

## **Paper title: Citizenship in Online Worlds**

### **Abstract**

In the early days of the Internet, many online activists believed that it would help to break down borders and facilitate a sense of global citizenship. However, the Internet has developed into a largely commercial space in which virtual gated communities provide a limited form of online citizenship to paying members. In an examination of three American-based sites, Cybertown, Active Worlds, and Second Life, I show how these immersive, privately owned environments allow individuals to enjoy rights and freedoms that reflect a particularly American concept of citizenship. I also describe how many community minded members encourage an awareness and responsibility for others, despite the focus on the individual in these online spaces.

### **Keywords**

Citizenship, virtual communities, online worlds

## Citizenship in Online Worlds

### Citizens and Netizens

In the physical world, a citizen is someone who has the right to live in a specific town, city, or country and to participate in its political processes. Although an individual who is born in a particular political jurisdiction is usually granted citizenship as a birthright, others must apply to the appropriate authorities, which will determine whether or not they can be legally accepted as citizens. Larry Gerston identifies two very different models of citizenship. In the responsibilities-bearing model, the citizen is considered to be a member of a team working for the good of the community, which has shared values and an interest in the welfare of all of its members. In the rights-bearing model, the citizen is defined as an individual who has a natural right to life, liberty, and property, and whose limited responsibilities are specifically set out in legislation. Gerston believes that the rights-bearing model, which reflects a highly individualistic and consumer-oriented view, is the one that most Americans would identify with (2002, pp. 19-20). Canadian law and culture, by contrast, place community and collective rights ahead of individual freedom, and Canadians are more likely to support the responsibilities-bearing model of citizenship. In a book exploring the meaning and future of Canadian citizenship, William Kaplan suggests that Canadians share a “sense of participating in national purposes” and think of citizenship in terms of the “benefits from and obligations to collective projects and shared values and goals” (1993, p. 16). In *Rethinking Australian Citizenship*, Geoffrey Stokes

makes the case for a civic identity that looks beyond the narrow interests of national citizenship. "Global citizenship", he argues, "may comprise a range of universal moral aspirations and political prescriptions that encompass both rights and obligations toward the whole of humanity" (Stokes, 2000, p. 231).

Global citizenship promotes a sense of awareness and responsibility for all people and places, irrespective of regional and national boundaries. Nel Noddings explains that a good global citizen supports global peace, justice, economic fairness, the well being of particular physical places, and cultural diversity. He believes that Americans should think of themselves as citizens of a world in which everyone enjoys the same rights and shares the same responsibilities (2004, pp. 2-9). Many early online activists believed that the Internet would facilitate a kind of global citizenship, because it allowed geographically dispersed individuals to connect and communicate in a neutral, uncontrolled, virtual place. In 1994, Howard Rheingold imagined a "citizen-designed, citizen-controlled worldwide communications network" that would function as a global "electronic agora" and revitalize the public sphere (2000, p. xxx). In 1997, Michael Hauben predicted a near future in which "[y]ou are a Netizen (a Net Citizen), and you exist as a citizen of the world." He believed that when every Netizen could make a direct connection with every other Netizen, or to the "collective mass of many" on the Internet, they would work cooperatively and create a more democratic world (1997, p. 3).

Although the number of people who are able to connect to the Internet has grown dramatically since the early 1990s, the environment in which they

communicate has changed considerably. Dan Schiller describes how the not-for-profit network faced a “full-scale entrepreneurial intervention” from 1992. A decision was made to allow commercial carriers to control the Internet backbone in 1994, and the system was effectively commercialized the following year (1999, pp. 12-13). Cass Sunstein documents the increasing interest that corporations showed in the Internet as it attracted more users and he notes that, by 2000, the number of .com sites far outnumbered education and government sites (2001, pp. 117-118). Although the non-profit, educational, and government sectors still have a large presence online, users are attracted to sites that provide sophisticated communication tools in graphically intense, immersive, multimedia environments. Invariably, these sites are privately owned, and the owners determine the conditions of membership.

Cybertown, Active Worlds, and Second Life are three popular sites that allow participants to use a 3D avatar to navigate through immersive, virtual environments where they can build objects and communicate with other users. In each case, paying members are granted rights and privileges that are not available to visitors. Although members may be referred to as “citizens,” they may find that they have little influence over how their online “community” is structured and governed. Many are happy to enjoy their individual freedom in these game-like environments without the responsibilities that are associated with participatory citizenship. Others, who prefer to participate in collaborative projects, find ways to organize themselves into active communities.

### **Cybertown: A simulated democracy**

Cybertown ([www.cybertown.com](http://www.cybertown.com)), which opened in 1995 and reached a population of over one million “citizens” by 2003, is a virtual 3D city with realistically rendered spaces. It attracts adults who share an interest in fantasy and science fiction narratives and imagery and who wish to participate in building an intentional community online. The home page describes the site as a “Civilization for the Virtual Age.” Mina, the official Guide, is shown gesturing towards City Hall (an iconic pyramidal structure with a spherical top), inviting newcomers to enter the futuristic city and participate in its civic activities. Although visitors are welcomed, individuals who pay a monthly fee of US\$5.00 can “immigrate” and become citizens. Citizens can use a personalized 3D avatar, join and form clubs, take a job to earn “citycash,” create, buy, and sell 3D objects, and settle in one of the many themed neighbourhoods where they can build their dream home (“Welcome to Cybertown,” 2009).

In a paper that was published in the Cybertown Press Room in 2001, Cybertown Inc. comments that “[w]hat the community aspect of the Internet is currently lacking on the majority of community-based destinations are some of the basic principles that define a real-world society.” It boasts that Cybertown replicates institutions and practices from the offline world, including an economic system, a political system, a social hierarchy, and a constitution, and that it has “evolved” into “the largest 3D ‘virtual society’ that exists on the Internet” (“The Next Generation,” 2001).

Amitai Etzioni argues that any community, whether it is online, offline, or a combination of both, can use the Internet to enhance democratic government

provided that four crucial elements are in place: information sharing, deliberation, voting, and representation (2004, p. 232). Initial observations indicate that Cybertown satisfies all of the four criteria. Indeed, the images, political institutions, and titles suggest that this online city is governed very much like a physical municipality. It has a City Hall, a City Council, and a political hierarchy that includes a City Officer, a Security Commissioner, a Security Chief, a Deputy Mayor, a Mayor, and a Founder.

Although the images and official positions give the impression of a participatory democracy in Cybertown, the governance and decision making processes tell a different story. Pascal Baudar tells how, in the beginning, he and co-founder, Tony Rockliff, governed Cybertown themselves. They then created a civic structure and appointed trusted individuals to positions of responsibility, including a mayor and city councilors. These people then selected others to occupy positions below them and the process continued down the ranks until the social structure of Cybertown was complete ("Fake Worlds," 2002). In an inversion of fundamental democratic principles, government officials are responsible to the senior official who has appointed him or her, not to the people over whom they exercise power and control. With no elections, there is no effective method of holding the politicians to account. The titles suggest a democratic civil structure, but the reality is more like the top down management style of a private corporation.

Tony Rockliff functions as the benevolent dictator of Cybertown. He is referred to as the Founder, and he is well respected by the citizens as the

original visionary and ongoing manager of this virtual City. Rockliff gave himself the power to draft, amend, and revise the Constitution, and to set all Community Policies, Community Content Guidelines, and Behavioral Guidelines. He appoints the mayor, who oversees the running the community, handles public relations within the site, and directs the City Council, which is comprised of Colony Leaders, Town Guides, Security Leaders, and other selected citizens. The Council implements the strategic plans provided by the Founder, proposes and votes on new laws based on the Constitution, and appoints new Council Members as required. Neighborhood and Block Leaders are responsible for supporting their residents, approving content, and policing behavior. None of these are elected positions. Ironically, voting is a popular pastime in here, but the activity has nothing to do with elections. Cybertownians are given frequent opportunities to cast a ballot for, among other things, the best club design, the best house design, and the best web page dedicated to Cybertown.

It is rare to encounter opposition to the Founder or to his Constitution anywhere in Cybertown. Much like residents of gated, master planned communities in the physical world, members seem content to enjoy the freedoms and protections that are provided in this fantasy environment. The generally polite and welcoming behavior, and the willingness of residents to serve as volunteer guides, indicates that many participants retain a strong sense of civic responsibility. What such a group could do if they were really able to take control of this virtual community can only be imagined.

## **ActiveWorlds: Citizens, but no society**

Like Cybertown, Active Worlds ([www.activeworlds.com](http://www.activeworlds.com)) is a 3D chat site that offers individuals an opportunity to communicate with other participants in real time through the use of a full-body digital representation. Cybertownians can design and furnish their own house, but, in Active Worlds, members can create an entire world. Participants are invited to build on any empty site, to shop, to play games, to chat with people from around the globe, and to explore several hundred virtual worlds. With more than 70,000 citizens and a universe server receiving more than one million visits every day, Activeworlds Inc. claims to host one of the largest and most popular 3D building projects on the Internet ("The Activeworlds Corporation," 2011).

Entering Active Worlds as a tourist is free, but visitors are encouraged to pay a membership fee of US\$6.95 per month to become a "Virtual World Citizen" of the Active Worlds universe. The privileges that are granted to citizens include the use of a large selection of avatars, access to all of the virtual worlds, a protected citizen name, the right to own and control property, and the ability to post messages and to send telegrams and files to other citizens. Significantly, "Citizenship" is listed under the "Products" category of the Activeworlds website, along with advertising and hosting services. The price: US\$6.95 a month ("Become a Virtual World Citizen!," 2011).

Unlike Cybertown, there is no government in Active Worlds, so there are no opportunities for civic involvement. Citizenship has little meaning, except as a system for separating fee-paying members from the tourist underclass.

Margaret Thatcher's famous comment, that "[t]here is no such thing as society" (Keay, September 23 1987) may well apply to Active Worlds, where regulation is limited and every individual looks after him or her self. The Active Worlds Conduct Guidelines consist of a few general rules that apply to the area near the entry point in public worlds. The Content Guidelines are equally brief. Citizens, for their part, are "solely responsible for their properties, and everything contained in their own worlds" ("Active Worlds Content Guidelines," 2011).

Since all citizens are able to construct almost whatever they want on any empty patch of virtual land, the urban infrastructure of Active Worlds continues to grow. However, the emphasis on solitary builders and their individual property rights works against the development of social groups and a sense of shared purpose. Many paid members are only active for as long as it takes them to complete their personal project (if, in fact, they manage to finish it). A collection of 3D structures created by individuals who may have stopped coming to the site long ago is not likely to support a lively social scene. Alphaworld, the first and largest world in the Active Worlds universe, is a sprawling virtual suburbia larger than the state of California that is littered with empty monuments and incomplete projects. Considered public space is absent here, because there is no master plan, no planner, and there are no building regulations.

Despite the lack of political positions, social structures, and urban planning in Active Worlds, some community-minded residents take their citizenship status very seriously, and they work hard to create meaningful

communities. Many of these valued citizens are “townbuilders.” SW City, a busy, themed town within Alphaworld that began in 1999 and continues to be active, serves as an example of how individual builders can work together to construct an urban environment that can attract and support social activity. Fifteen volunteer staff members, assisted by hundreds of active residents, prepare and maintain SW City and grant plots to builders through their own real estate system. Information for visitors is available in the Town Square Park and guides are on hand to greet newcomers and to provide assistance. Tourists, as well as citizens, are invited to join hundreds of members who play SW City Interactive, a city-wide game in which participants create a user profile, converse with city characters, collect special objects, and embark on various quests. As well as making it easier for newcomers to meet other residents, the game is designed to take players on a grand tour of the city.

SW City provides archived information about its history, its districts, a census, and various events on its official Website. It also has its own discussion forum, where residents write about governance issues, engage in debates, and post announcements. Volunteers publishes a monthly newspaper, the *SW City Times*, and produces one-hour radio programs, which can be heard “in world” over *AWRadio* or downloaded as MP3 files. Back issues of city newspapers, as well as a monthly email newsletter that was sent out for several years, are still available from the SW City Website (“SW City Online,” 2011). The active role that citizens take in constructing and maintaining this busy place demonstrate the importance of community leadership, urban planning, self-governance, a

shared history, and multiple channels of communication. Most of these features do not exist in the rest of Active Worlds.

### **Second Life: A nation of entrepreneurs**

Of all of the graphically immersive 3D online chat sites that have been created over the last fifteen years, none have attracted as much attention and press coverage as Second Life ([www.secondlife.com](http://www.secondlife.com)). This virtual world was launched in 2003 and expanded quickly. Statistics covering the population growth, the amount of virtual land that has been purchased, and the number of Linden dollars (virtual currency) that are exchanged, are updated on a daily basis. By the end of January 2008, the number of total residents (avatars with a unique name that are able to log into the site) had reached 12,277,900. More than 18.5 million square meters of virtual land were available for sale, and the total supply of Linden Dollars (1 \$US = 265 Linden Dollars) in circulation was approaching 4.3 billion ("Second Life: Economic Statistics," 2008). By 2009, growth had leveled off. However, by the end of 2010, almost 800,000 users were still logging in more than once a month, and the online environment had grown to the virtual equivalent of over 2,000 square km ("The Second Life Economy in Q4 2010," 2011).

Philip Rosedale, the CEO of Linden Lab, the company that created Second Life, has declared that he is "building a new country" (Carr & Pond, 2007, p. 21). However, participants are referred to as "residents" rather than citizens. Civic structures are non-existent and there is no official opportunity for political participation. Although building is a central activity, as it is in Cybertown and

Active Worlds, what sets this virtual community apart from others is the ability to sell virtual land and objects for cybercash that can be exchanged for real-world money. Second Life has developed a market economy that emulates, and is linked to, the real world economy. Individuals are encouraged to set up businesses "in world" to sell virtual clothing, objects, buildings, and land. This online nation was designed to attract entrepreneurs rather than community-minded citizens.

The only sanctioned method of forming collective associations in Second Life is through the creation of Groups. Residents can easily form a Group, which consists of two or more members, and they can join up to twenty-five Groups. The official guide to Second Life explains that the rules that govern Groups followed an open model in the beginning, but the young communities were judged to be "too immature for democracy," so a "new authoritarian group structure" was introduced (Rymaszewski, 2007, p. 34). The individual who starts a Group is identified as the founder and owner, and he or she enjoys special powers. These include assigning roles and particular abilities to other members, whose actions are limited by the specific powers that have been granted. Only members who have been given the right to do so can send notices to other members or vote on Group proposals. The owner can summarily eject members from a Group and has the right to appoint a successor ("Improved Group Tools," 2007).

Some Groups have grown to the size of large communities or small nation states. The social and political structure of these larger collections of residents

usually develops from the top-down management structure of the Groups from which they formed. However, not all Second Life communities are governed according to an authoritarian model. Alpine Meadow, Colonia Nova, and Neufreistadt are three themed areas that joined together in 2004 to form the self-governing Confederate of Democratic Simulators (CDS). By 2009, the CDS had grown to eleven sims. They created their own constitution, planning regulations, forums, and Websites. Every six months, elections are held for the Representative Assembly, which owns the land and is responsible for establishing the laws and regulations that all residents agree to abide by. Anyone who has been granted title to any land by the CDS becomes a citizen, and citizenship cannot be revoked without a fair trial. The purpose of the CDS is to “enable ownership of high-quality public, private, and open-space land; create a themed yet expressive community of public and private builds; and implement novel democratic forms of self government within Second Life” (“Confederation of Democratic Simulators,” 2009).

Although Linden Labs encourages the development of self-governing communities within Second Life, the company remains in charge. Residents cannot override the rules that are embedded in the software that controls this private universe. The big decisions that determine how the world functions are made by Philip Rosedale and other Linden staff, and they are announced in “Town Hall” meetings, which, despite the democratic connotation, involve no political participation by the residents.

Cybertown, Active Worlds, and Second Life all follow a limited model of citizenship that offers the right to a virtual life, individual liberty, and personal property. By simulating democratic institutions, Cybertown negates the possibility of substantial civic participation. Active Worlds and Second Life offer unbridled freedom to the individual at the expense of public considerations. In both sites, however, civic activists have worked to create collaborative communities that are more in keeping with the responsibilities-bearing model of citizenship. Although only a small minority of members are involved in these experiments in self-government, they show what is possible in privately owned sites, and they provide a glimpse of what could develop under different circumstances.

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