people to stay in one job for two or three years, five at most, and then move on to the next opportunity. The average person has had 7.5 jobs before the age of 30. CEOs and venture capital look for an "exit plan" when funding any new startup, and if the entrepreneur plans to take longer than three years to get the business profitable and sell it, (s)he will be denied funding.

On a more personal note, think of how your interests have changed over the past year. How many things are you doing now that you weren't doing a year ago? How many things have you stopped doing? For teens, it's possible that last year doesn't even resemble this year, as the rate of change slows with advancing age. Compare the change someone experiences between the ages of 13 and 23, and then between the ages of 63 and 73. During which age range will more change occur?

AWTeen is a "revolving door." While there are indeed a few regulars who have helped out for a long time, many people come to the world, participate very actively for a few months, and then leave shortly thereafter. This progression is neither good nor bad; it's just the way things are. With strict systems of government, people are expected to uphold their roles for months, if not years, however, a system that is at odds with this "revolving door" style of visitation.

We also forget that while some commitment should be required, Activeworlds is a volunteer activity. Nobody gets paid to visit AWTeen, and everyone should be treated as such - volunteers who help out because they want to. If people aren't interested in AWTeen anymore, they should be allowed to move on and be replaced by someone new. As anyone who's visited the world knows, there are always many people willing to give it a try. It's not right to let these hard-working and interested people sit on the sidelines while disinterested people continue to run the organization.

Furthermore, time has a habit of causing people to grow older. While it might be great to have someone who's 19 as Caretaker, having someone who is now 22 as Caretaker may be less appropriate, in some, but not all, cases. If the Caretaker loses touch with how younger people think and function, then attempting to run a world geared at younger people is a mistake.

Adults, and especially teens, have changing life circumstances and interests. Expecting someone to devote 20 hours a week to a single activity for years on end, on top of their full-time job or education, is ridiculous.

The way of past Caretakers

Anyone who's been following AWTeen since its inception should be able to see a clear pattern emerge. Each Caretaker works hard and enjoys his or her job for a period of time. A lot of progress occurs during this period. Some Caretakers last in this stage for longer than others, but so far all have burned out or have simply lost interest in the position. The second stage is a period of downtime that inevitably follows. In my case, I lasted about a year and a half before I declared that the Council should take a vacation, which began three months of downtime.

After the downtime, eventually the Caretaker either decides to finish up and exit gracefully, or delays until citizens rally themselves into such a furor that they are ousted. Regardless of the option the caretaker chooses, these cycles cause losses in AWTeen's population during the downtimes, so the community never achieves a net gain.

It's clear that there is a problem here. Why is it that AWTeen's citizens allow this cycle to continue to be repeated ad infinitum? If it has clearly been shown not to work, then why do we continue down the same doomed path over and over and over again?

A sensible proposal for governing AWTeen

I submit to AWTeen's community a simple proposal for managing the world that addresses all of these major concerns. Its simplicity is the key point in returning AWTeen to prosperity.

The proposal involves the following six, and only six, points. I will address each in turn.

Elect the Caretaker through direct vote
Almost any citizen can vote
Anyone who can vote can run

Hold elections every six months
Appoint an elections manager to oversee each election
If the Caretaker resigns, AW appoints a temporary replacement

Here is the reasoning behind each of the above points:

There is only one person who pulls it together in AWTeen, and that's the Caretaker. In this proposal, after election the Caretaker can then form a government any way he or she chooses. The Caretaker can hire people, fire people, organize committees, run events, appoint people to run events, and so on. (S)he may choose to follow the same path as his or her predecessors, or may choose a different method of leadership. Most likely, precedent will evolve as an important factor when Caretakers decide how to stand on certain issues.
Any citizen who visits the world at least one month prior to an election should be able to vote. All opinions are important. People who only visit occasionally may limit their visits because something isn't quite right for them to encourage frequent visits. It is not the community's decision to decide who is important enough to be granted a vote. Everyone receives one vote, to be counted equally.
There should be no limitation on who can run to become Caretaker, except for having been in the world at least one month prior to the election, and being a citizen. There are many talented people from elsewhere in Activeworlds who would excel at being given the opportunity to perform this role, but are currently excluded by the oligarchical nature of the world's Council. Allowing new ideas to be introduced by new people and avoids stagnation. Age should not be a requirement as many of AWTeen's current leadership are not teenagers anyway.
Six months is a good length of time for the Caretaker to prove his mettle. If the Caretaker burns out, (s)he can gracefully decide not to run in the next election. If the Caretaker wants to continue, the community can decide whether his or her leadership remains superb. Meanwhile, Activeworlds holds all AWTeen assets such as bot code and website documents so that no Caretaker can decide to "take the world with him" if not reelected.
As the Caretaker's term approaches its end, Activeworlds, Inc.'s representative appoints an elections manager to oversee the next election. The elections manager cannot run in the election, and does not report to the Caretaker. His or her job is to develop, with the input of the community, the method of registering candidates, of voting, and of tallying the votes. The votes must be posted publicly with vote totals for all candidates - refusing to display the votes for fear of "hurting people's feelings" is not an option. Of course, (s)he can hire people to assist. When the new Caretaker takes office, or the current Caretaker's term rolls over, the elections manager's term expires.
This issue is pretty self-explanatory. in the case of resignation, AW will simply appoint a replacement to serve the remainder of the Caretaker's term until the next election can occur. Six months will pass soon enough.

That's it. Six rules. That's all there are.

Noteworthy omissions

You'll notice that very few set rules of any sort are included in this proposal. There isn't even a guarantee that the same type of election will be held every six months. If a runoff election is seen as too complicated, then a direct election where anyone can run and the highest total wins might be tried next time.

There are also no procedures whatsoever dealing with world rights or committee actions or the like. Technology changes quickly, and new browser features are being implemented all the time, so any rules that could be included would probably become obsolete within a year. Stating that people may eject for five minutes on the first offense doesn't make sense if a different method of security than ejection is implemented in a later version. Such rules would be akin to writing a constitution stating that police officers are only allowed to use a certain type of horse for patrolling the streets. Imagine how ridiculous such a statute would look now, especially since it would be difficult if not impossible to repeal.

Plus, if we elect a decent caretaker in the first place, then there is no need for a charter stating how often he can eject people. And you can bet that there is a very high probability that a responsible and hard-working Caretaker will be elected because (s)he will need to put forward a whole lot of effort to be noticed in the vast number of candidates who are sure to run.

There are no rules for "impeachment" or "censure." Such clauses only bog things down in lengthy proceedings that rarely succeed. Usually, by the time an "impeachment" runs its course, the term has nearly expired and nothing is gained except a complete halt to all activities in the meantime. Again, six months will pass soon enough. There isn't a need to have a thousand newsgroup threads discussing whether someone should be impeached or not, and then a thousand more discussing whether the impeachment was fair or not after the fact.

The bottom line is that things change too quickly to write it all down in a huge charter, and the best way to quickly adapt

is to allow someone to quickly respond to challenges.

Objections to the election process

A common response to a proposed electoral system is to say that the elections would become popularity contests. All elections are popularity contests. Even the best intentioned and most intelligent people in the world have a hard time separating charisma from a candidate's stance on the issues. Despite this flaw, however, the republic remains the most effective form of government the world has.

Another complaint might be to suggest that endless campaigning would overtake the world. One way of dealing with the problem is for the elections manager to limit the length of campaigns to a month or so. The elections manager might also prohibit campaigning near GZ, or restrict it to the Web in an extreme case. With this flexibility, the elections manager could look at how past elections succeeded or failed to decide which path is best to follow this time around.

Some might object to AWTeen's staff not being given any "leg up" on everyone else by default. Giving people an advantage simply to reward their length of service is not in the world's best interest. It's entirely possible that someone could have advanced to a senior leadership position but have done very little to actually assist the world and its citizens. Conversely, someone who would make a great Caretaker might not have been able to participate actively in AWTeen's affairs because one of the committee leaders had a personal grudge against him or her. Name recognition will assist the longtime contributor somewhat, but will still allow those with great ideas to make a run at the top job.

Conclusion

I decided to publish this suggestion to the community in order to throw out some observations I've made over the past few years and to encourage discussion on how AWTeen can be made better. Robbie deserves some recognition, as many of the ideas published here came about during a conversation with him in late April. This proposal isn't flawless, and it may not be the perfect system, but I hereby submit it for the community's review.

AWTeen is not a powerful state that has to wield its nuclear arsenal, manage its economic policy, and deter terrorist threats. Yet, the number of rules and regulations in effect throughout the past ten years seem at times to be more appropriate for a large corporation's bylaws than for an Activeworlds world. We don't need to worry about Sarbanes-Oxley compliance or insider trading regulations; we just need to make the world better.

A clear sign that the current system is broken is the number of forum postings and in-world arguments over the legitimacy of the "JerMe controversy." It's been over a month since JerMe resigned, and the issue is still at the top of the headlines. Everyone continues to place blame on who was right and who was wrong in a long-dead decision. Either there are a lot of other good things going on, and we should be talking about them as well, or there aren't many other things going on, and we should be planning them. Who cares whether one word of the charter meant JerMe resigned or abdicated or was impeached? What ever happened to those discussions over whether the day or night cycle of the world should start at midnight instead of 2am?

I call upon everyone involved in AWTeen to put an end to this endless bickering, simplify the government of the world, and to work together once again to move forward and strengthen the community. I implore the community to do so now, not in three months or a year from now when it is too late to repair the harm caused by recent events. Most of all, however, I put forward two simple requests, two that should be everyone's underlying goals throughout Activeworlds.

Let's have fun once again, and let's make Activeworlds a better place.

Posted by Brant in Proposals at 11:43