

# And the Ringleaders Were Banned: An Examination of Protest in Virtual Worlds

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## ABSTRACT

Protest has made the jump between the offline and the online spaces and is frequently used in most virtual worlds available today. Despite the frequency of these protest actions in virtual worlds, and their similarities to offline protest actions, further research is needed to see how the adaptation to a virtual environment changes the protest. This research uses case studies to examine several major protest actions that have occurred in several different virtual worlds over the last 10 years. The author finds that the use of the technology in virtual world enables very different methods of protest. She makes the argument that these differences are large enough that they require a deeper exploration and grounding in theoretical models for the field to grow into its potential.

## Categories and Subject Descriptors

J.4 [Social and Behavioral Sciences]: *Sociology*

## General Terms

Human Factors

## Keywords

Virtual Worlds, Collective Action, World of Warcraft, Everquest, Computer Mediated Communication, Hacktivism

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In 2007, the avatars of Linden Lab's popular virtual world, Second Life came out to picket a multinational corporation, virtually. The carefully planned and coordinated event not only mobilized the avatars of Second Life, it also brought international media attention to the strike and its roots. This strike was quickly followed with another only a few months later. While this was the first publicly noticed political action taken by avatars in a virtual world, protests have been occurring in virtual worlds for over 10 years. Some, like the peace protest and sit-in held in There.com and the two strikes in Second Life, are tied to offline events. Others, like the violent sit-ins and takeovers found in World of Warcraft and Ultima Online, can only be explained through processes that are tied entirely to the worlds in which they were held. One thing has remained consistent through both types of

protests; every virtual world that has gained a moderate level of popularity has experienced population unrest and protest.

Given the ubiquity of these actions, and the long period of time over which they have occurred, it would be expected that there is a vast area of social research meant to examine protest in virtual worlds. Despite the logic of this belief, there remains little academic attention for collective action in virtual worlds. One of the reasons for this could be due to the fact that there are very few theories that directly explain how the processes of collective action are altered in a virtual world. At the current moment, many researchers fall back on theories of collective action from the offline world to explain behaviors in the virtual. These theories fail to take into account some of the unique aspects of virtual worlds that make their experience something very different from the known social processes that guide an offline protest. By understanding the nature of collective action in virtual worlds new theories and possibilities for their study can be opened up to future researchers.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Modern virtual worlds support a very diverse population of inhabitants. From their roots as online video games to be played by white, male role players to the massive, interactive cities of today, virtual worlds have made a leap in both size and social complexity. Research on social movements have also made a similar leap, moving onto the Internet to find better forms and new methods of expression, following in the United States long history of protest and civil disobedience.

However, before the connections between the two areas of interest for this study can be made clear, an examination of the background and development of both areas is necessary. After careful examination, the papers were grouped together by common themes. These themes are used to head the section discussing that particular grouping of papers.

### 2.1 The development of video games

During the early 1980s MUDs or Multi User Dimensions (Dungeons) were text based games where individuals connected over the newly founded Internet to role-play fantasy base themes [30][5][7]. Many times the standard interactions in the game are based in math, such as combat. They also often have a high fantasy or science fiction based storyline where the players act out the roles of barbarians or wizards attempting to kill dragons and evil sorcerers [30][16]

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In 1997, Ultima Online was released to the public and heralded the beginning of a new breed of MUDs, the Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Game or MMORPG (MMO for short) [30]. Ultima Online featured many of the same types of game play featured in the earlier MUDs but instead presented the user with a graphical interface [8]. These MMOs, as exemplified by Ultima Online, were persistent worlds, existing and changing whether there were players online or offline. They often developed their own economies that focused on the trade of raw material for crafted pieces, services, or currency [14]. Ultima was soon surpassed by the release of Everquest [13]. At its height Everquest supported 400,000 users and remained the most popular MMO in the American market for at least 6 years [13]. It wasn't until the release of World of Warcraft (WoW) in 2005 that Everquest was surmounted. At the time of this writing WoW remains the dominant MMO on the market with a total subscriber base of almost 10 million people worldwide [3].

## 2.2 Social research in virtual worlds

Almost from the original introduction of MUDs scientists attempted to understand the social, psychological, or economic factors of MUDs and frequently used them as sites for research. There was a strong interest for many researchers to find out why individuals chose to play these games [10]. Richard Bartle, developer of the original MUD was the first to try and craft a descriptive framework of what motivate people to play [1]. Others have tried to improve on Bartle's framework with minimal success [29][30][31][32].

As the number of players began to increase, the small group environment began to shift. Ducheneaut & Moore found that many of the modern MMOs were not designed well to facilitate such sociability but others found that friendships formed in these virtual worlds could be as rich as ones in the offline world [27][10]. Concepts from CSCW were also frequently applied to MMOs with large populations to better understand what tools were needed to increase the ability of player organizations called guilds to communicate and work together within the game [25][26].

No matter how far social research has extended into the new virtual worlds there remains large areas of social life in these worlds that remain sparsely explored.

## 2.2 Protests and technology

Even before it became accessible and popular to browse the Internet, many activists had moved some part of their political life online. Protest and social movement groups have always been quick to adapt new and emerging technologies to their needs. At the same time as these technologies become more readily accessible and acknowledged by the general public and by the formal organizational structures of commerce and government, many argue that the ability of movement groups to use these technologies becomes limited.

The Zapatista Movement of Mexico, one of the better-known digital activist groups, broadcast its message across the world through the newly available World Wide Web [33]. Sigrid Baringhorst has examined the ability of grassroots political actors, like the Zapatista movement, as well as the actions of well funded political regimes to use the Internet and associated communication

technologies as a tool to garner collective support [34]. She and other authors find that often both groups can make effective use of these technologies but limit the true power of discussion and communication that they enable [34][35].

Others have found that the Internet enables the expansion of protest and information in repressive areas where the technology has leapfrogged, bypassing industrial infrastructure and enabling more primitive areas to digitally engage [36]. However, this engagement with technology as a facilitator for change may not be evenly consistent throughout any given group [37]. As Neumayer and Raffl found the very groups that can benefit the most from change being pushed using the Internet and ICTs can also be the groups most likely to fall within the digital divide, left voiceless within both their government and supporting groups [38].

### 2.2.1 Internet as a continuation of offline protest

Many authors have tried to theorize why these protest groups are drawn to the Internet as a new medium for their actions. Kreimer succinctly summarizes these viewpoints by placing the new medium of the Internet into a continuum of strategies used by protestors throughout American history [15]. The author examines the use of boycotting and pamphlet making by the Revolutionaries of the 1700s up to the emergence of civil disobedience in the 1960s and 70s [15]. Kreimer theorizes that these new technologies enable a sudden growth in protests following their release, eventually to fall to the way side as new forms are enabled by new technology [15].

Other authors have focused on the fact that Internet based protest and mobilizations often employ the same theories as their offline counterparts but with only limited results due to limited implementation [28]. Wall finds that Internet enabled protest communications often have some of the same goals as offline line meetings, protest organization and collective identity formation [28]. She did show however that this technology was better suited towards the former since most groups only employed one aspect or part of the process for symbolic development, instead of approaching it from 3 sides [28][4]. Russell has contradictory data however [23]. The author discovered that the Zapatista movement was able to successfully create a collective identity both within the group and to the outside media and world through Internet based protests and communications. Russell found that it was the use of mythology to form relationships within the organizations [23]. It was the usage of these myths and symbols that allowed the geographically divided protestors to form an identity and work together to meet the group's goals [23].

### 2.2.2 How the Internet changes social movements theory

Other authors feel that view that the use of Internet as a simple continuation of protest groups habit of absorbing new technologies to be too narrow. Many of these authors feel that the Internet has created a break in social movement theory that was not created by previous technologies. In their eyes, theory must be revised or rewritten before real understanding about protest and the Internet can move forward.

Clark and Themudo take this point of view when they argue that "Dotcauses" help to create Internet enabled protest identities that

break with traditional views of how movements act and organize [6]. The authors believe that politically active websites help to create “transnational action, leaderlessness, profusion of concerns, tactical schisms, and digital/language divides” (2006). This is a large break with most social movement theories that have traditionally relied on the organization around charismatic leaders, formal organizations, and state level interactions to make their explanations. Other authors point out that these breaks in traditional social theory have arisen because the motivators for mobilization have also changed due to the globalized nature of the Internet [17]. Langman argues that these new motivations have created allegiances between social movement organizations require the formation of new collective identities that take into account updated motives and definitions of truth [17].

Schussman and Earl argue that leadership can still be found within these new social movements but that the basis for who becomes a leader has changed [24]. For the authors the role of identity and background play larger roles in determining the course of the movement as well as the possible decisions that would be taken by that leader [24]. However, the authors do find that these influences do lead to more diverse paths than more traditional views of leadership would theorize [24]. Peckham argues that these leadership changes are due to the fact that Internet enabled mobilizations bypass the theorized level of the state [20]. With this move away from the state as the central actor comes a change in what resources are being vied for between mobilized forces [20].

### 2.3 Gaps within the literature

While many social movements scientists have acknowledged the role and importance of the Internet, it remains a secondary force within the field of research. However, given the increasing changes in American society that have been spurred on by the Internet, it becomes necessary to look beyond these views. The development of the Internet as a community, as well as the ICT revolution, has dramatically changed the quantity and quality of actions on the Internet and through virtual worlds. It becomes increasingly possible that an individual can participate in a “second life” during their free time, socializing and fulfill both their needs, as well as the needs of any alternate persona that they adopt online. Already, it is common to see small level protest break out in many of these virtual worlds over issues of identity and possession. However, as the barrier between the virtual and the real diminishes it will be inevitable for social issues of the offline world to make the transition to virtuality.

Some research on this has been conducted on the first steps to this path, the Zapatista Movement is the clearest example given in the literature. But focus on movements such as this is only the beginning since the level of virtuality in any movement will be likely to move beyond the favoritism for the offline world that is shown in these early movements and into increasingly virtualized mobilization actions.

## 3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The issues experienced by the different groups involved in the virtual protest actions bring to light several new questions about the increased use of technology in protest movements. The focus of this research is on the role of technology and virtualization in the

adaptation of collective action repertoires to virtual world situations. This leads to the main research question for this study.

RQ<sub>0</sub>: How does the integration of collective action into virtual worlds change how the action is organized and enacted?

In order to accomplish the goal set by this research questions several this studied will be structured to make use of several bodies of research. This study is primarily a case study meant to examine historical virtual collective action and expand current collective action theory into the digital realm. This study is interdisciplinary in nature and draws on the literature of Sociology, Computer Mediated Communication and Information Technology.

### 3.2 Theories for understanding virtual protest

There are several theoretical areas that this research will draw from. Since there are no established theories that deal directly with virtual world collective action it is necessary to extend theories that are applicable to this new area. These theories will be used to establish a theoretical framework. The two main bodies of theory that this paper will deal with are Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) and Hacktivism. CMC examines the roles of communication channels in shaping social practices. Hacktivism is one of the first attempts to explain how social movements make use of the Internet to advance their causes. These separate areas will be drawn together in the final theoretical framework that combines their strengths while acknowledging the role of virtual worlds more clearly.

#### 3.3.1 Hacktivism

Hacktivism is the first attempt by social movement scholars to extend the theories about collective action to the Internet. Hacktivism is a method that is used by technologically savvy protestors to reach a broader audience with their message. As a means for political change hacktivism draws on the concepts of civil disobedience as a method of protest and mobilization. It is also used to create new means of exerting control over one’s political context by using new tactical innovations to circumvent political control and repression.

There are several key concepts that can be drawn from the literature about Hacktivism. Hacktivism encompasses many different types of activities within its boundaries, from the emailing of politicians to denial of service attacks. Given this broadness of available methods, one of Hacktivism’s most important concepts is that the wide range of technological integration into the actions taken by the group. But any type of technology can be employed within these actions since it’s selection is shaped by the needs of the social movements but it also shapes the actions that are possible for them to achieve.

The legality of the actions taken by groups that use Hacktivism is the second major concept of the theory. Legality has a broad range of definition since using these online methods of action can cross local and national boundaries. Often groups can engage in completely legal actions that resemble processes in the offline world. These actions have been referred to as digitally correct Hacktivism due to their focus on following both software and governmental laws. There are also a wide range of illegal actions that movements can make use of that either break the rules of the government or that break software agreements, these are frequently referred to as mass action Hacktivism.

The third concept that Hacktivism focuses on is the idea of authority and the question of who is actually legitimate authority in an online realm. The government is an important authority in the offline forms of collective action since it usually acts as the major force against which social movements are aligned. However, with the integration of the Internet as an area meant to facilitate offline social action and an area that can have its own social action has meant that the clear role of the government has become less defined. Secondary actors, like corporations, have filled in as the authority against which many online social movements act. The government handles most policing in the offline world but the Internet remains an area where there is no single authority. Many different organizations can use policing or repressive tactics. Because of this the central role of the government has been shifted to being one among many actors with authority. This brings into question who has the right to act against a social movement in an online realm and what are the actions that are considered legitimate for them to take.

Hacktivism is the first theoretical area that attempts to examine social movements and collective action on the Internet. It has begun the process of extending social movements theory to an online environment. As such it makes a valuable tool for this research since there are so few bridges to explain virtual world protest. This first bridge allows the research to take several of the understandings and apply them to a new realm where they can become more detailed and tested.

### 3.3.2 Computer Mediated Communication

Computer mediated communication examines the different processes that are involved in developing a social society and structure when it is moderated by different technologies. Often these studies focus on the social ties that exist between individual actors. These social ties can be understood as being strong, for individuals that share many common experiences and factors, or weak, those that share only a few similarities or who communicate infrequently [12].

The richness of social cues that a communication medium allows is one of the most important factors in CMC. These cues are the amount of social information that is permitted by the medium to be transferred between two individuals engaged in some form of communication. The richest is considered face-to-face communication due to the ability to see, hear, and interact directly with a person and their social context and environment. The poorest is often considered to be text only communication due to the fact that most of context around a conversation is missing and one only has printed words to garner a meaning.

The types and availability of cues changes how the social ties between individuals are formed and how they strengthen during the course of a relationship. Computer mediated ties have been found to have three properties that influence the relationships between individuals that make use of them. The first is that communicating online increases the likelihood of feeling personally connected to a social group. Often these social groups can entirely exist on the Internet and are connect by no face-to-face or offline contacts. This phenomenon was accounted for by showing that the individuals used CMC to create a sense of proximity with each other that substitutes for the face-to-face proximity that is not possible.

The second property of CMC that needs to be considered is the amount of time that can be devoted to maintaining an individual's involvement in a social group. This factor has two parts. The first is the amount of time required to feel a part of a social group. This initial step often requires more time in a fully virtual relationship than in a relationship that has both offline and online components. The fewer cues found in Internet related media means that there needs to be a longer period of communication for the same levels of trust and reciprocity to be achieved. The second part is the amount of time required to maintain the relationship. The cost of communication through Internet media has been shown to be much lower than when communicating through other possible channels. The nature of the Internet allows a person to engage in multiple conversations at the same time. It also allows conversations to be picked up and dropped as it remains convenient for the individuals involved in them. These unique factors of Internet communication lead to an overall increased communication within social groups. It also has the ability to increase the strength of ties by compensating for the lack of similarities.

The third property of CMC is the fact the using CMC to communicate increases the prevalence of weak ties between the different individuals within the social group. Weak ties like these provide two important functions. The first is that they are additional connections that can be used by the social group to draw in support. The second is that they enable a much higher spread of information and new ideas across a social network [12]. CMC enables a higher rate of development of these weak ties, thereby exposing an online social group to a wider range of ideas and changing how they go looking for information.

Computer Mediated Communication examines how the channels that social groups use to communicate both within the group and with outsiders affect very deeply how they are viewed. Participation in a virtual world is very heavily focused on communication with others in the world. There is no form of communication in a virtual world that isn't affected by these principles. Due this fact it becomes necessary to understand what influence they have on communication.

## 3.4 Theoretical framework: virtual world collective action

Mobilization, game research, and Computer Mediated Communication literature have made it clear that there are many factors that come to play when communicating in a virtual world, let alone trying to mobilize a group. Each area of literature brings its unique focus on aspects of a virtual protest and needs to be included in any comprehensive framework. The following section will detail each of the concepts that have been drawn from the theoretical areas described above. A brief definition of what is meant by each term will be followed with an explanation of its theoretical foundations.

1. Degree of Virtualization: Degree of virtualization is a simple percentage of the amount of organization and participation that was achieved offline or virtually. The social movement theory of Hacktivism describes the majority of mobilization attempts that have occurred online. As described previously thought, these attempts are usually seen as enhancing offline protests or movements, adapting older ideas, civil disobedience, to modern

technologies. In accordance with this there is a level to which these older methodologies are adapted to the new technology.

2. Legality: Legality is a measurement of how legal the actions of the protests were both in planning a protest and holding it. A second theme that emerges from within the Hacktivism literature is the legality of the actions taken by the members of the virtual protest. The definition of legality is very wrapped up in where the protest falls along the line between offline protests and fully virtualized ones. Protests that bridge the offline/online gap will frequently have national laws on assembly and protest that need to be taken into account. As a protest moves farther from this dividing line these laws become less of an issue since there is no governing body of the Internet.

3. Cultural Homogeneity: Cultural Homogeneity is a measure of how similar individuals within the protest are to each other in regards to their cultural views and identity. While basic web pages offer only limited cues for interaction since they are primarily text based, modern virtual worlds offer not only text-based interaction but also visual, sound, and speech channels. In addition, the expansive nature of many of the worlds allows for a larger view of background or setting for interaction. In the absence of face-to-face communication, the use of the multiple channels, as well as other forms of computer-mediated communication, can create a sense of proximity and solidarity among the members of the virtual world.

4. Limitations on Participation: Limitations on Participation is a measure of if and how individuals are prevented from participating in the protest. This list can contain a number of issues including technical, social, and organizational limits on who may participate. The structure and development of social ties are an important factor for the diffusion of knowledge across a social network. If a network is new enough, because of the introduction of a new medium, than it is likely that the ties between individuals are weak, having not had the time that is required to develop the stronger ties. It is in a situation like this where the degree of virtualization also becomes important since offline social ties may need to be called on to compensate for the weaker online ties.

## 4. CASE STUDIES

The following three sections detail case studies drawn from several prominent virtual worlds. The cases were drawn from many different sources including: news websites, forums, web logs and journals, and general web site. The authors examined these sources to develop detailed accounts of what occurred during the protests and how the different groups accounted for the key actions and results that accompanied the protests. These were then combined into a cohesive timeline of events that attempts to create an objective (or at least multi-narrative) viewpoint of the events that unfolded within each virtual world. The variables that were presented in section 3.4 will then be compared against the storyline developed within and across these cases to see how well these variables act to explain the process of protest in these virtual worlds.

### 4.1 Ultima Online

In all of the Ultima single player games, Lord British, the king of Britannia, was designed to be “almost unkillable” – impervious to traditional attacks, but vulnerable to very specific or clever circumstances. In Ultima Online, Lord British was never supposed

to die. Of course, sometimes the rules of a video game can be broken, especially in one as complex and uncontrollable as an MMO. During the game's beta test, he found an exploit which allowed him to morph into a seemingly harmless chicken. Rather than notify Origin of the bug, he roamed Britannia slaughtering people with invisible fireballs and was untrackable as a chicken.

On August 9, 1997, near the end of Ultima Online's 25,000 player closed beta, Ultima creator Richard Garriott decided to take Lord British on a tour of Britannia and speak to his subjects. He was accompanied by Lord Blackthorn, played by producer Star Long, and the jesters Chuckles and Heckles, played by programmers Scott Phillips and Jeff Posey, respectively. The royal visit was intended to be a server stress test, and it indeed attracted an extremely large, concentrated number of players to gather, causing severe lag for all players online. As British spoke, the same player moved among the characters present, checking pockets for something to steal. He soon found another player carrying a spell scroll, and he snatched it. Using the scroll allowed him to cast a spell called “fire field”, creating a wall of flame, which he aimed at Lord British.

Blackthorn mocked Rainz's assassination attempt, proclaiming his and Lord British's invulnerability to such a weak attack. Lord British, wanting to get in on the fun, marched into the fire. Almost instantly, he was dead. Lord British was revived within 15 minutes of the attack. Regardless, his death caused a lot of confusion and amazement.

In the end the death was found to be caused by simple human error. Anytime Garriott logged in to UO, he was responsible for setting an invulnerability flag on his character. This flag was only good for one session and had to be reset every time he logged in. This particular, day Garriott had forgotten to set this flag and was no long invulnerable. Origin actually responded to the incident quite positively. They held it up as an example of the possibilities of an open, player-influenced world. However, within a week after the assassination, Rainz had been banned from the Ultima Online beta test. They stressed that he was *not* banned for killing Lord British. The assassination provided Origin with an opportunity to get his account information, as they had been looking for him before the event. Rainz was banned for his chicken exploit – or rather, that he failed to report it and instead used it to gain an unfair advantage and go on a killing spree.

### 4.2 Second Life strike

IBM and Rappresentenza Sindacale Unitaria (RSU), the union representing Italian employees, were in talks for several months leading up to the strike. RSU asked for what they called a “small salary increase” of 60 Euros per year (less than \$100US) along with “health and pension investments, informative rights, etc.”. This was based on the rising revenue and income of the corporation. IBM responded by offering a 6 Euros increase and canceling the workers' “productive results benefit”, a yearly bonus of 1000 Euros (approximately \$1377US). RSU decided to stage the first virtual strike, with the help of UNI, an international union support organization.

UNI planned to stage the protest sometime between September 17 and 30. UNI asked the Second Life community, as well as any union workers or members of the general public sympathetic to RSU's cause, to join in the protest. Leading up to the event, UNI reported

having participants from at least 18 countries on board, including about 500 IBM employees, as well as unions from 16 countries involved, including India. Within one week, UNI established the “IBM Second Life – Strike International Taskforce”, apparently the group primarily responsible for actually organizing the protest. Following this, the Taskforce was given 20 days to solve technical, legal, logistical, and security issues, and met daily inside Second Life to do so.

UNI reached out especially to try to mobilize people unfamiliar with Second Life. On their website, they offered a basic tutorial on creating an account, installing the software, moving around the game world, and getting to Commonwealth Island. They included pictures at most steps, with a great emphasis on helping the tech-illiterate – for example, when mentioning the four arrow keys for movement, there is actually a photo included of arrow keys on a keyboard.

The instructions also informed people about obtaining and equipping a custom “Strike Kit” created for the occasion. The kit contained an official T-shirt, several signs, as well as several wearable floating “fish”. Instructions were to wear a shirt with either a sign or a fish, but not both. Participants were told not to wear any of the equipment in public before the strike, the date of which would be announced through the strike's private mailing list.

The protest took place on September 27, 2007 from 4 am – 4 pm EST. Protest staffers counted 1,853 participants from over 30 different countries. The protest spanned 7 IBM locations within Second Life, primarily IBM Italia and the IBM Business Centre. The groups assembled at the predetermined sites and engaged in a formalized picket line blocking the entrances and public squares in most of IBM's well-known Second Life sites. The groups engaged in marching, displaying large prominent signs, and yelling protest slogans.

As with a real life strike, the UNI strike attracted some off-message protesters and hecklers. Two of the most talked-about oddities were an avatar in a banana suit, actually protesting against IBM with a sign that read “Fair work, Fair pay! Please don't take all our money away!” and a large green triangle holding a sign that read “I AM A LARGE GREEN TRIANGLE”. A counter-protester from union watchdog group The Center for Union Facts arrived with an enormous sign bearing the group's logo and a shirt that read “This strike sucks, get back to work.”

Despite some technical snags and a few strange participants, UNI declared the strike a success, citing an international showing of solidarity and extensive media coverage of the event. During and immediately following the strike, IBM refused to comment.

On October 24, UNI reported that Andrea Pontremoli, CEO of IBM Italy had resigned after IBM Corporate supposedly made a complaint to IBM Italy regarding how they handled the negotiation situation. He had apparently been responsible for the pay cut in the first place. On November 5, after threat of real world strike action, UNI reported that a new contract between RSU and IBM Italy had been signed, reinstating the 1000 euro bonus for 3 years. IBM also agreed to make payments into a national health insurance fund and to continue negotiations regarding industrial and business strategies in Italy and the improvement of internal communication policies.

### 4.3 Eve Online corruption scandal

EVE Online is a popular MMO that has a science fiction and space theme. The unique factor that separates Eve from its competitors is the focus on developing and maintaining a ruthless and cutthroat laissez-faire in game economy. In fact, for many players, achieving success in Eve's economy is the most important thing in the game. During 2007, many members of EVE's community had their confidence in developer, CCP, shaken, due to allegations of corruption. What first brought these incidents to the forefront of the community's consciousness was a collection of information compiled by a player using the handle “Kugutsumen”. He established a diverse, far-reaching social network and used his connections to access secret information circulating within message boards of in game player organizations called corporations and alliances (multiple corporations working together in order to achieve greater power and influence). He would then sell his findings to rival organizations for in-game currency.

In early 2007, Kugutsumen received a nearly complete dump of the private forums of a corporation named Reikoku. Reikoku is a member of EVE's most powerful alliance, Band of Brothers. Lord Stone, a player, had joined a corporation called Reikoku, part of Band of Brothers, in March 2005. One year later, he was appointed a director, making him one of a handful of players near the top of the organization. Kugutsumen stumbled upon a message Lord Stone sent to a fellow director, named Gunstar Zero, saying he was leaving the organization Reikoku for “unforeseeable reasons” and linked to CCP's jobs page. Kugutsumen proceeded to post all of this information to his website under the title “Reikoku Makes its Own Luck, Part 1” on January 30, 2007. While it was public knowledge that CCP employees play EVE, Kugutsumen's find seemed to suggest that at least one person in Band of Brothers was aware of Lord Stone's status as a developer, a violation of CCP's policies.

Part 2 of the exposé revealed even more dealings had gone down between Band of Brothers and CCP employees. Through posts and private messages, again taken from the Band of Brothers alliance forums, Kugutsumen outlined the story of one player, Ishos Rerajan. In March 2006, Ishos was promoted and put in charge of Reikoku's fleet of capital ships, the game's largest and most valuable class of ships. A few months after his promotion, on July 12, Ishos announced abruptly that he was “taking a break” and had to leave the corporation without going in to further details. This announcement leads to Kugutsumen's biggest revelation. According to private messages among Reikoku's directors, the real reason Ishos had to leave was because someone outside the corporation had discovered he was a CCP employee, and notified a GM. CCP's policy at the time was that any developer whose true identity was revealed had to take a new name in-game and sever ties with any factions with which they were involved.

This post set off a firestorm across the EVE community. The official forums became flooded with posts by the advocates and dissenters on both sides arguing that it wasn't wrong for the directors of the Band of Brothers alliance to know about why a member was actually leaving. CCP did their best to censor discussion on the topic initially, deleting threads en masse. Eventually, however, a CCP developer named Kieron posted a thread with an official acknowledgement of the situation, stating that CCP was investigating the allegations. As a community discussion erupted, previous allegations of developer misconduct came to light.

Kugutsumen continued to build his case against Band of Brothers regarding developer misconduct.

On February 13, the CCP developer Kieron attempted to calm feelings of dissent with the introduction of a new Internal Affairs division within CCP. He announced the appointment of a GM, Arkanon, to head this division, and linked to a post explaining his duties and powers. As Director of Internal Affairs, Arkanon was given the power to monitor all staff game accounts, compile reports on anything that needed to be addressed, and enlist personnel from any division of CCP to help in his investigations. While Arkanon's appointment satisfied some members of the community, many greeted it with cynicism or even outrage. They pointed out that while this was a step in the right direction for the future, it did nothing to address the events that had already transpired.

In June, the story was picked up by a surprising and significant source: the New York Times. A reporter named Schiesel covered the allegations of corruption and how the situation was handled. He interviewed the CEO of CCP, Hilmar Petursson, who revealed a seemingly huge policy decision by the company: a plan to hold elections for an oversight committee. The proposed committee would consist of nine members, elected by the playerbase. At least once a year, the representatives would be flown to Iceland for a several days and engage in an overview of CCP's Iceland site and their upcoming decisions.

## 5. ANALYSIS

### 5.1 Degree of Virtualization

In the continuum between fully offline and fully virtualized protests these three case studies represent the steps beyond simply using web pages for hacktivism by creating a fully virtualized protest. While virtualization of a protest is often treated as an all or nothing variable the differences between the selected case studies show that virtualization is also a gradient that can be taken to degree much further than most literature will handle it.

The IBM Second Life Strike bridges the gap between the offline and the virtual. The cause of the strike is firmly grounded in the offline world of unions and corporations. It was the offline conflict between IBM management and unionized workers over pay scales and incentive programs that initiated the strike and involvement of the other organizations. Most of the organizing forces, similarly, primarily functioned in the offline world in their day-to-day operations. However, these organizations also organized the Second Life part of the strike almost entirely online. Protestors were drafted through the distribution of online news. Once participants were found they were encouraged to join an online list-serv to distribute important information about the strike, including logistics and training information. They used the development environment of Second Life to create traditional strike media, like the strike kits with signs and tee-shirts, and unique tools such as the floating fish. Finally they held the actual strike within Second Life, with over 2,000 avatars counted at the various strike locations during the entire time period.

UniGlobal, the organizers, took their offline knowledge and skills and translated them into the organization of a successful virtual protest. However, they and IBM remain physical entities, using skills and social relationships honed in the offline world to

accomplish their virtual goals. In this instance, there is a slight dominance in terms of organization and time spent in the virtual for the strike organizers, with only the initiating action and the organization and social structures of organizations involved being the offline components.

The death of Lord British, faced a very different starting situation, resulting in a very different degree of virtualization. Ultima Online is a fully virtualized world that requires little or no offline interaction. The initiating event was reliant on offline human behavior, forgetting to turn on an option. However, the rogue player used entirely in-game means to perform all his actions. Most of the communication between the hosting company and the general Ultima Online populace was also held online through the official Ultima Online website.

The response to the protest was equally virtual. The individual had his online account banned from the game. Acknowledgements of the assignation came in the form of forum posts or replies as well as spoken messages on the server where the assignation occurred from in-game employees. Because of these factors this action can be placed at the far end of the spectrum, acting as a fully virtualized action in its initiation, organization, activation, and response.

Sitting between these two events is the Eve Online scandal. The events of the scandal occurred almost entirely online and within the game world. The developers have little or no power outside of this game world. However, they did take their understanding of politics to attempt to change the view of the situation once it did come to light in the larger community.

The reactions of banning and forum post deletion also occurred in a solely online arena where the developers and hosting company had control. However, the last result of the entire scandal produced one of the more interesting outcomes. This is one of the first clear examples of how a scandal in an online world has impacts on the offline one. The establishment of an oversight committee will have very large impacts on how CCP is run. While the communications and in-game activities were engaged in online, the player base was only satisfied with an older understanding of control and wanted someone in the offline world to be there as an authority.

### 5.2 Legality of Actions

While the case studies above represent very legal protests they respond to the legality of their actions very differently. Some of this response is tied closely to the virtualization of the protest. However, increasing virtualization diminishes the role of national law and consequently the importance of the legality of actions taken during the protest.

For the Second Life strike, the connections that remained between the offline world and the virtual protest required the adherence to laws regarding assembly, the ability to unionize and strike, as well as network access and proper usage. Since the strike retained its offline ties it was necessary for UniGlobal to form the "IBM Second Life – Strike International Taskforce" to take into account the legal aspects of holding such a strike. This taskforce researched and structured the strike so that it complied with the many laws regarding the ability of the protestors to picket IBM.

The taskforce had a secondary issue regarding legality that was different from the normal understanding of laws governing protests and strikes. The users of Second Life all signed an End User License Agreement (EULA) that specified how any person was allowed to use the Second Life program and what the outcomes of improper usage would be. While the EULAs do not count as national law, they do add a new layer of legality. The taskforce needed to take the appropriate usage clauses into consideration when developing the organization of their strike and successfully managed to organize the large strike without violating the EULA.

Since there were no offline components to the Ultima Online assignation, the laws of various nations regarding assembly and ability to protest did not come into play and the role of the state in this protest is completely removed from even its level of importance in the Second Life strike.

During the assignation there were also no specific EULA clauses that dealt with the assembly of players. In fact, creating a large assembly was the entire point for this exercise since Lord British was hoping to test how well the servers handled such a large group. The actions of Rainz were considered to be very legal since he was simply using in-game abilities in a creative and new way. However, the unique nature of virtual worlds allow for a much stronger digital trail to be kept about any player. This nature means that the actions that Rainz had taken previously were revealed during the investigation of the assignation. This trail brought to light Rainz's illegal manipulation of a bug and then to his banning.

The actions that spurred on the Eve Online scandal were of mixed legality. The initial ones brought to light by K were found to be direct violations of the EULA by both the alliance and the developers that were involved. There was no clear word regarding what happened to the developers that broke the rules, the alliance that was involved faced increasing hostility and scrutiny for their actions during the whole event.

Many players argued that the developers, CCP, also violated the social contract between the hosting company and the player base. While this isn't a written contract, many players felt that the company was responsible to look into any accusations regarding corruption and to make their policies and actions known to the public. The actions taken by CCP seemed to be more focused on making the issue disappear from the public eye than on fixing it and reassuring the players. To the players this was a violation of the social contract since they no longer felt confident in the control of the company and the reliability of the game that they chose to play.

### **5.3 Cultural Homogeneity**

The three cases selected highlight very different levels of cultural homogeneity during their protests. The differences in virtualization seem to have affected the communication networks of the two groups so that the strength of these networks online accounts for the differences in homogeneity. The issue of time allowed for the development of a player culture is also an important differentiating aspect between the two case studies.

For many of the participants of the IBM strike in Second Life, this was the first time that they had set foot in a virtual world. Many of these protestors were drawn from organizations that were connected to UniGlobal in the offline world but did not necessarily have any

strong connections with the organization in the virtual world. This was highlighted by the extensive use of training materials provided by UniGlobal leading up to the strike. This system bypassed in-game tutorials and made it simpler for new players to go to the two important locations, UniGlobal's home and the IBM Island.

Many of the individuals logging in for the first time were drawn to the protest through weak ties with the strikers. Many were participating in a virtual world for the first time and had no social network there before the assigned date of the strike. The newness of the medium combined with the recruitment practices of using media and blogs to spread the word of the strike created only loose, weak ties between individuals that chose to participate. There was little feeling of solidarity because of these weak ties, fostered through inexperience and the feeling that this was a one-shot protest. This was highlighted by groups with only partial connection or interest in the meaning of the strike joining the group to shout their own slogans.

The nature of Ultima Online helps to create a higher homogeneity among players by using special in-game events to create a sense of world that has unique things happening within it. The system also provides a detailed feedback system during beta tests so that players may give information regarding bugs or flaws that they find within the system. Overall, the system in place for this period encouraged communication and a sense of familiarity between the players and developers. The structure of the world encourages this feeling of belonging to a greater world. The important part with this protest is the fact that the player actively tried to break this feeling of community. Despite many factors that are meant to make him feel like a member of a society, Rainz chose to break many social bonds by killing other players and attempting an assignation of Lord British. The framework described above assumes that the system in place should have prevented such behavior by a player. However, the system's failure to create a social structure and prevent abusive player actions implies that there are additional factors that should be taken into account regarding player's integration into a larger community.

The corruption that the Eve players protested occurred over many months of game play. There were many smaller changes that cumulated into larger problems for the community over time. This spreading out of the problem allowed the time that was necessary for the community to form strong social ties with each other through the use of the community building areas of public discussion. The fact that many threads discussing the topic were not deleted meant that the individuals were able to gather and find others that supported their ideas and feelings about the scandal. These social ties allowed for the development of a shared understanding of experience and community to develop. By calling on this community and the ties that it formed with the anti-corruption organizers were able to use the numbers of upset players to push for stronger control and oversight in the running of the game.

### **5.4 Limitations on Participation**

There are some shared similarities between the cases presented above in terms of limitations on who could participate. As in all virtualized protests, access to a computer and the Internet are required for participation. In addition, the protests required specialized software, which may or may not cost money, to be installed on the computer before participants could access the



protest site. Distinctions can be made between the two cases in the roles that social ties play in determining participation in the protest.

The weak social ties that created a very heterogeneous mixture of protestors for the IBM strike in Second Life, helped to lower the limitations placed on participation. The general call for participation that went out from UniGlobal called on their weak ties with other organizations in both the offline and online worlds. However, the usage of these weak ties allowed the call to be heard by more people and spread to others connected to UniGlobal only through shared ties.

While this diffusion of knowledge weakened the shared goals and sense of community that was at the protest, it did allow a large number of very different individuals and groups show up to lend their support. Because there were fewer limitations to participation and a large diffusion through weak social ties, news of the protest reached groups outside of the original target, like the union watch dog groups that stopped by to protest the protest or the individual who showed up with a nonsense shirt and sign.

The community that formed in Eve Online encouraged participation by all players of the game. The fact that this game is meant to support independence and cut-throat politics of economics meant that players were quick to jump on an advantage against the dominant group. The fact that all this information was disclosed on websites and forums that allowed public access meant that many players were able to participate in the discussion and feel involved in their community. This allowed for the development of solidarity among the community since they were able to discuss their problems together as a community within the game and form social ties with each other. However, this nature also brings up problems for the proposed solution by CCP. Given the overall community nature many players who were able to act together to keep the issue in the forefront feel that acting together in an oversight committee may be impossible. The nature of the game means that the individual members of the committee will be more likely to look after their own interests, rather than the larger community interests. They were able to come together in their discussion since it was an issue that affected all the players and put everyone at a disadvantage.

In Ultima Online there were several issues that place limits on the participation. The first was the fact that internet connections and computers that were powerful enough to run the software were more limited at the time of this event. MMOs were not as popular as they are now and online gaming was almost unheard of, resulting in small numbers of players compared to today's standards. In addition, such a large gathering of players caused server instability that meant that many players lost their connections to the game and were unable to play at that moment. Many more probably chose not to play rather than face this instability as well. Finally, while there were many observers only two players actively participated in the event, Lord British and Rainz. The fact that Lord British as a character was never meant to be killed also meant that he was very vulnerable when he did not have the invulnerability option enabled. This was shown in his almost instant death upon stepping into the fire. This instant death and the long period of time before he reappeared means that no other players could be involved in the death and through it the fame.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The popularity of virtual worlds is growing rapidly to match the increases in Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) and Internet usage by many populations around the globe. While there is a large both of research on the separate areas of social movements, hacktivism, game research, and computer-mediated communication there needs to be a synthesis of these areas to fully understand just what virtual worlds hold for us.

In particular, as virtual worlds come to the cultural forefront they will be increasingly adopted for social use by individuals and will likely see more protests in the future. However, at the moment there is no clear understanding of what this new technology means for the protests that will be held on it. Most research dealing with protests treat the virtuality of protests as a binary, either offline or online. It is the hope of this research that this binary understanding of virtual protests will be expanded in the future as more detailed models of understanding are developed.

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