

## For any reason or no reason – on virtual (extra-)territoriality

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*“Second Life is an exciting development of the virtual world. A country that wishes to show that it at least has the ambition to be at the forefront of development of course has to be in it”<sup>1</sup>*

Swedish minister of foreign affairs, Carl Bildt

The 30<sup>th</sup> of May, Sweden will be the first country in the world to open an official Embassy within Second Life, the online 3D multi user environment owned by Linden Lab. The project is initiated by the Swedish Institute<sup>2</sup> (a culture and marketing department of the Swedish ministry of foreign affairs) and according to the official blog even Sweden's “road warrior for peace” the minister of foreign affairs as well as former head of state, Carl Bildt himself will attend the opening<sup>3</sup>. But what happens when a specific mode of representation is transferred to a new context? In this case a building for bilateral governmental representation is transferred to a private corporation.

I'll use the Embassy in Second Life as a case study of mediation between global web-based corporations and the notion of participation in a time where privatized service platforms are becoming a standard that most people (in this case even states!) uncritically are subscribing to.

My starting point will be an examination of the embassy and its representation, from an architectural perspective in relation to the Swedish Government's Politics of Architecture on state representation as well as from the point of view of the conflict between conventions of diplomatic missions and the terms of use regulating the virtual world.

### Politics on representation

According to the Vienna Conventions on Diplomatic Missions from 1961 embassies are established on mutual consent<sup>4</sup>. The function of an embassy is to represent one state in another state by negotiation between governments and protecting the interests of the sending state and its inhabitants within the receiving state<sup>5</sup>. This is achieved through reporting on the conditions and the development of the receiving State to the sending State and by creating friendly relations and developing the two States economic, cultural and scientific relations<sup>6</sup>.

In 1998 the Swedish government adopted a new policy on architecture politics<sup>7</sup>. The Proposition was the first initiative to establish a politics of architecture with an integrated plan and law on architecture, crafts and design. The changes touched on a variety of levels from the establishment of infrastructure, to city planning and individual buildings. Basically this meant the addition of strings such as ‘aesthetically shaped’ and ‘should be aimed’ into the existing laws<sup>8</sup>. One chapter, though

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<sup>1</sup> From Carl Bildt's personal blog from the 30<sup>th</sup> of January 2007. The blog entry was Bildt's response after for the first time acquiring the news about the Swedish embassy in Second Life via a BBC-news article. The entry is called ‘Heja Olle Wästberg’ and is aimed at the director of the Swedish institute Olle Wästberg: <http://carlbildt.wordpress.com/2007/01/30/heja-olle-wastberg/> [my translation from Swedish]

<sup>2</sup> Official announcement by the Swedish Institute, Jan 2007: [http://www.si.se/templates/CommonPage\\_\\_\\_\\_3052.aspx](http://www.si.se/templates/CommonPage____3052.aspx)

<sup>3</sup> <http://secondhouseofsweden.com/2007/05/20/may-30-is-launch-day-for-the-second-house-of-sweden/>

<sup>4</sup> Article 2, Vienna Conventions on Diplomatic Missions, 1961: [http://untreaty.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/conventions/9\\_1\\_1961.pdf](http://untreaty.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/conventions/9_1_1961.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Article 3.1a; 3.1b; 3.1c - Vienna Conventions on Diplomatic Missions, 1961: [http://untreaty.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/conventions/9\\_1\\_1961.pdf](http://untreaty.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/conventions/9_1_1961.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Article 3.1d; 3.1e, Vienna Conventions on Diplomatic Missions, 1961: [http://untreaty.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/conventions/9\\_1\\_1961.pdf](http://untreaty.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/conventions/9_1_1961.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Handlingsprogram för arkitektur, formgivning och design: <http://www.regeringen.se/content/1/c4/25/65/e36cce6d.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Suggestions to alterations of existing laws Framtidsformer – Handlingsprogram för arkitektur, formgivning och design, pp 5-9 <http://www.regeringen.se/content/1/c4/25/65/e36cce6d.pdf>

concerned the representation of the public sphere and the state, “Public Sphere as Exemplary – the State as Exemplary”<sup>9</sup>, focusing on the importance of confirming the role of the State through its representation. This also concerned embassies, which are representations of the State in other States. The new architecture politics added a new aspect to the embassy. It was not enough to be an institution with the main function to represent the State, now the institution itself (including its own representation) had to be representative of the State - the representation of the representation became representative. In this way a Swedish Embassy would have to architecturally express what Sweden stands for<sup>10</sup> - or at least what Sweden would like itself to stand for.

## A House of Sweden

The virtual embassy in Second Life will be a copy<sup>11</sup> of a real world embassy: The House of Sweden, situated in central Washington DC next to a big park and a river. The embassy was developed as a consequence of the new politics on architecture. A competition was announced by the Swedish National Property Board (SVF) in 2002 and the winning proposal, designed by Gert Wingårdh and Thomas Hansen opened 2006<sup>12</sup>.

House of Sweden is a concept developed in collaboration between the Swedish National Property Board and the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs<sup>13</sup>. The house is a conglomerate that besides the actual embassy consists of corporate apartments for the business industry and an event center with conference rooms and exhibition space.

The building stands as a postmodern paraphrase of Scandinavian modernism. It is a wooden glasshouse. Its facades consist of backlit opaque glass with printed patterns of pressed wood and the interior a romantic/nostalgic choice of materials associated with Swedish nature and traditional Swedish craft like wood, granite and water<sup>14</sup>. The reception desk is made of glass and a massive wooden door is opened whenever the embassy is open for visitors<sup>15</sup>. Also it is possible for ‘anyone’<sup>16</sup> to rent the exhibition center and the conference rooms of the house for events. As House of Sweden describes themselves in a pamphlet with information about the building: *“Some have said that this type of open embassy is what the Americans themselves should build, but cannot. [...] modern American embassies are instead usually large, closed-off buildings located a safe distance from everything else. Despite its openness, the House of Sweden has the same level of security as other Swedish embassies, neither lower nor higher.”*<sup>17</sup> - Open and relaxed, though under control. This is the House of Sweden, the building as well as the concept marks itself in opposition to the traditional embassy with openness, relaxation space and an interweaving of the arts and the business world. Although it is obvious the art is but a layer of the design branding the concept of Sweden and the business environment. As a matter of fact even the diplomatic mission itself seems to be there, in order to brand the corporate apartments which take up most of the space in the whole building<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> “Offentligt som förebild - Staten som förebild” Framtidsformer – Handlingsprogram för arkitektur, formgivning och design, pp 25-3 - <http://www.regeringen.se/content/1/c4/25/65/e36cce6d.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> “New expectations for future embassies” - Background material - House of Sweden, page 2

[http://www.sfv.se/cms/showdocument/documents/sfv/engelska/house\\_of\\_sweden/background\\_material\\_the\\_building\\_the\\_artwork\\_etc\\_.pdf](http://www.sfv.se/cms/showdocument/documents/sfv/engelska/house_of_sweden/background_material_the_building_the_artwork_etc_.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Official announcement by the Swedish Institute: [http://www.si.se/templates/CommonPage\\_3052.aspx](http://www.si.se/templates/CommonPage_3052.aspx)

<sup>12</sup> “The architecture competition” - Background material - House of Sweden, p 3

[http://www.sfv.se/cms/showdocument/documents/sfv/engelska/house\\_of\\_sweden/background\\_material\\_the\\_building\\_the\\_artwork\\_etc\\_.pdf](http://www.sfv.se/cms/showdocument/documents/sfv/engelska/house_of_sweden/background_material_the_building_the_artwork_etc_.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> “A new concept is born” - Background material - House of Sweden, p 2

[http://www.sfv.se/cms/showdocument/documents/sfv/engelska/house\\_of\\_sweden/background\\_material\\_the\\_building\\_the\\_artwork\\_etc\\_.pdf](http://www.sfv.se/cms/showdocument/documents/sfv/engelska/house_of_sweden/background_material_the_building_the_artwork_etc_.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> See photo of facades:

[http://www.sfv.se/cms/showimage/images/aktuella\\_projekt/washington\\_dc/foton\\_30\\_maj\\_06/hos\\_fasad\\_mot\\_flaggstanger\\_och\\_grasmatta.jpeg?mime-type=image/jpeg](http://www.sfv.se/cms/showimage/images/aktuella_projekt/washington_dc/foton_30_maj_06/hos_fasad_mot_flaggstanger_och_grasmatta.jpeg?mime-type=image/jpeg) - more photos from interior to be found at: <http://www.wingardhs.se/php/flash.html> | under projects - 2006

<sup>15</sup> “The various parts of the building – a tour” - Background material - House of Sweden, p 4

[http://www.sfv.se/cms/showdocument/documents/sfv/engelska/house\\_of\\_sweden/background\\_material\\_the\\_building\\_the\\_artwork\\_etc\\_.pdf](http://www.sfv.se/cms/showdocument/documents/sfv/engelska/house_of_sweden/background_material_the_building_the_artwork_etc_.pdf)

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<sup>17</sup> “The various parts of the building – a tour” - Background material - House of Sweden, p 6

[http://www.sfv.se/cms/showdocument/documents/sfv/engelska/house\\_of\\_sweden/background\\_material\\_the\\_building\\_the\\_artwork\\_etc\\_.pdf](http://www.sfv.se/cms/showdocument/documents/sfv/engelska/house_of_sweden/background_material_the_building_the_artwork_etc_.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> All together the house consists of five floors of which 1\_ floors belongs to the embassy, 1\_ floor belong to the event center and 2 floors makes space for 19 corporate apartments. This means that 70% of the building is reserved for activities related to business and events, and only 30% of the space of the whole house is related to traditional diplomatic activities.

with apartments at the size of 70-250 m2 and a rent of 40-60 USD/m2. The renters include Volvo group, Saab and Lars Thunell, the vice president of World Bank<sup>19</sup>.

A Swedish embassy's original function was to take care of governmental negotiations, official representation and the protection of Swedish people and their interests within the USA. House of Sweden mirrors a shift in the role of diplomatic missions, where the new embassy is rather an official high end 'tourist bureau'. It serves the function of an exclusive promotion platform - a show room for the darlings of the Swedish business industry.

## A Second House of Sweden

The original embassy is designed for the human scale in relation to the use of the building, the surroundings, the economical framework and the politics of cultural representation. The final layout of the floor plans and the materiality of the house reflect these conditions<sup>20</sup>: office spaces are situated along glass facades in order for people to enjoy the view of the park and the river, interior stairs are covered with sound absorbent maple<sup>21</sup>, elevators are integrated for disabled people and things to move unhindered between the floors, and the exhibition space is especially designed so that big vehicles are able to enter when setting up a new exhibition<sup>22</sup>. In this way the entire building may be seen as a narrative product of human scale and experience interweaved with the above mentioned factors.

By shifting the medium or context from the real world to a 3d simulated environment presented on a computer screen the elements are changing.

Even though the user is represented by a (if she wishes humanlike) figure - the avatar, any navigation within the environment is reduced to the four arrow-keys on the computer's keyboard and the world is experienced through the screen with the image of one's avatar's neck in the foreground<sup>23</sup>. One perceives the environment in layers of resolution according to the graphic card and the capacity of the processor of the computer that is being used.

Patterns of movements are radically different. The avatar itself doesn't get exhausted, it is rather like a goal-less torpedo in constant pace as long as the arrow-key is pressed down, it is only when the user behind the screen gets tired that it stops and 'falls a sleep'. This makes the planning of experience within the virtual embassy rather different than from its real-world model. In the real House of Sweden, breaks and pauses are implemented in the house according to the function. An example is the sculpture of running water greeting you as you exit the conference space<sup>24</sup>, placed there in order to somehow refresh your mind. In Second Life it is not the avatar who would be tired or need a break after a long seminar, but rather the user behind the screen and keyboard. An equivalent break could therefore be an interruption, letting the screen go black and thereby forcing the user to shift perspective from second to first life.

Compared to traditional closed off and mono functional embassies the "real" Swedish embassy in Washington DC surprises at a first glance by its openness allowing new activities to unfold within the house and by being a glass house<sup>25</sup>. The glass house has a strong tradition in modernism. It is an almost supposedly invisible trespass between the outside and the inside. On the one hand it is a monument of building technology's victory over nature's forces and modernism's reaction against Victorian style, but on the other hand it is also implementing an openness that paradoxically signifies control and surveillance. The glass house offers the insider visual access and to a certain degree the illusion of being part of the

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<sup>19</sup> "The various parts of the building – a tour" - Background material - House of Sweden, p 6

[http://www.sfv.se/cms/showdocument/documents/sfv/engelska/house\\_of\\_sweden/background\\_material\\_the\\_building\\_the\\_artwork\\_etc\\_.pdf](http://www.sfv.se/cms/showdocument/documents/sfv/engelska/house_of_sweden/background_material_the_building_the_artwork_etc_.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> Floor plans:

[http://www.sfv.se/cms/showdocument/documents/sfv/aktuella\\_projekt/washington\\_dc/infor\\_overlammandet\\_till\\_ud/hos\\_wdc\\_8\\_ritningar\\_maj\\_06.pdf](http://www.sfv.se/cms/showdocument/documents/sfv/aktuella_projekt/washington_dc/infor_overlammandet_till_ud/hos_wdc_8_ritningar_maj_06.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> "The various parts of the building – a tour" - Background material - House of Sweden, p 5

[http://www.sfv.se/cms/showdocument/documents/sfv/engelska/house\\_of\\_sweden/background\\_material\\_the\\_building\\_the\\_artwork\\_etc\\_.pdf](http://www.sfv.se/cms/showdocument/documents/sfv/engelska/house_of_sweden/background_material_the_building_the_artwork_etc_.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> "The various parts of the building – a tour" - Background material - House of Sweden, p 4

[http://www.sfv.se/cms/showdocument/documents/sfv/engelska/house\\_of\\_sweden/background\\_material\\_the\\_building\\_the\\_artwork\\_etc\\_.pdf](http://www.sfv.se/cms/showdocument/documents/sfv/engelska/house_of_sweden/background_material_the_building_the_artwork_etc_.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> If not 'mouse look' is enabled, which is an alternative navigation mode where the mouse is used for all navigation and the user have first perspective view, but this mode is rather difficult to control with a mouse and is probably better suited for a joystick.

<sup>24</sup> "The various parts of the building – a tour" - Background material - House of Sweden, p 5

[http://www.sfv.se/cms/showdocument/documents/sfv/engelska/house\\_of\\_sweden/background\\_material\\_the\\_building\\_the\\_artwork\\_etc\\_.pdf](http://www.sfv.se/cms/showdocument/documents/sfv/engelska/house_of_sweden/background_material_the_building_the_artwork_etc_.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> Compare for instance with the photos of different American embassies published at Wikipedia:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American\\_diplomatic\\_missions](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_diplomatic_missions)

outside while at the same time being protected from it. It gives the outsider visual access to the inside, stating: “there is nothing to hide here”.

Using the representation of glass in a virtual world though, is merely pointless. In a virtual world there is no difference between interior and exterior. One needs no protection from any weather situation or nature forces and intrusion is not about closing the access by building a wall or a window, but rather to alter and implement the security into the code behind the representation. As a matter of fact this is very easy in Second Life: Different security options are incorporated into the ‘land’. The land owner is able to decide which level of security is active on her property, for instance making it possible for the avatars to ‘die’, denying other users to build or move objects on the property, or denying any access to the property without permission. So if the owner i.e. wishes to give other users only visual access to at part of her property she doesn’t need to build any transparent simulation of glass, but can implement this in the code. A glass building in a 3d world is rather clumsy and annoying: when trying to navigate through it and accessing visible things, you constantly bump into the transparent walls.

One aspect of the original House of Sweden which might have a chance to be more successful in a 3D online environment is concept of making the embassy a platform for different events and activities. This might be a case where the virtual world has an advantage since it overcomes the difference of time-space in information technology by allowing users who are spatially separated to experience the same environment together in real-time.

In Second Life most places give an impression of being empty, but by establishing in-world events this is exactly what the Swedish institute wants to avoid<sup>26</sup>. It is worth noting though that the emptiness in Second Life is not only due to a lack of visitors, but rather is connected to the scale of the 3d environment and its relation to the capacity of the servers. Due to server restrictions it is only possible to be 40 people at a time on each island<sup>27</sup>. House of Sweden in Washington DC is 7500 m2 large. The rooftop terrace alone is built to host 200 people at a time – just for a cocktail party<sup>28</sup>. The diplomatic activities takes up 30% of the spatial area of the house which has 50 people working there daily<sup>29</sup>. But considering the fact that only 40 people is capable of accessing the whole island at a time, all of the employees wouldn’t even be able to meet in the virtual embassy. No wonder why SL feels like suburbia - it is suburbia. The low density is exactly the same problem that suburbs are struggling with. Considering the scale of the building, no matter how many events they make the embassy will always feel empty until a solution is found for increasing the capacity of the servers and thereby making it possible for more people to access it at the same time.

#### The Diplomatic Bag may not be opened

“The premises of the mission” are, according to article 1 of the conventions of Diplomatic Missions” *the buildings or parts of buildings and the land ancillary thereto, irrespective of ownership, used for the purposes of the mission including the residence of the head of the mission*”<sup>30</sup>. The actual premises of the Swedish mission in Second Life will be a chunk of data stored on Linden Lab’s servers. The servers are computers physically placed in the state of California, USA<sup>31</sup>. Visitors of the embassy will be able to access the premises of the Swedish mission, the data on the servers via a viewer (also called the client). This is a piece of software that the users download and install on their own computers enabling them to access data on Linden Lab’s servers real time together with other users, and thereby accessing the virtual diplomatic mission and the rest of Second Life. But in order to access any aspect of Linden Lab’s Second Life the user has to agree with the terms of service<sup>32</sup> - a virtual layer to the virtual world.

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<sup>26</sup> Stefan Geens at: <http://secondhouseofsweden.com/2007/04/04/division-of-labor/>

<sup>27</sup> Alvar C.H Freude: “*Warum Second Life kein Web 3.0 ist*” p.24 – a power point presentation  
<http://alvar.a-blast.org/vortraege/webmontag/second-life/second-life-vortrag.pdf>

<sup>28</sup> “*The various parts of the building – a tour*” - Background material - House of Sweden, p 7  
[http://www.sfv.se/cms/showdocument/documents/sfv/engelska/house\\_of\\_sweden/background\\_material\\_the\\_building\\_the\\_artwork\\_etc\\_.pdf](http://www.sfv.se/cms/showdocument/documents/sfv/engelska/house_of_sweden/background_material_the_building_the_artwork_etc_.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> “*The various parts of the building – a tour*” - Background material - House of Sweden, p 5  
[http://www.sfv.se/cms/showdocument/documents/sfv/engelska/house\\_of\\_sweden/background\\_material\\_the\\_building\\_the\\_artwork\\_etc\\_.pdf](http://www.sfv.se/cms/showdocument/documents/sfv/engelska/house_of_sweden/background_material_the_building_the_artwork_etc_.pdf)

<sup>30</sup> Article 1, Vienna Conventions on Diplomatic Missions, 1961:  
[http://untreaty.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/conventions/9\\_1\\_1961.pdf](http://untreaty.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/conventions/9_1_1961.pdf)

<sup>31</sup> General Provisions - Terms of Service: <http://secondlife.com/corporate/tos.php>

<sup>32</sup> First paragraph - Terms of Service: <http://secondlife.com/corporate/tos.php>

Second Life's Terms of Service consists of a 7000 words document presented to the users as a click and agree contract after having downloaded and installed the viewer and just before accessing the service for the first time. The contract is un-negotiable. If you disagree with parts of the terms you'll have to disagree with all by clicking disagree at the end of the document. This in return means that you are not allowed to enter the service at all.

The code behind the world is generating the environment, setting the parameters for it and thus being the world. While the Terms of Service rather is a regulative framework defining what-could-be or what shouldn't-be, thus governing the company in order not to be able to hold it responsible for anything that might occur within its framework and giving it absolute control of in-world decisions<sup>33</sup>. This is not necessarily to be understood as a police state which wants to keep the control by controlling anybody anytime. The control is rather latent 'in-case-of' control, where the company in case something unexpected happens can wash its hands saying "Oh, no! This is not our responsibility" or "This was not our intention." The Terms of Service text is dense, the document would take an average reader about 35 minutes to read<sup>34</sup>, which makes most people skip reading and just agree in order to access the service immediately. General Director of the Swedish Institute, Olle Wästberg describes his idea of establishing the embassy in Second Life as the following: *"I got myself a user account, this avatar as it is called and logged in and it seemed to be a good marked place for us. In collaboration with the ministry of foreign affairs we have now decided to open an embassy"*<sup>35</sup>. In the process of logging in Olle Wästberg properly skipped reading the terms of service, because if he would have read them he would have been aware that agreeing with the terms of service is to violate the Vienna Conventions of Diplomatic Missions and thus making it impossible to establish any embassy whatsoever in Second Life.

There are three aspects of the Conventions for Diplomatic Missions which are violated by Second Life's Terms of Service: (i) the first regards the inviolability of the Diplomatic Mission itself, (ii) the second is the inviolability of the premises of the Mission including its property, furniture, archives and documents and (iii) the last concerns the inviolability of Diplomatic Agents.

(i) A Diplomatic Mission is inviolable<sup>36</sup>. It means that the receiving state is not allowed to enter the embassy without permission. The receiving state is even obliged to protect the embassy as best as it can. But in Second Life any kind of data stored on Linden Lab's servers (for instance the embassy itself, accumulated items like Linden dollars, content, scripts, objects, account history or account names) are subject to deletion or alteration at any time for any reason or even without a reason in the sole discretion of Linden Lab<sup>37</sup>.

(ii) Premises of a Mission are *"immune from search, requisition, attachment or execution"*<sup>38</sup>. But in Second Life the user must authorize Linden Lab to disclose any kind of information the corporation finds *"appropriate to investigate"*<sup>39</sup> to *"private entities, law enforcement agencies or government officials"*<sup>40</sup>. Furthermore Linden Lab has the right to follow, track and record any of the user's activities within the service<sup>41</sup> this includes activities taking place within the premises of the virtual embassy.

(iii) *"The person of a diplomatic agent shall be inviolable. He shall not be liable to any form of arrest or detention. The receiving State shall treat him with due respect and shall take all appropriate steps to*

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<sup>33</sup> The string "no liability" appears 3 times, "any reason or no reason" appears six times and "sole discretion" appearing 17 times in the Terms of Service.

<sup>34</sup> According to <http://mindbluff.com/askread.htm#5>

<sup>35</sup> Olle Wästberg as quoted by in Alexandra Hernadi in Svenska dagbladet - [http://www.svd.se/dynamiskt/inrikes/did\\_14523659.asp](http://www.svd.se/dynamiskt/inrikes/did_14523659.asp) [my translation from Swedish]

<sup>36</sup> Article 22.1 and 22.2 - Vienna Conventions on Diplomatic Missions, 1961: [http://untreaty.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/conventions/9\\_1\\_1961.pdf](http://untreaty.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/conventions/9_1_1961.pdf)

<sup>37</sup> 5.3 Terms of Service. See also similar statements in 1.4; 1.6; 2.6 and 3.2b: <http://secondlife.com/corporate/tos.php>

<sup>38</sup> Article 22.3 and 24 - Vienna Conventions on Diplomatic Missions, 1961: [http://untreaty.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/conventions/9\\_1\\_1961.pdf](http://untreaty.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/conventions/9_1_1961.pdf)

<sup>39</sup> 6.1 Terms of Service: <http://secondlife.com/corporate/tos.php>

<sup>40</sup> 6.1 Terms of Service: <http://secondlife.com/corporate/tos.php>

<sup>41</sup> 6.2 Terms of Service: <http://secondlife.com/corporate/tos.php>

*prevent any attack on his person, freedom or dignity*<sup>42</sup>.” In Second Life the user is represented by an account name. It is the name of the character that represents the user and whereas the character itself can be changed and remodeled immensely the account name is static. The account name is equivalent to the representation of a diplomatic agent, and “*Linden Lab reserves the right to delete or change any Account Name for any reason or no reason*”<sup>43</sup>

By being located within the Linden Lab Corporation the Swedish embassy in Second Life is subordinate to the terms of service conducted by Linden Lab and thus breaking with the conventions related to diplomatic missions. This is recursive since any future visitor of the embassy will be forced to do the same<sup>44</sup>. In this way the notion of participation in this kind of virtual world is uncritically accepted and without getting acquainted with the conditions that the users are agreeing with in order to be allowed to participate. There is no consular service provided at the embassy in Second Life, instead it will link to ‘real’ web-sites where you can get info about how to obtain visa etc. But why do the users need to access second life and subscribe to the terms of service in order to exit Second Life to get the information that the virtual embassy provides?!

For any reason or no reason?

In order “*to make sure it [edit: the virtual Swedish Embassy] exudes “Swedishness”*”<sup>45</sup> the Swedish Institute has hired the design bureau Söderberg A/S to manage the layout of the virtual copy of House of Sweden and its surroundings in Second Life. But is it really possible for a design bureau “*to manage the overall look and feel of the sim (or “island”)*”<sup>46</sup> for it to signify Swedishness? According to the architecture politics the answer seems to be yes, and the initiators are obviously thinking of the look of the Swedish nature. But is Swedishness only a semiotic layer wrapping up the structures by making a realistic simulation of the Swedish landscape? Doesn’t the representation go beyond the aesthetical layer and isn’t it rather a matter of inscription into context?

Let me give an example: In the official announcement the Swedish Institute is motivating the set-up of the virtual embassy by the following: “*Reaching out internationally, to an increasingly selective crowd, calls for an inventive and progressive way of working with communication. It is of great importance that we find our target groups where they are most likely to be open to our information, in their own context.*”<sup>47</sup>

But it is certainly difficult to imagine the Swedish government approving any kind of set-up of an embassy within a real world private corporation - a Disney-like amusement park, no matter *how well any designers would have managed to give it an overall look and feel of “Swedishness”*, or no matter *how good a market any Disney world whatsoever would be for targeting progressive individuals where they are most likely to be open for Sweden’s promotion*.

It is obvious that the Swedish Institute is not familiar with the structures they are inserting the virtual embassy into. At the official announcement at their web-page the description of Second Life says: “*Second Life is a 3-D virtual world and is built and owned by its residents.*”<sup>48</sup> It is an exact copy of how Linden Lab describes themselves in “What is Second Life?”<sup>49</sup> on their webpage. But as we have already seen Second Life is not owned by its inhabitants. It is a private space owned by the corporation Linden Lab. The users are able to create content with reserved intellectual property rights within the environment, but any content stored on Linden Labs servers (which every part of the users environment are) are according to the terms of service owned by Linden Lab and subject to deletion. The empty phrase is adopted by the Swedish Institute without reflection.

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<sup>42</sup> Article 29 (see also 30.2) - Vienna Conventions on Diplomatic Missions, 1961: [http://untreaty.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/conventions/9\\_1\\_1961.pdf](http://untreaty.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/conventions/9_1_1961.pdf)

<sup>43</sup> 2.3 Terms of Service: <http://secondlife.com/corporate/tos.php>

<sup>44</sup> Second Life’s Terms of Use, first paragraph: <http://secondlife.com/corporate/tos.php> as of 29<sup>th</sup> of April 2007

<sup>45</sup> Stefan Geens at <http://secondhouseofsweden.com/faqs/>

<sup>46</sup> Stefan Geens at <http://secondhouseofsweden.com/faqs/>

<sup>47</sup> Olle Wästberg quoted at the webpage of the Swedish Institute - [http://www.si.se/templates/CommonPage\\_\\_\\_\\_3052.aspx](http://www.si.se/templates/CommonPage____3052.aspx)

<sup>48</sup> [http://www.si.se/templates/CommonPage\\_\\_\\_\\_3052.aspx](http://www.si.se/templates/CommonPage____3052.aspx)

<sup>49</sup> <http://secondlife.com/whatis/>

The establishing of a diplomatic mission in Second Life is a continuation of the pattern that the House of Sweden already is a part of - an embassy as a show case for the Swedish brand, the nation state in competition with global corporations. So far Second Life has been the arena of big global corporations as MTV, NIKE, Reuters, but now the state is trying to compete with the corporations as if it itself was a corporation – a brand. From August 2006 to January 2007 the media coverage related to Second Life had increased by “nearly 150%”<sup>50</sup> and when the Swedish Institute in the end of January announced their intentions of opening the virtual embassy they immediately got worldwide media coverage everywhere, from BBC News to India news<sup>51</sup>. But the Swedish Embassy in Second Life is a media stunt with very little critical reflection behind it. Eventually the Swedish Institute is surfing waves of a media attention, which finally most of all is branding Second Life itself.

A kind of excuse for this argument is be found on the blog of Second House of Sweden where Stefan Greens writes: *“Ironically, once concern we had was that the decision to go ahead with the project amid the hype might make it look like we were taken in by the hype, when in fact we were going in despite the hype, because we felt we really wanted to figure out now how to use virtual worlds as a place to tell people about Sweden.”*<sup>52</sup>

Virtual worlds have been around for more than 15 years. Already 7 years ago the environment Online Traveler had sound<sup>53</sup>, an aspect which Linden Lab is just now trying to develop.

If the Swedish Institute was interested in using virtual worlds and had decided to take a political stand point with an awareness of the user’s position within these worlds, a non-profit open source version as for instance Croquet<sup>54</sup> would have been an obvious choice. Of course there would not be so many users or so much hype around it, but maybe Sweden could have started a discussion related to the public sphere of information technology. However there is no reason for establishing embassies in an open source network.

#### A b r i d g e d s o f a r

Second Life is a centralized structure. It is a closed network of servers all under the domain of Linden Lab, much like a state. Second Life and Sweden are separated entities. The usual way for a state to establish relations with another state is for the sending state to create a representation of itself within the otherness of the receiving state – the embassy. But in an open source structure where the servers are connected in a distributed network it would not be necessary for Sweden to enter this otherness and establish a representation there, rather it could create its own server, with its own set of rules interlinked with the other servers – much as a country, but not as an embassy.

Now is a time where standards are introduced, people are inhabiting the net. This should be done not by establishing embassies, but through critical discussion and reflection on and understanding of the public sphere which is possible within the information structures. A sphere which is being hi-jacked by private corporations without anybody noticing. The Sweden which eventually will be represented in Second Life is a state where all critical reflection is put aside on the behalf of elevating Sweden's profile - and no matter how well designed it might be, it is but a brand lacking any content – since the representation is not representing any thing but the representation itself.

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<sup>50</sup> Factiva: Percentage increase comparisons of media coverage about Second Life between months of August 2006 and January 2007 as quoted by Joel Cere: <http://blogs.hillandknowlton.com/blogs/ampersand/articles/7359.aspx#footnote1>

<sup>51</sup> BBC: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/6310915.stm> ; India News: <http://www.indiaenews.com/europe/20070130/37547.htm>

<sup>52</sup> Stefan Greens at: <http://secondhouseofsweden.com/2007/03/20/more-faqs-were-in-it-for-the-long-haul/>

<sup>53</sup> We used Online Traveler in 2000 as a platform for online access to the electrohype2000 conference in Malmö, Sweden, documentation: <http://www.electrohype.org/electrohype2000/rapport/rapport.pdf>

<sup>54</sup> In croquet ([http://www.opencroquet.org/index.php/Main\\_Page](http://www.opencroquet.org/index.php/Main_Page)) both server and client are open source in opposition to Second Life which only has opened the source code to the client – the viewer, but not to the servers.