Wednesday, October 31. 2007

A comment about optimism

Over the past few days, I have been working on a proposal to change AWTeen. I had figured that it would be better to actually do something about the things I'm criticizing instead of simply commenting on them. Before I was able to finalize the proposal, however, it was leaked to the Activeworlds forums. Now that it's already publicly available, I figure there's no reason to take it down from the website, so instead I'll comment on its seemed reception.

I should point out that the leaking of the proposal does not state my intent to run for an AWTeen position. If I had wanted to declare my candidacy, you would have known about it in no uncertain terms, and I did not send a telegram to AWTeen Elections with my name (so don't telegram mine either). The proposal was and still is a living document, with about 10 versions being created over the past two days. In fact, those who knew about the proposal can tell you that AlexTheMartian was the Governor candidate just yesterday, and I was trying to convince Eric to take the top spot before I noticed the thread. The proposal was not about me, but about the idea.

The responses to the proposal were very interesting. While there were a few people who actually did read the entire proposal and commented on it, it seemed that others responded simply to disparage the proposal in any way they could. That's not surprising, given that Matthew, SEVENs, and Strike Rapier, who contributed a majority of the comments to the discussion, are running for their own positions. And after those posts, some of which are even self-congratulatory for "killing" the AWDream idea, who in their right mind is going to say they are actually in support? Certainly not the ten other people who telegrammed their support to me both before and after the thread was started.

Yes, they did an excellent job at tearing apart the proposal - so well, in fact, that they caused Chanty to reconsider whether she had ever wanted to be involved with the idea in the first place, and I consider that a tragedy. This whole event makes one wonder whether, if I had posted the same proposal but with my name deleted and replaced it with SEVENs's, nobody would posted any negative comments at all. See, it's easy for people to stand around and complain about how things are bad now. However, I see very little discussion as to why things are bad, and even less as to how to improve what is bad. Instead, the same few people put down everyone who has any ideas for change whatsoever, and that's what's gotten AWTeen into the situation it is in now.

And, of course, those who claim they've "been around longer than two weeks" are clearly demonstrating that they are using their vast store of experience to the absolute fullest in developing a clear path forward for improving AWTeen. It's easy to understand why JerMe, digigurl, and Tony M decided to give up (but not to forgive the way in which they did it) .

Nobody who has ever created something great has started by aiming low. Bill Gates did not start Microsoft with the intent of developing a software company that brought in revenues of $500,000/yr. He saw the potential of the technology and was optimistic about its growth to its current astronomical market share of greater than 90%. Here, however, everyone is like the mom and pop shop on the corner that is content with barely earning enough to keep its one mini-mart open.

Sure, Flagg hasn't said that he would rename the world, but of course he didn't - because nobody thought of the idea at the time! I didn't even have a chance to E-Mail the proposal to him before it was leaked. Those who hold the current mentality of everything negative assume "Well, Flagg didn't say he would rename the world, so he won't even consider it."

Instead, how about the following, equally valid, thought: "Flagg hasn't flatly denied he won't consider renaming the world, and if we produce a well-thought-out proposal with good reasoning, why wouldn't he go for it?"

This might not be the right proposal for AWTeen, but it shouldn't be shot down without consideration. I haven't decided whether or not to follow through with this proposal and get my name on the ballot, or whether someone else wants to take over - or whether nobody should run at all. Some have even suggested that this idea be proposed for a new world instead. What I do know is that I'm not going to be shot down by extreme pessimism, and that I, and those who support the proposal, can decide for ourselves which direction is best to move forward.

Posted by Brant in Commentary at 10:09

Tuesday, October 30. 2007

An Open Letter to AWI Regarding AWTeen

I wrote this open letter to AWI regarding the current happenings in AWTeen. My point was not to comment on anyone's actions, but to encourage AWI not to write awteen off and to keep an open mind towards its future, along with providing some context and history of where I'm coming from. I figure this to be an appropriate venue to share it.

Aloha,

My name is Eric Rosloff, citname Eric (formerly XelNaga), citnum 315650. I'm writing this letter to express my thoughts on the current situation that has befallen the world awteen, a community in which I was, some years ago, a very active member. In recent years I have used active worlds only sparsely, and as I am now 21 years old have no real remaining connection to awteen, save through those other citizens with whom I shared my time with back in the day.

I became active in awteen at 15 years old, and during my tenure there (remaining active within the world for about three years) I shuffled between several leadership roles, both official and unofficial. My time serving as a public representative, member of the core, and member of the council played a large role in building my confidence as a speaker and facilitator and gave me experience in working with (and dealing with) others in a context that I imagine few ever get the chance to be a part of at such a young age. I worked with others of different ages, backgrounds, and ideals in strive of facilitating the growth and direction of a community made up on a unique brand of teens.. those who for whatever reason sought connection through this online medium. The things I learned during that time proved invaluable for me when I went on to be a facilitator and organizer for communities I was involved in out in the "real world", especially as an example of an organization that was run by it's own members as opposed to the concrete hierarchies found in many typical institutions for youth.

The height of my involvement happened to be during a time, some years ago, when the teen community of active worlds was several hundred strong. The low price of citizenship (then $20) provided much greater access to teens, who often relied on the finances of parents or a slim allowance to fund online activities. During this boom time the existing structure of leadership in the world made significant changes to itself to adapt to raised demand. New positions and staffers were added, holding worldwide events (both major and minor) became a significant priority (and were generally well attended), and awteen ultimately evolved from another themed building world into a thriving worldwide community.

The change in citizenship price had a devastating effect on the teen community. When the price of using active worlds became more than an incidental expense, the number of teens (along with the population at large) dwindled significantly. In the time since then, awteen's population and activity has steadily decreased, and its institutions have shrunk along with it. Finally, it seems, it has reached the point where those institutions are unable to sustain themselves based on the current level of activity (or lack there of), and have faded out. I think this is natural and an acceptable reaction to the current situation, which leaves you at AWI with the question of what to do next.

Considering all of the above to be context, the point of this letter is to strongly encourage you at AWI to keep an open mind towards the future of awteen. I have always been a firm believer in the idea of a world "for teens, by teens", and as I am no longer a teen or member of the community, I do not seen it as the place of myself or other members of my "aw generation" to attempt to set up new structures based on experiences we had back in the day. I do, however, sincerely and strongly hope that you will be open and receptive to the developing needs and desires of this present teen community, and willing to accommodate them should they come to some cohesive decision about how they'd like to chart their future. I would also suggest aiding in the constructive development of this dialog, but perhaps it would be best left in their hands.

To conclude, being a part of the community of awteen made a serious positive impact in my life, and I hope that such opportunities remain available for teens of this new aw generation. Every community goes through ups and downs, periods of growth and periods of decline, even great changes and reformations. Please, whatever you decide to do, don't write awteen off. Thank you for taking the time to listen.

Regards,
Eric (315650)

Posted by Eric Rosloff in Commentary at 03:27

Monday, October 29. 2007

Stop defending those who got us into this situation

Every time I talk with people in-world and on the AW forums, I am shocked at how many turn a blind eye to the actions of JerMe, Tony M, and digigurl. Apparently, the three citizens still have quite a few supporters, and I'm writing this article to question why. It is time for members of the AWTeen community to show themselves some self-respect and stop defending the actions of these former Caretakers in any way.

There have been many Caretakers of AWTeen - some good, and some bad. However, before those to whom I have referred above, none of the Caretakers has so hatefully harmed the world on purpose. There were Caretakers who didn't have enough time, and there were Caretakers who were inept, but they certainly had the best interests of the world in mind. These three, however, have demonstrated a complete lack of respect for the community that has worked hard to make the world what it is today - and they should not be a part of it in the future.

First, let's review the facts we have on the public record for each of the Caretakers. In regards to JerMe, his resignation caused great consternation when it was announced publicly in-world. In particular, JerMe addressed digigurl by using a manner that is extremely derogatory to women. The full chatlog is available here at jerme.txt. Furthermore, after this log, JerMe took the AWTeen forums offline as "punishment," which were previously located at AWTeen.com. The move was hardly unexpected, as animosity had been growing between Brock and JerMe for quite some time (ref: awportals.com).

After JerMe resigned, digigurl and Dr. Squailboont were appointed as Caretakers. On October 16, Dr. Squailboont posted a thread in the AWTeen newsgroups stating that he would remove the Hermes chat relay bot three days later. While I believe this was a good move (see why global chat relay is a bad idea), the announcement was changed three days later when Dr. S suddenly decided to leave with no further explanation.

As if leaving suddenly and without explanation isn't bad enough, the Caretakers then decided to shut the world down by taking all their bots with them. Dr. Squailboont sums up his poor attitude in his own words: "In other words: We're outta here. Good luck with Flagg (ref: here)." One member of AWTeen's staff, meanwhile, was scheduled to host a public meeting the day this resignation occurred, and wasn't even notified of the whole fiasco!

Note that not once in this entire article did I examine these three's actions as Caretaker. I only focused on how they respected the position and their staff members. My purpose is not to put Dr. S or JerMe or digigurl down any further, but to demonstrate that their behavior was abhorrent. If I were one of the members of their staff, I would be downright mad at their actions. Instead, I was berated by S E V E N s here for stating my mind and standing up to Dr. S.

What is wrong with this community that people are still befriending JerMe, Dr. S, and digigurl despite how they have treated other people? I'm sure that few community members would allow someone to stand in their face in person and shout slurs at them. And if you were suddenly fired, thrown out into the street without warning and without an explanation, wouldn't you curse your boss? Yet, for some reason people have let these two things happen to them online. Think about this: what does it say about you when you stand by and allow things like this to happen?

I realize there may be circumstances that lead to their resignations that we don't know about. If there are, then I hope that those circumstances have been worked out and that everything is OK now. But there are ways of resigning with honor that were not adhered to here, and this resignation was completely disproportionate compared to whatever has happened in the past. How about telling the community a week in advance, at the very least, so that continuity can be achieved?

It's time for everyone to gain some self-respect and stop being bullied around. Nobody can blame AWI or GSK or me or anyone else other than the Caretakers for this current mess. It is the previous Caretakers who have destroyed AWTeen's credibility and have earned the world a reputation for childishness and self-serving behavior.

Finally, let's also keep in mind not only who is guilty, but also who is innocent - the rest of the community. We're all on the same side here - we want to rebuild the world and recover. We should be banding together to fix this mess as soon as possible.

Posted by Brant in Commentary at 07:17

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

The Collapse of AWTeen

Note: The following post was written by Matthew, not Brant.

Following the post by Dr. SquaiLboonT on the AWTeen forums that the world would be handed over to Flagg and the Peacekeepers, discussion quickly moved to the reason behind this. While Boont and Digigurl would not provide any (real) information as to the reason behind this decision, many of the users of AWTeen, and people who were not users, talked about the reasons. There were disagreements. Some people thought that Boont and Digi were completely in the right for doing this. Gnu summed it up in his post with the following statement.

Cause really, if there's half the world abusing the volunteers on the team, people bickering in the background about changing the way they run things and one really persistent little muck-racker, then there's not much point to providing these services anymore, no?I have to wonder about this. Was half of the world really abusing the volunteers? Of course not. Sure, there were people who did not respect the Caretakers, or put them down in front of everyone in the world. But, the volunteers were not being abused. I was a Just Ask Me, that's a volunteer position. Was I ever "abused"? No, I wasn't. Nor were the majority of other people who gave up their time to help the world. Neither, of course, were "half the world" abusing Digi and Boont. There were certain people who abused them, but it never got out of hand, as far as I could tell. Had the Caretakers cared to use their privileges to moderate the world like they were supposed to, this would not have happened. Digigurl constantly abused her powers, banning certain people for simply annoying her, but not banning others for doing the exact same to other people. Whenever Boont was on, he just spent his time sending annoying console messages from some telephone. This let the users of AWTeen run wild, doing whatever they wanted. This led to a small collapse in the community. Older citizens simply left. They could no longer deal with the chaos of the world. The same happened to new tourists in AWTeen. They got insulted by so many people, and nothing did anything about it. Of course, they left the world. Who would want to stay somewhere where they just get put down? By allowing this action to continue, the CTs were leading the world to its death. They were also not following the duties they had to AWI, as AWTeen is an AWI world. They were pretty much forcing away most of the new users, who could have became citizens.

A big part of this problem was the aging of the Caretakers. I don't mean in physical age, but in how they acted. No longer did they want to deal with the twelve year olds in AWTeen who whined about everything. They had better things to do with their lives (or so they claimed). Of course, they weren't willing to resign from their positions, which they should have done. From what I can tell, none of them wanted to give up their power in the world. They got so annoyed with the world that they simply decided to shut it down. That was a very, very bad move, especially because they were supposed to be the mature ones of the world, as the Caretakers. If they truly deserved the position of Caretaker, they would never have done this. The reason that they were still the caretakers, however, was simply because of the way that the position got passed down from CT to CT. You didn't get the position because you were the best person for the job; you got it because you were the best friend with all the Caretakers. I can say this with certainty out of a similar personal experience.

At the meeting on the Friday that the CTs left AWTeen, there was supposed to be a meeting. This meeting was supposed to be to discuss a position I had suggested for the world, the Community Liaison position. I had suggested this position because of the obvious lack of communication between the Caretakers and the users of AWTeen, which I discussed earlier. I was set to receive this position. When Boont and Digi announced the removal of Hermes from the world, however, I was very public on my disagreement with their decision to do this. Pretty much as soon as I first said that I disagreed with their actions, both of the CTs decided to shun me. They would not talk to me on MSN or AW. What had changed that had made me bad for the position of the Community Liaison? Absolutely nothing. The only difference was that I no longer agreed with them on one simple thing. This is just proof of how the only way to help change the world was to suck up to and be friends with the CTs and other high staff, who, of course, were their friends. All that came out of this was the age of people in the government getting older and older.

It is time for a new generation of people to come in and manage AWTeen. People like Jaguar Hahn, who are actually friends with people in AWTeen. People who know what the users of AWTeen want, and what kids their age like to do. The current generation was good while they lasted, but it is time for them to move on and pass their contributions to the next group of teens, like the first CTs of AWTeen have done. Young users of AWTeen have every ability to do well running AWTeen. They just need the chance.

Posted by Matthew in Commentary at 17:25

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

Why a strongly defined elections system is important

On the Activeworlds newsgroups, there is currently a debate raging over whether AWTeen's upcoming election should be strongly organized, or whether the election should be a loose affair. The "strongly organized" system involves slowing down the election process so that it takes place over the course of several weeks to a month, publicizing the election, setting up a timetable, and making sure that all candidates are on the same page at all times. Proponents of the "loosely organized" solution argue that all the candidates are already known, and that no additional controls are needed, adding that Flagg should set up a bot in AWVote soon and accept candidates by E-Mail.

I vehemently support the "strongly organized" method of elections. I have posted in the AW forums how such an election could be held, and will repeat it here first, and then provide a story supporting this reasoning. First the original suggestion:

First, a timeline is decided upon that lists the dates for important events in the election process. This timeline includes the registration date, the election day, and so on.
Second, the election is advertised, and a deadline for registration is set. Candidates must submit their names before the registration deadline to be included on the ballot. This step is necessary to determine who is actually running.
Third, the candidates submit their official statements, which are posted in some public place so that everyone knows what each candidate stands for.
Fourth, debates are held. The debates must be well-organized, planned in advance, and there must be a consensus on who will be involved in the debates.
Fifth, the election day arrives, and everyone votes.
Sixth, and perhaps most importantly, the voting totals for each candidate are fully disclosed so that the process is transparent.
What I didn't state in the newsgroup post, however, is why I believe that such a system is necessary. I do not believe that excessive controls are needed; just some rules to maintain order and slow down the process.

A few years back, I watched a student government election take place as the organization's current public relations officer. The student government organization's constitution specified quite a few procedures about how the election would be conducted, and left room open for a committee to set any rules that were missing from the constitution. Several members of the current administration were running either for reelection or for promotion. As a result, the election was overseen by two members of the government who were not running for any positions, thus making up the committee referenced in the bylaws.

The committee decided upon several additional rules for that year's campaigning. Among them were the following:
Nobody was to hang posters or signs in the building where the voting would take place, or distribute stickers or paraphernalia within a certain distance of the building
The vote totals would not be disclosed to the public; only the names of the winners would be disclosed
Removing or destroying other candidates' literature would result in disqualification
Nobody was to "campaign" more than two weeks before the election.
Four weeks out from election day, I heavily advertised the election, and encouraged a number of candidates to sign up. But the "campaign" itself began immediately, and the word "campaign" wasn't well-defined. Did "campaigning" mean sending E-Mails to people? What about posting signs, or organizing people together? Was talking about running defined as "campaigning?" Since nobody knew, the rule was blatantly disregarded. Once one person broke the embargo, then the others were left with a moral dilemma: should they follow everyone else, or should they maintain what they thought was their own definition of "campaigning?" Those who decided to be conservative were left at an initial disadvantage.

Later, the literature of some candidates began to advance on the prohibited building, but again: was covertly handing out stickers to people at lunch considered "campaigning?"

However, these incidents stayed underneath the surface until the day after the election, when the results were to be announced. As public relations officer, I was called downstairs at 9:30am and informed of who had won. All of the incumbent officers had won the election, with one exception. My job was to go upstairs to the main lobby and create a large banner congratulating the winners. I did so, and posted the banner around 10:00, then left to do something else. I returned to the building around 11:00 and was immediately pulled aside by one of the losing candidates, who was very

distraught. Apparently, she hadn't even known that she had lost until she read the banner in the lobby congratulating her opponent. Nearby, a room of 15 people demanded that I do something about the situation.

Not sure what could be done, I nonetheless decided to investigate what had happened to cause so much distress to everyone. I asked the leader of the elections committee who had been notified of the results. I was told that they had pulled aside the victor in this particular race, as well as two others, and had informed them that they had won prior to the banner being posted. Of course, these people were friends of the committee members and were also all incumbents. The outsiders were not notified in this manner and didn't find out until the banner had been hung in the lobby.

Angry and suspicious, I demanded to see the vote totals to confirm that the election had been conducted properly. The committee leaders refused to disclose the totals to me or to any of the other 15 or so people who were protesting in the other room. I walked out and went home, debating whether to even return to the organization.

The end result was, of course, that the same people more or less were sworn in as officers the following year. While that would not have been bad normally, people did not trust the results to be fair and honest. As a result, they lost faith in the organization and its ability to represent them, and what was already generally regarded as a clique now became even more so, enough so that qualified people disdained the organization. After all, who would want to risk their reputation running next year when something like that might happen again? Furthermore, would anyone want to even represent an organization that had so much lost prestige through this botched election and was headed towards irrelevance?

AWTeen shares many similarities to this student government organization. There is currently a clique of "insiders" who want to gain control of the world. Of course they would support a loosely organized election system, because it benefits them greatly. Fewer others would know about the election, so they are less likely to be opposed. Their friends will make up a greater percentage of the constituency, ensuring their victory. But those who don't participate in the election or don't know about it would continue to see AWTeen as a laughingstock that is run by a small clique of inept people, regardless of the qualifications of those elected.

Imagine if, as some suggest, registrations are simply sent by E-Mail. Strike Rapier is tied for the lead with Jaguar Hahn. But an E-Mail comes in at the very last minute, adding a new person to the ballot and drawing a vote from Strike, throwing the election. Do you think that Jaguar is going to sit back and relax after losing by one vote in such circumstances? Instead, every member of his party could decide to boycott AWTeen, claiming they are the real Governors, leading to months of more power struggles and bickering. It's happened in the real world countless times. And as I said before, such a botched election will be the "end of the world," because that will be three strikes (after JerMe and Tony M/digigurl), and AW certainly won't want to try citizen-based leadership again.

I say that we need to give as many people as possible the chance to run and be elected. We need to have organized debates scheduled well in advance. We need to set a registration deadline for candidates to get their names on the ballot. We need to publish statements and platforms in one place so that people can get unbiased information. Most importantly, we need to let people know the vote is being held and publish the results openly and honestly. We need to remove the impression that AWTeen is a clique of teenagers who bicker amongst themselves and open up this process to everyone in the community who wants to participate - both within AWTeen and outside, in the greater AW universe. Rushing a poorly organized vote does not accomplish these objectives.

The student government organization was lucky in that it was still respected as a useful organization to everyone at the college even after the election. AWTeen does not have that luxury, and I hope that the community gets this right, because we only have one chance.

Posted by Brant in Procedures at 11:51

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

Weighing in on AWTeen's issues

Hi. My name is Brant, and I've been involved with the AWTeen community for nine years. Over that time, I've participated in as well as followed AWTeen closely and watched how its community has grown and changed. Now, AWTeen is being reborn with a new system of elections that will define Caretakers of future generations.

I should make it immediately clear that I have no intention to run for the position of Governor in this election, and that I have no affiliations with any of the individuals or groups running in this election. While I will share my opinions about the process and comment on each of the groups' campaigns, I will weigh the facts and wait until the day before the election to decide who I will support. My last post before the election will be an editorial stating my reasons for reaching that decision. In the meantime, I'll comment on the good, the bad, and the downright foolish - at everyone's expense.

This blog is enabled for everyone to post comments, and your views are welcome. May the most qualified person win!

Posted by Brant in Announcements at 10:24