

A Failure of Convivencia: Democracy and Discourse Conflicts in a Virtual Government

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Abstract

Early utopian notions of Internet-based community as enabling transcendence of earthly governments and cultural divides manifested in the massively multiplayer online nongame platform, Second Life. However, while platform users nearly unanimously chose governance regimes based on professional management rather than democratic self-governance, one of the few democratic experiments experienced deep conflict over precisely the utopian notions it held in common. This article examines a failed merger between two experimental democratic communities in the virtual world of Second Life as an example of the general failure of internet utopianism and a specific failure to transcend distinctions in cultures of origin (the “failure of convivencia,” of the title, a term reflecting a historical model chosen by one of the communities) in a common online space. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, this article will analyze a distinction between radically different, and ultimately incommensurable, discourses around governance in the merged community amid the failure of participatory, democratic models of online governance.

Keywords

virtual worlds, internet, multiculturalism, governance

The social effects of computer-mediated communication have been the object of study since the general adoption of e-mail in the corporate workplace in the 1980s. Early work attempted to compare it to face-to-face communication, highlighting how the loss of nuance in body language and spoken intonation led to misunderstanding, while other studies found a greater empowerment of lower status employees compared to physical meetings (literature reviewed in Cherny, 1999, pp. 21–23). With the advent of MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons) in the same era, anthropologists began to examine online communities as a locus of culture, especially political culture (see, e.g., Cherny, 1999). The spread of internet access led some to claim that *virtual communities* (a term coined by Howard Rheingold in his study of the pioneering group The WELL in 1993; Rheingold, 2000) would pioneer newer, more democratic political forms (see, e.g., Barlow 1996). This vision was shared by many, both developers and users, in the virtual world of Second Life (SL), which launched in 2003 (Ondrejka, 2007). However, an early experiment in democracy in SL, the subject of this article, proved vastly less popular as a community and an exemplar of governance than its founders expected. This article analyzes the failure of a merger between two self-described “experiments in online democracy” within SL, which ultimately were “divided by a common language,” as Winston Churchill famously said of Americans and British, the very

commonality of their language of democratic participation and online community fueling extraordinary hostility within, and ultimate sundering of, the merged polity.

This article is an attempt to ascertain why the merger between two of the handful of democratic communities in SL failed, and in particular why the merger engendered so much hostility during its yearlong “trial period.” After a description of the tools and objects of governance in SL and the history of attempts to create democratic communities within it, analysis of community discourse will demonstrate that the source and severity of the conflict lay in the growing understanding that each group, Al Andalus (AA) and the Confederation of Democratic Simulators (the CDS), differed profoundly as to the substantive content of the terms they used to describe what they thought were common values, including *democracy*, *participatory government*, and *representation*, and that their differences were due in large part to the national political cultures of origin of the group members. This substantive disagreement masked by a common

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vocabulary points to the significance of the failure of the AA/CDS merger: It is a cautionary tale for management of cross-cultural cooperation both online and off-line, and for attempts to create groups inspired by a communitarian vision of civic participation, a vision that has failed utterly to appeal or to work within SL, or indeed online communities generally.

Prior to embarking on such an analysis, however, it bears noting how software and politics co-construct a polity within SL. As in “real life” (“RL”), in SL that which is governed falls into two broad categories: behavior and property.

Second Life: What Is Governed and How

SL is a virtual world, a persistent simulated three-dimensional environment in which people interact via avatars, or graphical representations of themselves. Unlike massively multiplayer online games (MMOs) such as *World of Warcraft*, SL is not built around game mechanisms of quests, scores, competition, or objectives. Rather, it re-creates a physical space much like the real world, in which people engage in activities they find valuable. Also unlike MMOs, all landscape features, buildings, objects, clothes and personal accessories are built not by its corporate owners but by its users, who engage in real-money trade, buying and selling user-created content.

SL is free to use: Anyone can create any number of avatars, enter the world, and engage in any noneconomic behavior for free. Linden Lab (LL), the company that runs SL, makes the bulk of its income from “land sales:” charging setup and monthly rental fees for parcels of virtual land. As of July 2010, the basic unit of land in SL, the region or “simulator,” often referred to as “sim,” and representing a virtual 65,536 square meters of earth and sky, cost \$1,000 to set up and \$350 per month to maintain.

SL users have innovated expansions on LL-granted powers and software tools. While “mainland” land owned directly by LL bears no restrictions on its use other than those relating to mature content guidelines, the bulk of land in SL is composed of private islands, typically subject to a “covenant,” a document setting forth terms of rental and the sorts of limitations on uses and appearance common in real-life home owner agreements in planned communities. Many private islands are owned by leasing companies (acting via a single named avatar, as for-profit corporations cannot own sims directly), which apply covenants and then sublease the land for residential or business uses. Management staff of these companies are typically quick to respond to complaints and disputes on their properties, given the much smaller ratio of staff to tenants than between LL and the entire user base. With the ability to evict and ban sublessors, “land barons” have actual enforcement authority over their tenants.

Personal behavior within SL is governed by a set of contracts between the user and LL, which users enter into by clicking a button indicating assent, which must be done in order to

enter into the virtual world (Fairfield, 2008). Among these is the “Community Standards” document (<http://secondlife.com/corporate/cs.php>), prohibiting a “Big Six” of behaviors: expressions of intolerance, harassment, assault, disclosure of real-life information, violation of the adult content zoning, and disturbing the peace. As LL disclaims liability for “Content, conduct or services of users or third parties” (<http://secondlife.com/corporate/tos.php#tos8>), users have no claim against LL for not sanctioning any particular alleged violations of the Terms of Service or Community Standards: There is no basis for “third-party beneficiary” claims relating to the contract between LL and the alleged violator (Fairfield, 2008), and no basis in the contract between LL and the person alleging violations, as LL has no contractual duty to act on abuse reports, and specifically disclaims liability for actions of other users.

This contractual situation gives rise to a political vacuum: Not only is the abuse-reporting system practically ineffective, given the size of SL’s user base and limitations on staff time for processing abuse reports, there is also no mechanism for resolving disputes between users that do not involve allegations of violations of the Terms of Service. Users have no contractual relationship with each other, and there is no body of tort law, no judicial system, no universally agreed-on means of dispute resolution, and most important, no mechanism for enforcing judgments, within SL.

Appeals can be made to national law: Several cases for copyright and trademark violation have been brought in Federal court in the United States (see, e.g., *Eros, LLC v. Doe*, 2007). Numerous problems with the use of state or national legal systems for enforcement of SL disputes, from the cost of access to the court system to profoundly complex issues of conflict of laws and jurisdiction, make recourse to those systems impracticable for all but the most high-value disputes, either in financial terms or in the determination of one party to seek an official acknowledgement or resolution of the dispute.

Origins and Political Systems of the CDS and AA

The land baron/covenant model arose with the establishment of private islands as an SL product in 2006. From SL’s launch in 2003, however, there was no clear solution to its lack of a dispute resolution system. In 2004, the SL official forum hosted a discussion of the prospect of users creating institutions to fill the vacuum left by LL (G. Llewellyn, interview with author, 2010). In response to an LL call for proposals to develop an underused region, a group of the forum members, predominantly European, jointly submitted a proposal for a community to be managed pursuant to an electoral, constitutional system. The proposal was approved, and the project members collectively (via a single landholding avatar whose RL owner received the bills) were awarded a lease to one third of a mainland sim in late 2004 (Wikia, 2011). After withdrawal of official LL support amid accusations of favoritism,

the group moved from LL-owned mainland to a private island in 2006 and named the project the “Confederation of Democratic Simulators.” Participants hoped that their model of a constitutional, elected government would prove popular enough to spread to 5% of the SL grid (G. Llewellyn, interview, 2010). Instead, the CDS stabilized at 5 sims out of a total of 31,426 as of April 2011 (Shepherd, 2012), the “land baron” model proving vastly more popular.

As of 2009, the CDS constitution provided for a Representative Assembly (RA), elected to 6-month terms by all those owning property within the five sims. The number of seats in the RA was equal to 10% of the voting population, as of a date set prior to each election. The 10th RA, elected in January 2009 and which was to vote on the merger with AA, consisted of seven persons (Ecksol, 2009b). Electors did not vote for individuals but rather for “factions,” or political parties, who then named members to fill the seats won. Determination of election results was by a system called Single Transferable Vote, memorably described by a professor emeritus at Yale as “too complex to describe” in a short work on democratic systems (Dahl, 2000, p. 190). For the 10th RA, the first-place faction ran two candidates but won three seats, while the last-place faction ran four candidates but won two seats, indicating the complexity of the system, especially for an electorate of 70 persons. The faction with the most votes then selected from within its membership a Leader of the RA, who chaired the typically biweekly sessions. The RA also elected a Chancellor, an executive with primarily administrative, land management functions. A “Scientific Council,” with members appointed by current members, subject to RA confirmation, acted as a constitutional court.

In 2008, the AA Caliphate, covering two sims, opened in SL. The brainchild of Michel Manen, a former member of the CDS RA, the Caliphate was intended to be “a community of individuals willing to explore the modalities of interaction between different languages, nationalities, religions and cultures within a political and juridical space shaped by authentic Islamic principles” (Manen, quoted in Duranske, 2007). Initially covering two sims, AA was a re-creation of Andalusia, Spain, in the period of *convivencia*, or peaceful cohabitation of Muslim, Christian, and Jewish communities under Islamic rule, prior to the Christian reconquest and expulsion of the Jews in 1492. The choice of that time and place was designed to evoke the spirit of convivencia and cross-cultural dialog, as well as enabling a virtual-architecture tour de force re-creating three period ethnic architectural styles within an overarching historically accurate context. The Caliphate, with Manen as caliph, would embody “leading edge research of how authentic Islamic legal principles can be applied in a 21st century context, and be compatible with universal ideals of dignity, equality, democracy, participation and human rights” (Duranske, 2007). However, by the Fall of 2008, various troubles prevented Manen from logging into SL, and management of the project fell to his assistant, Rose Springvale, also a former CDS RA member.

Springvale removed the “Caliphate” designation, and on consensus decision of the AA citizenry, ended the role of religious law. Ownership of the land, which had grown to seven sims by 2009, was transferred to a Texas nonprofit corporation, Virtual Democracy, Inc. (VDI), formed to manage the property and sponsor events and projects related to democracy generally online (Springvale, author interview, 2010). AA was run like a land baron project, with Springvale as property manager in addition to being one of three members of the VDI Board of Directors. Informal “town hall” meetings with interested landholders and other SL users, drawing in part on the Islamic concept of the *umma*, or community physically gathered, provided a source of legitimacy (Springvale, author interview, 2010).

In early 2009, Springvale began discussions with the CDS about a merger of the projects. She believed that merger would bring more activity to the CDS, put AA on a stronger financial footing, and enable a fit between a surplus of management in the CDS and a surplus of projects in AA (Springvale, author interview, 2010). The proposal was controversial in both communities, however: Some Andalusians disapproved of CDS formalism, factionalism, and the historic viciousness of its politics and disapproved of the loss of AA’s identity, as the merged entity would simply be an expanded CDS (Palisades, author interview, 2010). Similarly, some in the CDS were concerned that AA would be a financial drain and that its members, accustomed to “ad hoc” management, would prove hostile to the bureaucratic formalism of the CDS (Murakami, author interview, 2010). The merger agreement was eventually approved by both groups in May 2009, after inclusion of a modification proposed by Andalusian Wasp Thor: Both communities would have the option to terminate the merger on the anniversary of the joining on the SL map of the sims (Ecksol, 2009a, Section 8).

The merger took effect in July 2009. The 12th RA, elected in January 2010, was the first to include AA representatives, who took 6 of 11 seats in the legislature. (Lake, 2010b) That legislative session, leading up to the July 2010 Wasp Clause deadline, was one of growing conflict between CDS and AA partisans in the RA, though nonpolitical members of the two communities socialized frequently and amiably through this period.

As the date of decision on the Wasp Clause neared, there was significant uncertainty as to whether either group would terminate or whether popular moderate pressure for finalizing the merger would prevail. Immediately prior to the beginning of debate in the RA, board members of VDI announced that the Board had voted unanimously to terminate the merger on behalf of AA.

After termination of the merger, both communities went into significant decline. In the next CDS election, though the RA had been decreased from 13 seats to 7, fewer candidates ran than there were seats, as citizenship dropped from 131 in May to 70 in October (Lake, 2010a). The CDS has continued to run on its extensive financial reserves, while AA ended

operations in June 2012. After the termination of the merger, neither was a thriving, active place where people other than the leadership met, worked, and played together. It cannot be clearly concluded that the year of acrimony crippled both communities: SL overall is declining in use. Nonetheless, exhaustion and disillusionment after the termination of the merger have notably taken their toll.

Summary Time Line of Events

- 2003 SL launches
- 2004 SL official forum discussion on community governance
- LL sets aside land parcel for self-governance experiment
- 2006 Experimental community moves from Linden-owned land after charges of favoritism leveled; community takes CDS name
- 2007 AA Caliphate launches
- 2008 AA founder leaves SL; Springvale takes management role, drops “Caliphate” designation
- 2009 AA land ownership transferred to VDI, a Texas nonprofit corporation
- Springvale, on behalf of AA, enters into merger negotiations with CDS
- Merger approved May 2009, on stipulation of 1-year trial period (the “Wasp Clause”)
- I begin ethnographic work in AA in December
- 2010 CDS 12th RA seated; AA representatives take 7 of 12 seats
- Political debate increasingly vitriolic
- Elections for 13th Resident Assembly; I take a seat representing AA
- Just prior to CDS vote on the merger, VDI announces termination
- “Love Me, Love My Friends” CDS forum thread straddles week of termination

Choices of and Within Methodology

Having been aware of AA from the initial announcements of the then-proposed project in 2007, in the Fall of 2008 I had several discussions with its principals about conducting legal-anthropological fieldwork within the community. With Manen’s subsequent departure, I shelved my plans for the next year. In December 2009, I caught up with Rose Springvale on the status of AA. She informed me of the merger and encouraged me to become a citizen of the merged community. I rented a large house in AA, joined the CDS online forum, disclosed my interests as a researcher, and began participating in the merged community. I hosted parties that drew many of the political class, attended RA and other governmental sessions, and socialized widely in the community. On my entry into the community, I had no specific research question, but I

was generally curious about the success of the merger and the nature of politics in the CDS. Participant-observer ethnography seemed the method best suited to a simultaneous process of finding the right question and collecting the data that would enable me to answer it. I wanted to open the “black box” of the community’s extensive legislation to examine “the relative messiness of practice” (Law, 2004, p. 18) prior to, and outside of, the formal legislative process that was so prized by the CDS.

There is no one formula for the production of ethnographic work. As Hine (2000) states, ethnography is strengthened by this lack. It is a “lived craft, rather than a protocol which can be separated from the particular study or the person carrying it out . . . inseparable from the contexts in which it is being employed and . . . thrives on reflexivity about method” (p. 13). Following Hine’s (2009) later precept that

the key idea is that the researcher should become immersed in the social situation being studied and should use that experience to try to learn how life is lived there, rather than coming in with a particular pre-formed research question or assumptions about issues that will be of interest (p. 6)

my formal research began with my moving into the community as an observer, a member, and an engaged participant. After several months of quietly observing, I began to take an active role in the community, continuing as an organizer of unofficial social events, and stood as a candidate for the 13th RA. I was elected, and served a 6-month term, during which the merger was terminated.

Anthropological fieldwork methodology within online communities has increasingly acknowledged the centrality of reflexivity, or accounting for the presence and participation of the fieldworker in the community of study (compare the tentative discussion in Hine, 2000, with, *inter alia*, Hine, 2009; Baym, 2009; Nardi, 2010). While a reflexive, participatory approach may be regarded as contemporary “best practice” (Baym, 2009), Pearce and Artemesia’s (2009) term *participant engagement*, though lacking a strong theoretical foundation, better captures the flavor of fieldwork in online communities with an active, rather than merely discursive, component (Pearce & Artemesia, 2009). In an online game, being an observer, participant, or otherwise is practically impossible once one takes on an avatar and “go[es] into the screen,” (Pearce & Artemesia, 2009, p. 216). Once an avatar, one is a player, not an observer. In the CDS, where politics arguably took on the ludic centrality of battle in *World of Warcraft*, the sort of participation necessary to truly understand the community involved playing, not sitting on the sidelines observing. To have not participated in CDS politics would have given rise to an understanding as shallow as watching others play *World of Warcraft*. By the same token, my active participation was not an unmitigated benefit to my research. As I became more partisan, my access to

my opponents declined dramatically, and my status as an academic in general and a researcher of the community in particular became, at least in the hands of one of the CDS debaters, fodder for personal and factional attacks. Additionally, it is unknowable how the merger decision would have played out absent my involvement, particularly as my interrogation of members' political beliefs led to an articulation of greater differences between CDS and AA members than had been generally realized.

My research corpus consists of material on the CDS public forums, including posted chat logs of (almost) all official meetings of CDS governing bodies, supplemented by my own logs of the same meetings. I have over 1,000 photographs of CDS events, which were invaluable in providing insights into allegiances, friendships, and patterns of socializing, as an evolving record, quite literally, of where the participants stood in in-world politics. Additionally, I conducted approximately 10 one-hour interviews with key figures in the merger debate and in the earlier history of the CDS. This huge volume of material enabled a deep understanding of the CDS and the merger debate but proved challenging to synthesize into a short work. Here, I focus on one thread on the CDS discussion forum to serve as a synecdoche for the debate as a whole. While any number of forum threads might have served, the "Love Me, Love My Friends" CDS discussion thread (Bagheera, 2010) best reveals the growing realization within the community that the source of the bitter conflict between CDS and AA partisans lay in profound disagreements in worldview. This thread begins a week before the termination of the merger with a statement by a new member that she is leaving the CDS over what she sees as "vicious" and "ruthless" behavior toward a friend (some of which, not apparent from the thread, was mine). After a few posts of well-wishing, the thread turns to the underlying political causes of what most agree is a hostile atmosphere, with factionalism, rancor, CDS history, European political history, and political theory mobilized to rhetorical ends. The thread spans the termination of the merger. I believe this set of texts is representative of the merger debate in a number of critical ways: It is largely distinct from the locus of community practice in SL, a fact with factional implications; it is a mixture of sophisticated theory and rough street-level politics; it evinces a factional split traceable back to real-life cultural differences between the CDS activists and the Andalusian activists; and it embodies a good-faith dispute over politics, both real life and SL. Both "sides" use similar discourse elements with positive valences: democracy, participation, fairness, rights—but in different ways and to divergent ends.

All names used herein are actual avatar names. This choice is somewhat controversial from two opposing directions: my choice to elide real-life identity, other than to theorize as to the impacts of openly disclosed RL nationality on the political discourse of the CDS on the one hand, and my choice not to anonymize avatar names on the other. The former is largely settled practice. Early

online ethnographies (e.g., Kendall, 2002) covered communities whose members knew each other's RL identities and in fact met face-to-face, and thus held that an investigation into RL identity was appropriate and necessary. At the same time, names of online communities were often replaced with pseudonyms to protect the privacy of members (e.g., Cherny, 1999), which is still a fairly common practice with respect to the names of, *inter alia*, guilds in *World of Warcraft* (e.g., Nardi, 2010). However, contemporary and subsequent studies involving communities without an RL component, where interactions occur exclusively through avatars, have normalized the choice by the anthropologist not to seek RL information generally unavailable among the community members (Boellstorff, 2008).

This choice also reflects a particular view of identity. Breaking from Goffman (1971), who drew a core distinction between *presentations of self* and *self as hidden reality*, I follow Stone's (1996) early and lyrical, though, I believe, highly descriptive analysis of the self in a social and digital context. Stone holds that the "socially apprehensible citizen" is a collection of both physical and discourse elements, with the latter, predominant in society, made of texts, to the extent that she refers to a "textually mediated physicality" (p. 41). While applicable in the context she describes of such texts as legal and medical records, her view is even more apt in three-dimensional, visual, virtual worlds, where the physical body is not unwritten but elided by the constructed body of the avatar, and identity is performed through speech acts and a range of consciously chosen, indeed commercially purchased, elements of avatar body and wardrobe. The legible body, Stone (1996) claims, presents "a set of cultural codes that organize the ways the body is apprehended and that determine the range of socially appropriate responses" (p. 41). Once one accepts that the virtual world is a place, distinct but not cut off from places in the physical world, it would seem to follow that avatars are people, likewise distinct but not cut off from bodies, both physical and legible, in the physical world. Coupled with the choice of a participant-observer, rather than informationally privileged, stance within the subject community, the only sound choice is to present no more information about the participants in this community than they disclosed generally to each other.

However, practice has generally been to replace avatar names with pseudonyms, recognizing a privacy interest in, and reputational value of, one's avatar identity (Boellstorff, 2008). I have chosen to do otherwise, and to use actual avatar names throughout. Departure from the standards of pseudonyms both for groups collectively and for their members individually, I believe, is appropriate in this case. The CDS is unique in its mirroring online of nation-state institutions: Discussing it under a pseudonym would be disingenuous and purposeless, as there are no other such entities. Similarly, all its deliberations and discussions, both within SL and on its forums, are public, without any barriers to viewing. As the primary material for this study, the forum thread, is publicly

available and readily searchable, pseudonymization is neither necessary nor effective.

Civic Epistemologies in Conflict

While perhaps a seemingly trivial case, the politics of the CDS/AA merger is an exemplar of a significant problem in globalized political discourse, especially around the use and meaning of new technologies. The CDS and AA experienced what Sheila Jasanoff (2005) refers to as a conflict of “civic epistemologies.” In observing divergent civic responses to innovations in biotechnology in the United States and Western Europe, she observes that “[h]ow democratic polities acquire communal knowledge for purposes of collective action emerges in my telling as a particularly significant feature of political culture” (p. 9). Cross-national studies of regulatory policy historically had been “constrained by a number of unspoken assumptions that cast doubt on the utility of comparison,” including the meaning of terms such as *science*, *the state*, and *the gene*. Thus,

one has to ask how diverse actors use and understand the concept, how it is articulated through formal and informal practices, where and by whom it is contested, and how it reasserts itself in the face of challenges to its integrity or meaning. (Jasanoff, 2005, p. 19)

In the context of the merger, no one asked those questions until I began actively interrogating community members in December 2009. What emerged from my work was a pair of Discourses, defined below, built on divergent civic epistemologies.

CDS Politics as Clash of Discourses

Linguist James Paul Gee (2011) defines “Discourses” as “ways of combining and integrating language, actions, interactions, ways of thinking, believing, valuing, and using various symbols, tools and objects to enact a particular sort of socially recognizable identity” (p. 29), particularly relevant to conflicts over social goods, the stuff of politics, and distinct from “discourses,” or particular slices of interaction. Elements of the AA and CDS Discourses were largely inchoate among community members during the period in question. That the communities did things differently, that some of each group’s practices were distasteful or incomprehensible to the other, was abundantly clear and widely discussed. However, as both communities stated that their core values were “democracy” and “participatory self-governance,” a majority believed that there were sufficient grounds for merger.

Through individual interviews, essays on my blog that were publicized within the community, and threads on the active official forum, my interrogation began a process of

participants articulating the elements of their Discourses. One forum thread in particular, “Love Me, Love My Friends” (Bagheera, 2010), spanning the week in which the merger was terminated, evolved over 44 posts, many 2,500 words or more in length, to evince a growing recognition that the conflict grew not from personalities or factional politics but from an incommensurability of Discourses. Some articulation of this notion had begun in previous weeks, in part in response to my discussion of the work of legal scholar Beth Simone Noveck (Murakami, 2010), but it was only here that critical assumptions were brought to light. In retrospect, after performing discourse analysis on the forum thread, the two Discourses could be defined as including the following critical elements.

The CDS

We are Western European Social Democrats, on the Left in our national political cultures. We believe that individual liberty is protected only by strong state institutions and that a weak state, along with direct democracy, leads to tyranny. Conflict and rudeness are a sign of a robust democratic politics: Politeness is identified with fascism. As human nature is the same everywhere, politics is the same everywhere. Therefore, there is one ideal set of institutions, and that is those of the contemporary European nation-state, with a strong legislature and a weak executive. Also, there is therefore no particular reason to privilege time spent in the “physical” community of SL: The web forum is a better site for the lengthy verbal give-and-take that comprises politics. “Community” is not a meaningful unit of analysis; the state is, and the state is serious business. Deep pseudonymity—the refusal to disclose RL identity—is a core element of freedom. We are a small island of democracy in a sea of unpleasant capitalism: We have nothing to learn from the rest of the SL grid. We believe strongly in democracy, freedom, and justice. Politics is our purpose.

Al Andalus: Place Matters

AA is a recreation of a specific place at a specific time: Medieval Spain during the *convivencia*, or multicultural era under Islamic rule, and prior to the *Reconquista*, or expulsion of the Muslims and Jews by the resurgent Christian Spanish kingdom. Identity derives from place and community, and RL and SL identities are inextricably linked, though privacy is important. Self-governance happens through the *umma* of believers or the town hall, where all can speak: If you don’t speak, you don’t count. We are American and Eastern European, with a Middle Eastern contingent that largely keeps to itself. We tend to a mild libertarian capitalism and see a strong state as the primary threat to individual liberty. We believe in consensus, which is indicated by mutual respect and politeness. We are a part

of the SL grid, and a center of many overlapping but distinct social groupings, from fans of Flamenco guitar to Islamic conservatives. We believe strongly in democracy, freedom, and justice. Being a safe space for members of diverse cultures to meet and interact is our purpose.

Thus, the Discourse roots of the conflict were fairly subtle: Both groups articulated their core values with the same words. Both found the other's manifestations of those values strange, unappealing, or incomprehensible. Both responded by accusing the other of not in fact having the values they possessed, and indeed of betraying those values. The conflict grew to be more intense, bitter, and personal the more those core values were invoked.

Analysis

National-Political Culture and Discourse Conflict

In a key post within the thread, CDS cofounder Gwyneth Llewellyn linked her experiences growing up in Salazar's Portugal to the notion that rudeness is a sign of a healthy democracy. This was the turning point of the "Love Me, Love My Friends" thread, and perhaps of political discourse in the CDS, as for the first time the key elements of the CDS Discourse were all discernible and contextualized. She holds the key distinction between AA and the CDS is not online/off-line or spiritual/political but, intriguingly, polite/democratic. She does this by discussing her experience growing up under the Salazar dictatorship in Portugal:

In my country I saw that happen—we lived under a very polite, educated, good-mannered society for half a century, where virtues were exalted, a gentle conduct was honourable, and examples of good nature and politeness were followed by all. It was a right-wing, Catholic-inspired dictatorship. Once that was replaced by a representative democracy, corruption became the norm, cheating became widespread, and politeness was seen as pure hypocrisy or merely a clinging to a past that doesn't exist anymore.

She then counters a potential objection, that her chosen data point is not representative: "You may say this is just my personal experience . . ." but adds "the more democratic and free a system is, small or large, the less polite people are in it. The more strict, autocratic and dictatorial the system, the more polite people are in it." This move extracts a general political principle from her observation, and expressly presents a unity of off-line/online, holding that one rule covers all cases.

Llewellyn also, by discussing her experience in Portugal, points in this thread to another source of factional alignment: The CDS almost without exception was composed of Western Europeans, AA of Americans and Eastern Europeans.

The state-centric view of the CDS saw rudeness as not a problem *for the state*, thus not a problem, and in fact, as a sign of a healthy democracy, something to be encouraged. Andalusians, however, saw rudeness as a problem *for civil society*, and sought to transform or reject a state that encouraged it simultaneously with regulating political freedom via bureaucracy. Therefore, in retrospect, it is entirely logical that a thread on rudeness, begun in intimate, personal, self-help language, would give rise to the first coherent exploration of the split in political Discourses that had been masked by the overarching Discourse of "democracy and freedom."

Arria Perreault, Swiss, and a member of the CDS conservatives, then concurs with Llewellyn: "What some people call disputes, conflicts (and see as bad) is in fact a debate. The debate is the essence of the democracy. If you don't like debates, don't come here." However, she contradicts herself in the next paragraph: "It's really a shame to see what the CDS is today . . . we have merged with AA and our life became poisonous." The only implication is that debate *within* a Discourse is part of democracy, while AA brought an incommensurable Discourse, illegitimate and "poisonous."

Jasanoff (2005) describes how debates over biotechnology, while often framed as ordered by a rational ethics, were in fact driven by "broader, more powerful national narratives" (p. 201). Here, debates ostensibly about personalities and finance were similarly driven by powerful narratives about the nature of freedom, rooted in national culture and experience, that were almost never articulated by any of the participants. It required both a year of extensive and informed conflict and deep theoretical analysis after the fact to find the root of the problem, one practically identical to that driving the differences between political debates over biotechnology in Jasanoff's study. This obscured conflict suggests the value of a warning to cross-cultural engagement with the politics of technoscience: Participants would be well advised to check their assumptions at the door, as it were. There may be a role for persons trained in anthropology, linguistics, and dispute resolution in advising and preparing such teams prior to their work and on the first signs of disputes driven by mutual incomprehension.

Tensions Between Deliberative Democracy and Participatory Democracy

The original post in the "Love Me, Love My Friends" thread as well as later exchanges after the termination of the merger accord with Diana C. Mutz's (2006) thesis that deliberative democracy and participatory democracy are fundamentally at odds, both in theory and in practice. Her research found "an inherent tension between promoting a society with enthusiastically participative citizens and promoting one imbued with tolerance and respect for differences of opinion" (p. 3). She views her studies of American political behavior as adding to "ample qualitative evidence" (p. 107) that Americans avoid

divisive political discussions in order to maintain social harmony. Given that the CDS conservatives explicitly rejected social harmony, in this thread and in the earlier, AA Discourse focused thread, “The Appalling Beth Noveck,” (Murakami, 2010), it is unsurprising that AA citizens who did not participate on the CDS Discussion forums were unanimous in their opposition to the merger, citing political conflict and rudeness as their primary reason for seeking termination (author field notes, 2010). It bears noting that in the most divisive and contested election, perhaps, in CDS history, that of the 13th RA which was expected to vote on the merger pursuant to the Wasp Clause, 56 of 131 citizens eligible to vote actually did so (Lake, 2010c). Likewise, the departure over time of moderates from the CDS left a radicalized core, both more coherent and more extreme in its views than in early years (Livingston, author interview, 2010), a finding in accordance with Mutz’s (2006) research.

The “Love Me, Love My Friends” thread was started by Bagheera (see Figure 1), a relatively new member of the CDS, who had been recruited into the community by Arias Ahren, a figure controversial for what some saw as a confrontational discourse style. As a result, civility, its meaning, and its importance had been heatedly debated in the CDS in the month or so leading up to Bagheera’s decision to leave, announced in the original post of the thread. Her departure came at a point of maximum conflict, 9 days before a decision on the merger pursuant to the Wasp Clause was due.

Bagheera, identified as a “casual contributor” with 25 forum posts, speaks to the community in personal, emotive, and self-help language: Love me, love my friends. She refers to CDS politics as “developmentally crippled:”

the main topic of discussion seems to be who is worthy and who is not. As grown adults, it just comes across as developmentally crippled, and, worse, creating a gaggle of like-shallow-minded people to help each other stay stuck and not get whole again.

She professes adamant loyalty (“yes, MY FRIEND, Arias”) and to love “you all,” even those who “have behaved abominably.” Because people have “ruthlessly gone after my friend,” she announces that “[w]e are gone. My CDS lands are for sale . . . Fare well.” Bagheera’s post is one of only 3 out of 44 in this thread to invoke psychological/self-help language. This suggests that, without questioning her sincerity in claiming her departure was due to the treatment of Ahren, another factor was likely the clash between her personal, emotive focus and the electoral-politics Discourse of the CDS, which she reads as “developmentally crippled.”

Llewellyn later details what she sees as the “de-construction of the CDS” after the merger by people seeking “an authoritarian regime” (see Figure 2).

Note again that the opposition to a bureaucratic state is described as “authoritarian,” in a clear reversal of the self-perception of the opponents. At the core of her post she says,

So do not ask me to be willing to experiment, to be open minded and up to date with what other communities are doing, to modernise myself and discard old-fashioned and outdated models of government and citizenship participation. Don’t even ask me to be reasonable!

One notes that she began her participation in this thread by “othering” persons who refused to change, in contrast to her own, more spiritually evolved, state. The ironic turn has come full circle, the oppositional lines clearly drawn. She further notes that during discussion of the merger she relied

on my own assumptions instead of asking people what they *really* thought about living under a representative democracy . . . the problem is that I wrongly assumed that it was all about some people, but in reality it’s all about the *system*.

This is a key insight: nearly everyone in AA and the CDS relied on their own assumptions that their interpretation of the Discourse of democracy and freedom was universal, when in fact it was local, contingent on one’s native political Discourse, and fundamentally at odds with that of the other community.

Jamie Palisades, CDS Chancellor during the merger negotiations, and the person who negotiated the merger agreement with Springvale, later weighs in, in response to Llewellyn’s statement “the only purpose of the AA merger . . .”

Gwyneth, in three years of reading your clever words and many mean attacks, this is the cleverest and meanest yet . . . To impugn all of those supporters, and their motives, as “crushers,” is grossly childish. No-one wished to crush “your” precious 6 year project or “pervert” its laws.

He challenges her attempt to construct herself as a persecuted minority within the CDS: “How silly. You are the business partner of the EO (estate owner) of CDS, and share much of her power. And she has never taken over any of the admin responsibility for AA, and has waffled about the finances.” He adds, “When the government is weak (like it is now), you guys can be bigger and more powerful dictators, in practice, than Ulrika . . . who you ousted. *The real power ain’t the virtual laws, it’s who controls the money and property.*” He goes on to reject Llewellyn’s equation of democracy and rudeness:

Some of you obviously love fighting words, and fights, and think that fighting is a sign of democracy. But it’s really just being haters—and it’s *contagious*. The forum text, over time, shows that others in your group all have stepped up their tendency to make personal attacks, and become less conciliatory—following your

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Love me, love my friends

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Love me, love my friends

By Bagheera » Mon Jul 19, 2010 9:02 pm

I am not sure what to make of this clique that makes such public noises of diversity and inclusion and yet there are all these transcripts where the main topic of discussion seems to be who is worthy and who is not. As grown adults, it just comes across as developmentally crippled and, worse, creating a gaggle of like-shallow-minded people to help each other stay stuck and not get whole again.

So, I am out. Today I had a discussion with a CDS member about how it would be nice to have the viciousness gone and then later discovered this very same person had rather ruthlessly gone after my friend Arias - yes, MY FRIEND, Arias. Who, by the way, won't be bothering you anymore either. We are gone.

My CDS lands are for sale, most all objects (including structures I built myself) are included.

Some of you are very dear to me, you know who you are. Some of you have behaved abominably, even after many chances to change your ways. I love you all, even though I am leaving. Fare well.

45 posts • Page 1 of 3 • [1](#) [2](#) [3](#)

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Bagheera
Casual contributor

Posts: 25
Joined: Fri Jun 04, 2010 4:32 pm
[PM](#)

“[QUOTE](#)

If you are sincere, you have success in your heart, and whatever you do succeeds - Water/The Abyssmal (from the /ching)

Figure 1.

Re: Love me, love my friends

by Gwyneth Llewelyn > Tue Jul 20, 2010 3:18 am

Aaaah Bagheera, I'm so sorry to see you go! Every loss is sad, but some are sadder than most. 😢

From my perspective, I can only say that I don't harbour any expectations that others will change their attitude just because I wish that to happen. That will ultimately lead to disappointment and then frustration. I can only change myself, and hope, through time, to set an example for others to imitate. But knowing how and what to change is more than just idle words and the wish to do so; it requires careful introspection, analysing one's self deeply, and looking for what we don't like to see there. Most people are quite unwilling to do that, and I fully understand them: it's hard to do, it's uncomfortable. However, I've turned that self-analysis into introspection into a spiritual path 😊

But again, most people won't change as we wish, so I don't get disappointed when that doesn't happen.

The beauty of a democratically-run community is that we don't need to be all friends with each other to make it work. It would be nice if that would be the case. It can even be its goal. But we don't assume that everybody will be polite, reasonable, rational, understanding, caring, loving. Some will be, most will not. We can still stay together in spite of disagreeing with each other. But, of course, for many, this just means a replica of RL, where exactly the same happens, and we come to SL (and to the CDS!) expecting that things are different here. It's not – people are still people, and they don't change their minds just because they're using a pixelated body instead of a flesh-and-blood one. Their mind – and their tendencies – will come with them to the virtual world as well, and it's actually quite hard to believe that it could be different... so personally I don't expect anything. I'm just demanding with the only person I can actually influence and change: my own self. With others I'm merely tolerant and aspire that they find in themselves, one day, that they feel the same urge to change themselves and become better persons. But it's just a wish, not an expectation; I'm not really expecting that to happen, so I won't be frustrated when it doesn't.

As someone very wise once said, and someone even more wiser uses to quote in this forum, "Under democracy, more than half of the people are right half of the time". This leaves a lot of people out that are not right most of the time. The good news is that we can still live together in spite of that.

I wish you all the best to wherever you go now, and I hope that you find yourself in a community where more people are willing to change themselves. But don't feel disappointed if you find more that will never feel the urge to change. They will exist everywhere you go.

Posts: 575
Joined: Thu May 25, 2006 8:00 am
Location: Neuriedstadt



QUOTE

From my perspective, I can only say that I don't harbour any expectations that others will change their attitude just because I wish that to happen. That will ultimately lead to disappointment and then frustration. I can only change myself, and hope, through time, to set an example for others to imitate. But knowing how and what to change is more than just idle words and the wish to do so; it requires careful introspection, analysing one's self deeply, and looking for what we don't like to see there. Most people are quite unwilling to do that, and I fully understand them: it's hard to do, it's uncomfortable. However, I've turned that self-analysis into introspection into a spiritual path 😊

March 31, 2011
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I'm just a virtual girl in a virtual world...

Figure 2.

lead . . . Even a legislative representative democracy can be welcoming and civil. *But only if that's what its leaders model by their own tone.*

Having rejected the assumptions underlying the CDS discourse, Palisades attempts to inscribe Llewellyn's statement as a political move: "I can only assume that your post was a 'flame,' in this now badly-split community, hoping to annoy 'the other side,' so that AA chooses to leave, and takes most of your political competition with it." This is in fact what happened: candidates for the 14th RA, after the termination of the merger, ran unopposed.

Palisades then replies to a short, snide post from Murakami, a CDS conservative, expanding on his view of the role of harsh language in a community: "Someone who's overwhelmingly negative and destructive always is a real threat to the spirit of a community. In the school playground, we call them 'bullies.' Adults use other words for that behavior." Note that Palisades, an American lawyer, contextualizes negativity in the context of *community*, not *state*. Working from his Discourse, he misses the fact that Llewellyn and Murakami contextualize the behavior at issue differently, viewing it through the lens of state rather than community. He then clearly rejects the CDS Discourse assumption that one solution fits all:

The same legislative paradigm that works well in a town of 20,000 where 1/1,000th of the population is in the government, might induce social splits and unneighborly spite in a 120-citizen villages, where 1/10th of the village is the government (and half of the others are their spouses or roommates).

He also notes another critical distinction between the CDS and AA activists, a corollary of the "one solution fits all" axiom: "many of our 'legislators' barely set foot in CDS." The CDS conservatives in fact spent little to no time in SL outside of legislative sessions. True to their axioms, they found it unnecessary—politics was politics, and the locus of it made no difference. On the forums, the lengthy diatribes that tended to be the preferred style were much easier than in SL proper, so on the forums most of them stayed. AA, however, rejected that paradigm and was a deeply (digitally) embodied community and thus saw CDS conservatives' lack of time in world, as Palisades and Springvale both imply, as a dereliction of duty as representatives.

The next post was from an avatar identified as "Robert Walpole" but widely known to be AA founder Michel Manen. Walpole gleefully attacks Llewellyn, inverting her discussion of fascism in Portugal.

The saddest thing for you, Gwyn, is that under the cover of your cherished "representative democracy" in CDS you are running a dictatorship equal to that of Salazar, from which you have been running all your life. You have rejected its form but adopted its methods and have

created a virtual monster that perverts the very name of democracy and human rights with the tools developed by your biggest nemesis. Truly Freudian . . .

He then positions himself, and metonymically "his" Al Andalus, as "othered" from the Western European Discourse of the CDS, which he recasts as racist and imperialist:

Have fun running your "Estado Novo de CDS," finally (again!) free of the hated moors your ancestors ethnically cleansed from Portugal once before—yet masquerading as a representative democracy respectful of human rights—as long as you are white, Christian and European, at least.

Writing only hours after the announcement that the VDI Board had terminated the merger agreement (Khandr, 2010), Walpole concludes "It's your game, after all. Thankfully, AA is no longer a part of it."

Learning

At the end of "Love Me, Love My Friends," and a previous thread, "The Appalling Beth Noveck" (Murakami, 2010), active participants on each side developed a more or less clear and comprehensive knowledge of the Discourse elements of the other side. The result, contrary to utopian theorists, but in accord with recent experimental evidence, was not understanding and compromise but the termination of the merger. In this case, clarity led not to an acknowledgment of legitimacy but to social rupture. Llewellyn's statement "I refuse to accept any other model of self-government for the CDS" captures the sentiment. What the Andalusians wanted, civil society, in many meanings of both words, was flatly rejected by the CDS conservatives, that rejection leading the AA populace to recommend almost unanimously, and the VDI Board voting unanimously, to split from the CDS. Clearly learning occurred, but not to the ends expected by boosters of deliberative democracy, including Llewellyn herself in her initial post on the forum thread ("The beauty of a democratically-run community is that we don't need to all be friends with each other to make it work . . . We can still stay together in spite of disagreeing with each other").

The Politics of Technoscience

The activists from AA articulated the notion that the specifics of communications technologies affect the shape of political discourse, that place matters, and that what needs to be governed should influence what tools of governance are chosen. By contrast, those notions were opposed by the CDS conservatives, who were willing to acknowledge that their experiences in their national-political cultures of origin shaped their views but rejected the notion that the dichotomy between SL and RL: online versus off-line, very low barriers to entry versus very high barriers, an economics of natural

scarcity versus one of artificial scarcity, strong and legitimate means of resolving disputes and punishing wrongdoers versus weak to nonexistent institutions and tools—would merit different conclusions. This suggests that clarity of thought about the interaction between politics and technology would be improved by a greater dissemination of basic STS concepts, ideally coupled with early teaching of political history and values.

Identity and the Magic Circle

A foundational notion in the study of games and virtual worlds is that of the “Magic Circle” (Huizinga, 1938, Lastowka, 2010, Nardi, 2010). This concept holds that game spaces, and by extension, both game and nongame virtual worlds, are “places apart,” in a legal, cultural, and psychological bubble separate from “real life.” The strong pseudonymity of the CDS conservatives follows in the Magic Circle tradition: Real-life identifiers are largely obscured, and to ask for them from others or show off one’s own is considered a significant breach of propriety. Yet, while I have no firm knowledge of the age, gender, level of formal education, or place of employment of any of the CDS activists, all the forum participants willingly disclosed nationality, and, as shown, national culture played a profound role in local politics in the online community. At best, the Magic Circle is a polite fiction, a consensus not to discuss an inescapable reality. As a social convention, the Magic Circle has much to recommend it, enabling a greater equality in participation online by removing off-line status markers. As a theoretical construct taken to map onto actual performed behavior, it is deeply misguided. If anything, this study demonstrates the centrality of off-line, embodied political experience to online political identity. While the CDS had a rich and colorful political history, I believe that *the* determinative factor in factional allegiance with respect to the merger was national-political culture of origin and that the merger is far from a unique case in that regard (AA suffered its own splits, as radical, and then moderate, Islamic groups left for regions under their sole control, seeking political, cultural and religious homogeneity).

Democracy, Not Parties

Arria, CDS Chancellor at the time, and a leading conservative then posts, presumably in reply to me and my well-known role as an organizer of social events, but without mentioning me: “CDS is THE community who wants democracy, not parties!” This antinomy had been my first introduction to CDS politics: In January 2010, as I was moving into my property in AA, one of the Western European political activists came by to recruit me into his faction. He argued that AA’s emphasis on “dancing and parties” needed to be combated with democracy and seriousness. As he said this, he was standing under the giant glittering disco ball in my house, which got him points for earnestness but a significant deduction for failure of market research.

The democracy/parties antinomy would seem to encompass a split between statism and an emphasis on civil society. Rose Springvale tells of the 2009 Christmas party in the CDS, in which Arria, then Leader of the RA, allowed the Assembly meeting to run to nearly double its scheduled 2-hour length, refusing calls for adjournment to attend the official CDS Christmas party, where Rose, having been asked by the legislature to organize it, was present alone (Springvale, author interview, 2010). The metonymy of legislative session/dance party for the CDS/AA is clearly resonant, being used over and over, but the grounds for it are less clear. My best hypothesis is that it is a proxy for other antinomies:

- *State/civil society* tracks each Discourse well, as Llewellyn and Palisades each observed from opposite sides. The CDS saw all issues through the lens of the state apparatus, while AA focused on interpersonal relations and community—lacking as it did any actual political, as opposed to managerial, structure at all.
- *Closed/open* also seems to apply: As Llewellyn’s “I don’t want to change” post indicates, the general view in the CDS was that they had nothing to learn from the larger world of SL, and thus no particular need to be open to it. AA, by contrast, actively solicited people with interests other than politics, primarily through weekly flamenco concerts and other social events. Similarly, as one conservative stated on the thread, CDS was about politics, and did not welcome those who did not want to participate in politics. AA welcomed all, and a good number of its citizens came for the quality of the architecture and the social diversity, never participating in governance in any way, and were welcome to do so.
- *Disembodied/embodied*, however, may be the most significant pairing. CDS conservatives dismissed complaints about their preference for web forums over avatar embodiment in SL: Disembodied intellect was even coded into their political system, in which, until 2010, voters chose ideological factions rather than individuals. Embodiment is essential to many Andalusians, by contrast, from the physicality of removing shoes and kneeling in their mosque, to the popularity of horseback trail rides, to the dance parties that were anathema to the CDS conservatives. Why rejection of an embodied politics marked the CDS when their Discourse was so driven by their embodied experience in their national-political cultures of origin, however, is unclear. One might argue, however, that American politics, the source of AA’s Discourse, tends to the deeply embodied, with many of the divisive issues being physical, including those of birth origin, skin color, the personhood of the fetus, licit and illicit sexuality—issues with less resonance in Western Europe, the source of the CDS Discourse.

Implications

“Love Me, Love My Friends” problematizes theories of identity and community that hold that a “Magic Circle” separates online and off-line. While this may be a controversial notion in the academy, it certainly is not in Internet commerce. Facebook founder Marc Zuckerberg is famously quoted as saying, “Having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity” (Kirkpatrick, 2010). While nonsense from the perspective of any mature notion of the self, it certainly represents a core axiom of contemporary online business. While the CDS conservatives are among the greatest foes of integrating online and off-line lives the conclusion that their online politics are deeply rooted in off-line experience does suggest that marketers may not be wrong in tearing down barriers between the two.

This work further undermines assumptions that deliberation produces compromise, respect, and unity rather than polarization and disengagement. The community saw both of the latter and precious little of the former, despite hundreds of pages of forum discussion, plus legislative debate, during the merger period. Certainly this maps onto the contemporary American political experience: Few on the left or right do not understand the positions held by the other side but rather their antithetical ontological politics, and indeed antithetical Discourses, render respect and compromise impossible.

Finally, the fact that 70 people, out of SL’s regular user base of 1.5 million, have chosen to be governed by an electoral, legislative system points to a clear rejection of that model of governance for online associations. Managerialism is the norm, not just in SL but in *World of Warcraft* and across online forums. Given a choice, people almost without exception reject self-governance in favor of professional management in their voluntary associations online. As a great majority of Americans younger than 80 years lack practical experience in associations governed by formal democratic procedures (Putnam, 2000), it is somewhat unsurprising that they do not seek opportunities to use or develop skills they lack, contrary to the utopian assumptions of early internet boosters, including the founders of SL. Drawing conclusions from these data as to the viability of democracy offline would be hasty and insufficiently supported; however, what can only be interpreted as a clear rejection of democracy online must give rise to grounds for concern.

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Bio

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