The complexity of virtual accountability: A case study of a virtual NGO

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Abstract

Virtual worlds give rise to a new form of organizing that is not physical, lacks significant operational costs and is democratic between individuals who need not meet in person in order to establish an organization. The virtual dimension adds a layer of complexity to the concept of accountability: it is difficult to trust someone you only know via technology - and even more difficult is the attempt of holding this person accountable in the absence of a physical relationship. Nevertheless, despite this perceived deficiency, many virtual organizations have been created and are continuously being created today. Seemingly, individuals have found a way of handling accountability in a virtual context as to make virtual organizations function. Through the conduction of an in-depth case study of the company Peace Train, which is a virtual non-governmental organization (NGO), we investigate (1) how the virtuality of the platform Second Life shapes the stakeholder landscape and characteristics of a born virtual NGO and (2) how and which accountability mechanisms are established. We find that the virtual organization is characterized by fluid boundaries, a non-hierarchical structure with a lack of formal reporting and control. The stakeholders identified are similar to real world NGOs, with the exception of a government-like role taken on by a privately held company as the provider of the virtual platform. Due to the lacking operational cost base, formal accountability mechanisms are very difficult to establish and are successfully being substituted by various strong informal ones. The low costs imply that it is easy to establish a virtual organization, but due to the lack of formal accountability mechanisms it is hard to experience growth in terms of members, donations and visitors to events.

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Glossary

Avatar: visual representation of a user in the virtual world environment, mostly in the form of an animated cartoon figure.

Immersion: state of consciousness where a user of a virtual world forgets about their physical self and feels a sense of 'being there' in the virtual environment.

In-world: term in Second Life to refer to anything that happens within Second Life, referring to the virtual space of Second Life as *world*.

Linden Lab: California-based technological company that is the provider of the platform Second Life.

Notecard: inventory item in Second Life containing text and/or embedded textures, snapshots, objects or other notecards. They can be exchanged between users and be used to distribute information or to organize meetings, events, etc.

Real life: term commonly used to refer to activities that happen outside the virtual world.

Second Life: a free three-dimensional virtual world where users can socialize, connect and create using free voice and text chat.

Sim: commonly referred to as virtual land or region, which avatars can hold events or meet on. For the exchange of an annual fee, users can become owners of their own Sim.

Wiki: a webpage, used collaboratively by multiple users, that allows the creation and editing of online documents such as a calendar or tables, and is mainly used for internal organizing.

1 Introduction

Virtual worlds are gaining increasing importance: according to a recent speech from online game designer Jane McGonigal (McGonigal, 2010), an individual in a country with a strong gamer culture[1] will have spent approximately 10,000 hours playing online games by the age of 21, which is about the amount of time spent on education from 5th grade to high school graduation in the United States. Research has shown that this is about the time of practice required to become an expert at any given field (Ericsson & Charness, 1994). Therefore, society will in the future be faced with a group of people who are experts in the handling of virtual worlds, implying that virtual worlds are increasingly influencing the lives of many.

Some people today argue that virtual worlds, despite the initially hyped expectations during 2006 and 2007, when many well-known companies such as Toyota, American Apparel and IBM established presences in one of these platforms, have never really taken off. But on the contrary, research has shown that virtual worlds are now starting to enter a phase where real benefits hit the mainstream (Wasko *et al.*, 2011): the virtual economy has increased to a noticeable size, with revenues in 2011 from the virtual goods industry being expected to reach USD 7.3 billion globally (Sorom, 2010), a development that has been enabled by the fast growth of broadband Internet access and computing power (Wasko *et al.*, 2011). Also, virtual worlds can enable people to do things they would not be able to do in real world - not only in a gaming context, but through virtual platforms such as Second Life. And with the increasing transparency of other social media such as Facebook, and their constantly changing security settings making it hard to control information flows, there might be an increased need for the higher level of anonymity and privacy provided by platforms such as Second Life.

But not only do virtual worlds enable individuals to widen their possibilities of action, they also give rise to a new form of organizing that is not physical and democratic between individuals who need not meet in person in order to establish an organization. This new form of organizing is based on individuals getting together in a self-governed collective aiming to reach a common goal, which raises the question of how an efficient form of organizing and accountability mechanisms can be established. The virtual dimension adds a layer of complexity to the concept of accountability: it is difficult to trust someone you only know via technology - and even more difficult is the attempt of holding this person accountable in the absence of a personal relationship. Nevertheless, despite this perceived deficiency, many virtual organizations have been created and are continuously being created today. Seemingly, individuals have found a way of handling accountability in a virtual context as to make virtual organizations function.

[1] A strong gamer culture has in this context not been further defined, but it is reasonable to assume that Western countries such as Sweden can be included in this definition.

While previous research has addressed the governance of community forms of organizing for communities that engage in knowledge creation or production (for example Wikipedia or open source software projects such as Linux) (Krogh & Hippel, 2006) or the functioning of intra-organizational virtual teams that use a virtual platform as a complement to the physical world, little is known about virtual organizations that are established and exist only through a virtual world to engage in a common not-for-profit activity such as fundraising. How is such an online not-for-profit organization[2] internally and externally organizing its accountability relationships, when it only interacts and represents through avatars? What accountability expectations are externally imposed on such an organization, and how does the organization respond? In addressing these questions, accountability research on not-for-profit organizations can be of valuable help, but it has so far mainly focused on physical organizations (see for example Najam 1996, O'Dwyer 2005, Unerman & O'Dwyer 2006a, 2006b, Ebrahim 2002, 2003) and not notably expanded to include exclusively virtual not-for-profit organizations.

This research takes a step towards filling this gap by examining how a virtual not-for-profit organization establishes and manages its accountability relationships through various formal and informal accountability mechanisms. The study examines how accountability is perceived, enforced and may be altered in a not-for-profit virtual world context, as "accountability changes: it exists in many forms and is sustained and given extra dimensions of meaning by its context" (Sinclair, 1995, p. 219). Through the conduction of a case study on a virtual not-for-profit organization, this paper aims at shedding light on the complexities of accountability that arise from a non-physical setting.

This study proceeds as follows. Section two provides definitions on important key concepts and summarizes the relevant previous literature, followed by a description of the method used in this study in section three. We present the empirical findings in section four and present our analysis of these empirics in section five. In section six we present our conclusions, address limitations and provide suggestions for future research.

[2] The terms not-for-profit and non-governmental organization (NGO) will in this paper be used as synonyms (for a definition of non-governmental organization see section 2.1.3).

2 Theory and problematization

2.1 Definitions

This study is aimed at examining accountability in a virtual context. But the term *accountability* is not a self-explanatory concept. Therefore, it is important to create an understanding of the meaning of accountability and its context, namely the stakeholders, the virtual world environment, and the not-for-profit organization in itself. The following section will set the stage by providing definitional grounds on the concepts of accountability, stakeholders, non-governmental organizations and virtual worlds, before we can turn to a discussion of the previous research in those various areas.

2.1.1 Accountability

The existence of different forms of accountability has been pointed out extensively in previous literature and accountability in itself has been described as an elusive concept (Sinclair, 1995), which escapes an easy clear-cut definition and is difficult to grasp. In this context, a good start might be to look at a definition from a dictionary (Brettell Grip, 2009). The Oxford Dictionary of English (Oxford University Press, 2010) defines accountability as “the fact or condition of being accountable”. Accountable is defined as “required or expected to justify actions or decisions”. In the accounting research literature, accountability has been defined as “the giving and demanding of reasons for conduct” (Roberts & Scapens, 1985, p. 447). Generally spoken, accountability is therefore based on relationships in which people are supposed to explain and take responsibility for their actions (Ebrahim, 2003; Sinclair, 1995), and incorporates certain expectations on people or organizations to explain, justify and take responsibility (Cooper & Owen, 2007). In sum, accountability can be understood as occurring on the basis of relationships between people and/or organizations and arising because of expectations.

In previous research, two definitional directions regarding the focus of accountability can be found: one that is rather focused on accountability based on financial numbers, as well as one that is behaviorally oriented, including the personal aspect.

Brettell Grip (2009) makes the distinction between a *formal* (and legal) accountability as opposed to an *informal* one, which is based on personal values, beliefs and culture. This classification will be drawn upon in order to systematize the previous work. Borrowing from Sinclair (1995), formal accountability can be defined as arising “by virtue of a person’s location within a hierarchy in which a superior calls to account a subordinate for the performance of delegated duties” (ibid, p. 227). For the purpose of this paper the definition of superior and subordinate can also include external parties to the organization, (for example a founder can be superior to employees but can at the same time be subordinate to funders). Furthermore, the notion of formal accountability entails the reliance on accounting information as a main driver of enforceability and answerability (Schedler, 1999). Informal accountability, on the other hand, can be described as being based on personal feelings of being accountable even in the absence of a hierarchy.

The purpose of our categorization of forms of accountability into a formal and an informal category is not to provide a clear-cut separation of concepts but rather for us to create a structured theoretical framework valuable for our analysis. As Sinclair (1995) pointed out in a discourse analysis she performed on the statements of 15 interviewed chief executive officers, all different forms of accountability are subject to an individual's interpretation and perception, which is expressed in either a personal or a structural fashion. Therefore, the boundaries between the two proposed categories of formal and informal accountability are fluid and sometimes even vague.

To conclude, in order to inform a common understanding of accountability in the following of this paper, accountability will be understood as *the quality of being held accountable to someone/something, occurring on the basis of relationships between people and/or organizations, arising because of expectations and being able to take both a formal and an informal character.*

2.1.2 Stakeholders

Recognizing that relationships are embedded in the concept of accountability enables an analysis of accountability at an individual, organizational as well as internal and external level (Brettell Grip, 2009; Ebrahim, 2003). Through financial transactions from and to stakeholders they become part of the general economy. As such, it is important not to stop at an analysis purely covering an organization in isolation, but instead also to incorporate an analysis of external parties in order to portray as complete a picture as possible. Stakeholders can be understood as encompassing "any group or individual who is affected by or can affect the achievement of an organization's objectives" (Freeman, 1984, p. 46). Understanding and mapping the different stakeholders is an important part in this picture and of the accountability concept (Gray *et al.*, 2006; Slim, 2002), as NGOs have *multiple* accountabilities - downwards to their partners, beneficiaries, staff and supporters, and upwards to their trustees, donors and possibly host governments (Edwards & Hulme, 1995). In the following, this categorization of upwards and downwards relationship will be drawn upon and is explicitly not meant in a hierarchical sense. It is simply referring to the relationship between the case company and its funders on the one hand and the case company and its beneficiaries on the other hand.

To conclude, a thorough mapping of the stakeholders will unveil the different individuals and groups, and their respective opinions regarding the performance of the organization but also the basis for that evaluation. This understanding will in turn be important for an examination of accountability.

2.1.3 Non-governmental organizations

Since filtering out a standard definition of the term non-governmental organization (NGO) from previous literature remains difficult, we first draw, in congruence with previous research (Awio *et al.*, 2011; Gray *et al.*, 2006; Teegen *et al.*, 2004; Unerman & O'Dwyer, 2006a), on the definition published by a leading authority in the field as a starting point for describing the major characteristics. For this purpose we refer to the following United Nations statement defining NGO as:

"any non-profit, voluntary citizens' group which is organized on a local, national or international level. Task-oriented and driven by people with a common interest, NGOs perform a variety of services and humanitarian functions, bring citizens' concerns to Governments, monitor policies and encourage political participation at the community level. They provide analysis and expertise, serve as early warning mechanisms and help monitor and implement international agreements. Some are organized around specific issues, such as human rights, the environment or health." (United Nations, 2003, cited by Teegen *et al.*, 2004, p. 466)

A NGO can therefrom be seen as non-profit making and being made up of voluntary people with a common interest. Since NGOs "bring citizens' concerns to Governments" and not raise concerns for governments, we interpret this as that NGOs work independently from governments (which is also implied by the "non-governmental" part of the abbreviation). In line with this rather broad definition of NGOs, previous research has suggested to cluster NGOs according to their function. Vakil (1997) suggests that NGOs be classified according to their orientation (the types of activities they engage in, such as welfare, development, advocacy, development education, networking and research) and their level of operation (international, national and community-based). Further, a distinction can be made between NGOs in general and so-called grass-roots organizations (GROs), the latter of which operate for the benefit of its members directly (Goddard & Assad, 2006). Moreover, previous research distinguishes between a *de jure* (based on legal definition) and a *de facto* (based on operations) NGOs (Unerman & O'Dwyer, 2006a). But since neither all organizations, which would commonly be regarded as NGOs will necessarily be registered as those and vice versa, the pure reliance on this criterion will make the classification incomplete. For the purpose of the rest of this paper, a NGO will be understood as an *independent voluntary association of people with a common interest acting for a common purpose, independent from the direct control of any government, not a political party, non-profit making and not engaging in illegal activities.*

2.1.4 Virtual worlds

Virtual worlds are part of the broad field of social media, which can be seen as a larger group of Internet-based applications that can either serve to share content (e.g. YouTube), enable social networking or blogging (e.g. Facebook) or foster online collaboration (e.g. Wikipedia). One key feature of these mentioned social media forms is that the content can be created, updated and shared by individual users. A virtual world environment, however, can be distinguished by three main characteristics: i) they allow user-interaction with others in real time through Internet, ii) they allow the creation of fully customized self-presentations in the form of avatars and iii) they allow exploration in a three-dimensional environment. Furthermore, virtual worlds can be separated into two different forms: i) virtual game worlds and ii) virtual social worlds. In the former, users often need to follow rules and are often not allowed to engage in economic activities, whereas the latter do not pose any restrictions on behavior resulting in a flexibility and possibility to conduct business with other users. (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009; Zhou *et al.*, 2011). The here studied environment Second Life belongs to the virtual social world (see Figure 1). Linden Lab, the company behind Second Life, defines this platform as a 'free 3D virtual world where users can socialize, connect and create using free voice and text chat' (Second Life, 2011).

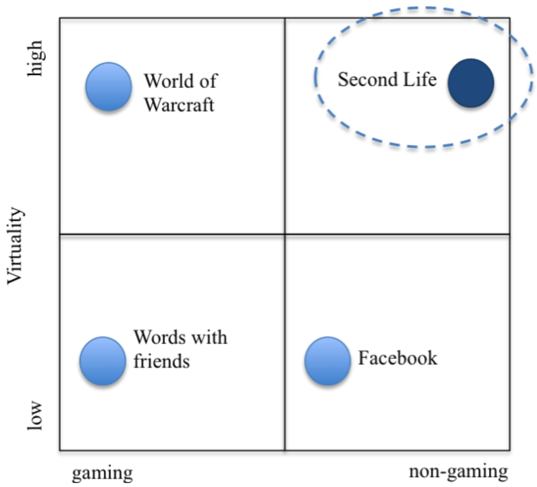

Figure 1: Virtual environments

Virtual worlds started out as two-dimensional, online gaming networks or chat applications (Zhou *et al.*, 2011). From there, virtual social worlds have by today developed into three-dimensional virtual platforms that can be seen as extensions of real life, being dedicated mainly to social and economic interactions. For example, Second Life uses a virtual currency to support in-world (the expression used to describe Second Life environment) economies, and individuals are through tools enabled to build and create objects which can then be sold or exchanged for in-world currency (Mahaley, 2009). The participation in virtual worlds is usually free, while the upgrade of some user features can then consequently cost money. The virtual currency in Second Life, the Linden dollar, can be exchanged to real world money (Mahaley, 2009; Teigland, 2010a).

The concept of having an 'avatar' is potentially the most important differentiator of virtual worlds compared to other social media (Mahaley, 2009) and therefore might need some explanation for the unfamiliar reader. An avatar is the visual representation of a user in the virtual world environment, mostly in the form of an animated cartoon figure. They are mostly of a human appearance, but can be chosen freely by their users to also represent animals, robots or even cars. A common preoccupation in a virtual world is for users to exchange, collect or shop for avatars and gestures (Webb, 2001). With an avatar, the user can tour the virtual environment, visit shopping malls, go to company islands, attend meetings or participate in chat rooms. They can interact via computer-based chat or voice over IP (Teigland, 2010a).

The usage of currency in virtual worlds enables organizational activities. Many real-world institutions such as corporations (Dell, Microsoft, IBM), educational institutions (Harvard University) and even government branches have been reported establishing a presence in Second Life (Mahaley, 2009; Spaulding, 2010; Zhou *et al.*, 2010). Some organizations take it one step further and are exclusively created and organized through a virtual world with the purpose of discovering and exploiting opportunities primarily within virtual worlds. Borrowing from Teigland (2010a) and drawing upon the international entrepreneurship literature that uses the term 'born globals', these organizations can be termed 'born virtuals'.

2.2 Previous research: Accountability

After having set the stage and reached a common understanding of the key concepts important for our study, we now turn to a review of the previous research performed in the accountability field. The concept of accountability has been researched extensively within the accounting literature. Accountability can both be internal as well as external, and within the external part, exist in an 'upwards' sense towards funders, shareholders, regulatory bodies, or a 'downwards' sense towards beneficiaries or clients. Within these fields, a classification of previous research into formal and informal categories lends itself to provide a framework for analysis.

2.2.1 Formal accountability

Roberts (1991) introduces the differentiation between hierarchical (also called individualizing) and socializing accountability, whereas the former can be categorized into the formal and the latter to the informal category. Roberts appreciates that accountability can be a valuable construct in an organizational setting, but criticizes how the use of accounting may lead to an hierarchical form of accountability in organizations, to which he attributes an individualizing effect. The presence of hierarchical accountability leads to the fact that individuals constantly benchmark themselves to their peers, which also makes them nervously preoccupied with how they are being seen by others - and separates them from their peers. Accounting information usually plays a large part in this hierarchical form of accountability since it is often viewed as a mirror of actions being performed in the organization. Despite the role of accounting information as portraying reality, it can sometimes be hard to trace individual performance to the produced accounting numbers and in this respect "the most unnerving aspect of accounting information is that individuals scarcely appear in it at all" (Roberts, 1991, p. 359).

Sinclair (1995) attributes the characteristics of a chameleon to accountability due to its context-adapting quality. Five forms of accountability are put forth whereof one, named the managerial form, can be seen as belonging to the formal category. It is defined as arising as a consequence of a person's location within a hierarchy. The managerial form displays similarities to the hierarchical/individualizing form mentioned above since it heavily relies on accounting information, outputs and budgets. Sinclair (1995) goes on with separating controlling the input and output on the one hand and controlling the process on the other. This separation is worth noting since it affects how delegated duties will be performed and as such also the subordinate's perception of accountability - if a subordinate is unable to affect the process and thereby also has limited ability to affect the performance, he/she might be less prone towards taking account for that performance.

Ahrens (1996) on the other hand puts forth the influence of the cultural background on the definition of accountability. He introduces the notion of a *style* of accountability and differentiates between styles of financial and operational accountability. In his definition of financial accountability, which can be attributed to the formal category, managers use accounting information within a return-risk framework to privilege the reality of accounting information in judging business proposals over other forms of rational reasoning. This also defines the understanding of a "good manager", who can handle risk despite under-funding and who is striving for meeting budgets albeit adverse conditions.

2.2.2 Informal accountability

Due to the potentially counterproductive aspects of the hierarchical accountability (Roberts, 1991) many scholars have sought to examine a broader and more holistic form of accountability - one that includes the impacts of the organization on a broader range of stakeholders, embraces both quantitative and qualitative aspects of performance and has a long-term orientation. Roberts (1991) uses the socializing accountability when referring to a form of sense-making through informal social face-to-face interaction (e.g. during journeys to and from work, lunches, in corridors, etc.) which serves to humanize the experience of work and frees the other from being a mere subject of competition.

Ahrens (1996) contrasted the financial style of accountability, mentioned above, with an operational style. The operational style is closely linked to the functional role that is assigned to an individual within the organization - the manager within a certain function is presumed to possess superior knowledge regarding how their function should be run. Therefore individuals belonging to other functions within the organization might carefully reflect before proposing cross-functional suggestions. Furthermore, this style of accountability is characterized by the lesser importance of accounting information for operational decisions, as it is perceived as not capturing organizational truths to a complete extent, and relies more on the assumed perceived superior knowledge of a person due to a certain functional position.

The socializing form can be perceived as less problematic due to its informal face-to-face nature and the lack of abstract standards of performance being imposed. However, Messner (2009) argues that even in a face-to-face setting there can still be a burden of accountability, since the informal setting does not completely erase the ethical burden that is put on an individual through expectations of accountability. Messner argues that there are three limits of accountability: the opaque self, the exposed self and the mediated self. The opaque self implies that parts of the behavior of an individual will be reigned by former experiences and believes that escape the current consciousness: being held accountable for behavior that is difficult or impossible to rationalize imposes an ethical burden on the individual. This is similar to the reasoning of Roberts (2009) who discusses the social practice of accountability where accountability as talk, listening and asking questions is important due to the fact that individuals can never quite know what it is that they are doing, and calls this phenomenon the limits of transparency. Continuing with Messner's (2009) limits of accountability, the exposed self implies that an individual is exposed to others' expectations irrespective of whether the individual desire so or not, and cannot escape the situation without being held accountable for it. However, having to care for these expectations might shift the individual's focus from the purpose at hand to concern for accountability and evaluation. Finally, the mediated self implies that external norms, social categories and other significant others in the individual's environment influences the self. The ethical burden arises due to the individual having to deal with external demands and multiple "truths" that can be in conflict with one another.

To sum up the formal and informal accountability put forth by previous research we will draw upon a quote by Roberts (1991): "socializing forms of accountability will always be limited to local contexts where there is a relative absence of asymmetries of power and the possibility of face-to-face interaction. These local contexts, however, are repeatedly subordinated to systems of hierarchical accountability sustained through the sanctions of power and money, whose peculiar merit is their capacity to span physical distance, and create internal divisions within local contexts." These two forms of accountability, the formal and the informal, are constantly intertwined and interdependent, which is why future search for accountability should try to accommodate both within one frame.

2.3 Previous research: Accountability in NGOs

While the previous research on accountability in general is mostly not organization-specific, there also exists a body of specific literature on accountability in a NGO context. There, accountability has both been covered in accounting research as well as what might be termed "non-accounting" literature (Goddard & Assad, 2006). Despite recent efforts of shedding more light onto the subject, such as a 2006 special issue of *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal* on accountability, there pertains to exist an acclaimed lack of empirical studies in the accounting literature (Awio *et al.*, 2011). Many authors pointed out that accountability in a NGO context differs from accountability in a general organizational context (Unerman & O'Dwyer, 2006a), and it is put forth that forms of accountability also vary with the type of NGO examined (Ebrahim, 2003; Slim, 2002; Unerman & O'Dwyer, 2006a). In the following, we will address key particularities of NGO accountability as discussed in previous research.

2.3.1 Context

Different reasons for why accountability in NGOs might differ from other forms of organizing can be put forth. NGOs are accountable to a different range of stakeholders as compared to other organizations, such as e.g. partners, beneficiaries, staff and supporters in a 'downwards' sense, and trustees, donors and possibly host governments in an 'upwards' sense (Edwards & Hulme, 1995, p. 9). Further, it is reasonable to assume that the relationships to these stakeholders differ. For example Grey *et al.* (2006), amongst others, point out that the relationship between NGOs and their stakeholders differ primarily with respect to the economic aspect - it is not, unlike that between a company and its shareholders, a purely economic one.

In a study of accountability in a grass-roots organization providing microfinance in Zambia, Dixon *et al.* (2006) draw upon a framework for analysis of accountability in a NGO context initially elaborated by Ritchie and Richardson (2000). They debate that there are *vertical/hierarchical "rule" based* as well as *horizontal "relational" based* accountabilities while recognizing that certain hybrid forms may combine both. This classification of accountabilities is in line with the former suggested classification of accountabilities into *formal* and *informal* categories and will also be used for this section of the theoretical framework.

2.3.2 Formal accountability in NGOs

Hierarchical accountability in a NGO context, which residing on the earlier provided definition can be classified as *formal*, arises in the relationship to influential stakeholders who control access to key resources and is short-term in orientation (O'Dwyer & Unerman, 2008). Within the hierarchical accountability relationship, many and particularly large NGOs find themselves confronted with top-down donor-imposed formal reporting requirements (Ebrahim, 2002). Also, in a perceived tougher competition for funds, NGOs might be inclined to shift their focus significantly towards this financial form of accountability (O'Dwyer, 2005; O'Dwyer & Unerman, 2007). But the increased implementation of formal accountability mechanisms can be to the non-benefit of the actual cause of the NGO since it restrains the organization from pursuing its actual goals, might be used to disguise potential dysfunctions (Dixon *et al.*, 2006), emphasizes resource use and the measure of immediate short-term quantitative targets (O'Dwyer & Unerman, 2008), or can lead to the tendency of negligence of downwards accountability according to NGO management's interests (Najam, 1996; O'Dwyer, 2005).

Still, Goddard and Assad (2006) find that accounting information, due to its competence-symbolizing character, can help legitimizing the NGO in the external perception. This is in line with the findings of other case study research, which suggests a widely legitimizing role of financial external accountability (Chenhall *et al.*, 2010; O'Dwyer & Unerman, 2008) and can be the case even if formal accountability mechanisms do not play a significant role in internal decision making (Goddard & Assad, 2006).

Furthermore, Goddard and Assad (2006) find that technical accounting excellence is not vital: organizations with stronger, better documented accounting systems were not necessarily perceived to be more accountable by stakeholders. Instead, what matters for organizational accountability is accessibility and transparency of conducted affairs. This is also in line with the results of Awio *et al.* (2011) who found simplicity and transparency to be two of the key elements to the accountability framework in their studied grass-roots NGO. Further, they found that the use of simple accounting procedures enhances understanding for broader community constituency. In contrast to this, a case study of an Irish non-governmental development organization even implemented a programme scheme in order to de-emphasize narrow financial impacts between the organization and the funder, functional accountability, and emphasize accountability for broader social impacts such as long-term impacts on beneficiaries, so called social accountability (O'Dwyer & Unerman, 2007). Despite the efforts to overcome this formal accountability relationship, the organization was faced with a persistent stickiness of the functional accountability due to a lack of commitment, resources, guidance and expertise from the funder and thus the functional accountability seemed to "override" all other forms even on a long-term basis.

2.3.3 Informal accountability in NGOs

Despite the fact that many studies have found that an apparent focus is put onto hierarchical upwards accountability in NGO practice, general accountability in NGOs is also seen as going beyond the mere cross checking of financial figures (Slim, 2002). This is especially true since NGOs can cause widespread and unintended negative impacts upon the lives of many stakeholders - both close to or remote from the NGO - and can be regarded as responsible for these impacts (Unerman & O'Dwyer, 2006b). Gray *et al.* (2006) further argue that, given the closeness of many NGOs to their key stakeholders, appropriate accountability mechanisms for many NGOs are likely to be *informal* rather than *formal*.

While previous case research has covered all different forms of NGOs (reference is made to Vakil (1997) under point 2.1.3 for a categorization), informal accountability has been found to play an especially prominent role in grass-roots NGOs. In these, demand for accountability is rather "bottom-up" in nature, i.e. stems from the beneficiaries who here also happen to be the members of the NGO itself (Awio *et al.*, 2011). Even though Awio *et al.* (2011) found simple accounting procedures to be important in this grass-roots context, they also stress the importance of complementing and underpinning it with social capital (where according to the World Bank social capital is defined as: "… the institutions, relationships, and norms that shape the quality and quantity of a society's social interactions. … Social capital is not just the sum of the institutions which underpin a society – it is the glue that holds them together." (World Bank, 2011)) Hence, the importance of personal contact and the visibility of activities imply that "effective grass-roots accountability must be reconceptualised as accounts of actions and transactions, rather than the numerical abstractions of accounting" (Awio *et al.,* 2011, p. 86). This bottom-up and beneficiary initiated accountability implied positive outcomes for service delivery. Contrasting this to the top-down funder initiated social accountability studied in O'Dwyer and Unerman (2007), it can be speculated that the bottom-up approach was more successful due to a higher commitment from the beneficiaries who are also likely to reap the benefits compared to the lack of such commitment from the funders.

2.4 Previous research: Virtual worlds

Virtual environments have inspired a large body of research, which has taken various directions, from technology-driven approaches to studies on individual psychology or explorations of educational possibilities (Sivunen & Hakonen, 2011). Much research has also been conducted on the characteristics of virtual organizing. At the same time, the definition of virtual environments or virtual organizations has most of the time been rather ambiguous. Virtual organizations have for example been seen as ad hoc organizations that are being constructed mainly to deal with and coordinate responses to very urgent and temporary issues (Grabowski & Roberts, 1999), as organizational teams that extensively use information technology for communication (Ahuja & Carley, 1999) or as an open source software community (Gallivan, 2001). This goes along with a variety of virtual environments studied, such as virtual gaming worlds or the mere use of information technology for communication. Furthermore, much of the existent research is focused on individuals' behavior in virtual worlds rather than organizational structure.

In their review of virtual environment studies on social and groups phenomena, Sivunen and Hakonen (2011) identify, amongst other findings, a lack of research on work groups using virtual environments, so-called virtual teams. Only one of the 47 articles studied in their analysis researched organizational work groups, and the participants in this study had known each other from face-to-face meetings before. What we will be studying in this paper is a 'born virtual' with participants who initially only met within and now still mostly meet and organize through a virtual world. Therefore, for the purpose of this paper, we will focus on drawing upon key findings that previous virtual world research can provide with respect to a better understanding of the functioning and the peculiarities of virtual worlds, being aware of the fact that not all of these findings will be unrestrictedly applicable to the virtual organization studied here.

2.4.1 Reasons for the use of virtual worlds

In previous research both motivations for firms and individuals to engage in virtual worlds are put forth. In today's competitive business environment firms are constantly demanded to improve. However, it can be that travel and expenses for training becomes a roadblock for learning and meeting goals and in this setting virtual social worlds can be considered a cost-effective way to deliver development across regional boundaries (Mahaley, 2009). Therefore Mahaley (2009) comments upon four key differentiators that Second Life has from an educator's perspective: i) avatars have access to tools to create objects and media, ii) objects or environments created can be observed and experienced by others, iii) the avatars can use multiple channels for communication and iv) real-world physics need not apply which implies for example that three-dimensional prototypes can be made to visualize things. Kaplan and Haenlein (2009) explain five different ways in which companies can make use of Second Life and while the fifth also relates to learning, the first four are more cost or profit oriented. First, firms can use Second Life for advertising and communication through setting up virtual flagship stores, buying advertising space in virtual malls or radio stations, sponsoring of virtual events and not to mention the positive impact their activities can have on real life press coverage. Second, is to sell digital versions of real life products in the virtual social world, so called v-Commerce. Third is to use Second Life for conducting marketing research projects at a lower cost. Fourth is the possibility of organizing recruiting events within Second Life. Fifth is to use the virtual social world as a platform for organizing internal meetings and knowledge exchange. Yet more benefits for charitable organizations in virtual worlds are put forth such as an increased global reach, an increased awareness for small organizations and a wide potential of fundraising tools and activities and relatively inexpensive organizational costs (Teigland, 2010b).

Besides the organizational interest in engaging in Second Life, previous research also points to individual motivations. Self-therapy, a source of instant pleasures, liberation of social norms, tool for self-expression and exploration of novelty (Partala, 2011) are some of the revealed motivations. Zhou *et al.* (2010) also point to the experimental reason for using Second Life but adds functional and social reasons. For-profit as well as not-for-profit organizations can draw upon these motivations, as for example in a study of Sutano *et al.* (2011a) one participant commented that meeting in a virtual environment gave the feeling of presence and led to higher attention and less multi-tasking as compared to speaking on the phone. Also, Sivunen and Hakonen (2011) found that meetings in virtual environments can be perceived as being more enjoyable as compared to traditional means of remote interaction, since team members can change and modify their avatars' or the meeting environments' appearance.

2.4.2 Uses of virtual worlds

From the above paragraphs it becomes apparent that the virtual world environment offers several opportunities to different organizations and individuals. But some peculiarities of virtual worlds have drawn attention of previous research and can be clustered into two major categories: trust and communication.

Virtual worlds usually do not restrict individuals to a single identity or registration, allowing users to simultaneously maintain several virtual world appearances (Webb, 2001). Furthermore, participants in several studies have stressed that the public sharing of personal real-life information about another avatar-owner's identity is perceived as one of the most damaging offenses in a virtual social world (Spaulding, 2010; Webb, 2011). This shows that there is, at least for parts of the virtual population, a public decoupling of virtual and real-life identities. On the other hand, several other studies show that individuals start to develop strong personal ties to their avatars: "Second Life is more than a mere computer game - it is an extension of their real life" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009, p. 570). Also, research has shown that with increasing frequency of usage, the behavior of avatars increasingly converges to behavior shown in real life situations (Kaplan & Heanlein, 2009). So, at least for parts of the virtual populations, one can assume a personal and direct link between the individual and their avatar, thus enabling trust. This is also in line with the findings of Jarvenpaa and Leidner (1999), who find that trust can exist despite the fact that members might not have met before. This is good evidence for those who argue that trust is even more important in virtual organizations since you need to manage people that you do not see (Handy, 1995) and thus trust can be used as risk mitigation (Grabowski & Roberts, 1999). In contrast, Gallivan (2001) in his study of open source software projects finds that there is a higher reliability on forms of control to a greater extent than trust. One of the reasons for this is that relying on trust makes the project vulnerable to members' misdeeds and therefore trust is substituted by controlling the conditions for collaboration, social control (norms of behavior) and self-control (emphasis placed on the individual's professional reputation).

Communication plays a vital role in any form of organization, but it is especially fundamental to virtual organizations. Electronic communication enables parties to link across distance, time, culture, departments and organizations (DeSanctis & Monge, 1999). In extension to what has been said before, communication is closely interlinked with trust. In virtual environments, good communication can be used within a trust-building strategy. Having a task-focus in written correspondence or sharing explicit statements about commitment, support and excitement can increase trust between remote team members (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999). This is especially important in virtual worlds such as Second Life, where, within the communication with avatars, non-verbal communication such as gesture and facial expressions are missing (Moore *et al.*, 2007). Avatars appear motion- and therefore lifeless during the time the individual might be engaged in some other activity, for example private messaging with another person in the virtual room. For other avatars, it is then impossible to understand whether the individual is completely absent or just temporarily engaged in an activity that is not visible to other avatars (ibid). On the other hand, as previously mentioned, communicating in a three-dimensional environment which resembles for example a real world conference room and gives participants the feeling of presence, can result in participants paying more attention and being less engaged in multi-tasking compared to speaking on the phone (Sutanto *et al.*, 2011). While the three-dimensional virtual environment can be considered an advantage compared to telephones, comparing it to face-to-face situations can indicate something else. On the one hand Hinds and Mortensen (2005) note that virtual teams experience more task and interpersonal conflict while Wakefield *et al.* (2008) find that technology-mediated communication contributes to a reduction in all types of team conflict. The latter finding links to Grabowski and Roberts' (1999) findings, that communication can be used to mitigate risk in virtual teams.

A further particularity of a virtual world context is that the choice of communication is affected by other mechanisms as compared to real world situations: the reluctance of revealing real life information can lead to the fact that individuals prefer written communication (e.g. chat, e-mail) over spoken communication (e.g. phone, Skype) irrespective of the task and the information richness of the medium (Teigland, 2010a).

A third area of academic discussion is the difficulty of facing the challenges of dispersed work, the lack of strong predetermined rules or the absence of a central authority. Hemetsberger and Reinhardt (2009) found that there is a preeminent importance of coat-tailing systems, which inextricably bind together individual action goal fulfillment with collective activity. They further point out the importance of self-motivation and the difficulty to solve the tension between volunteer work and task prioritization, as well as the fact that participation must be intrinsically rewarding in order to attract volunteer contributors. Members must be able to choose their task according to what they deem fun, and therefore tasks are of modular character. Further, Hemetsberger and Reinhardt (2009) stress the fact that in an Internet context, individuals are only visible through contributing content: "doing means visibility and thus, progress" (ibid, p. 997). Based upon this presumption, there is a tendency to meritocratic approach to organizing, and although rules of decision making tend to be consensus based, "he who does the work, decides" (ibid, p. 1002).

2.4.3 Success factors in virtual worlds

For organizations to succeed in a virtual world, what is there to think about? Kaplan and Haenlein (2009) suggest 'five Cs' for success in virtual social worlds: i) catch traffic, that is to ensure that many avatars visit the virtual representation of the organization to avoid giving the perception of being an empty and deserted space, ii) compensate presence, that is firms should satisfy many avatars' desire to earn money by compensating their presence, iii) consider innovativeness, that is make sure to be innovative since one of the key motivations for spending time in Second Life is to have fun, iv) create a learning environment, that is to satisfy avatars' desire to learn and have new experiences, and last but not least v) care about avatars, since for many individuals, Second Life is an actual extension of their real life. Similarly, Spaulding (2010) puts forth another five suggestions for success in a virtual world: i) participation requires an attitude of contribution, that is each participant should add value to the community in one way or another, ii) the primary activity should not be advertising, iii) sponsoring a community requires resources, that is companies need to put effort into maintaining community relationships in the long-run, iv) be willing to experiment, since there is not much prior knowledge to draw from and v) match business and community needs, that is evaluate whether the community fits with the needs of the business, since not all firms are good matches to the virtual communities.

2.5 Problematization

Accountability in an organizational and personal context is based on relations to others and their expectations. Therefore, when analyzing accountability in an organizational context, it is important to understand the relationships an organization finds itself to be situated in. Furthermore, it is important to understand the special characteristics of a virtual organization, in order to be able to distinguish the impact of virtuality from other factors. A first step in analyzing accountability is hence to map the stakeholders of the organization studied and to identify and set out the special characteristics of a virtual organization.

Thus, our first research question will be:
RQ1: How does the virtuality of the platform Second Life shape the stakeholder landscape and characteristics of a born virtual NGO?

Organizing through a virtual platform adds a layer of complexity. Firstly, according to Roberts and Scapens (1985) the face-to-face nature of relationships will have a decisive effect on the form of accountability: "Consequently, despite the ability of information systems to bridge physical distance, such a distance has a decisive impact on the forms of accountability that emerge" (Roberts & Scapens, 1985, p. 451). Secondly, due to the fact that individuals are interacting with avatars, the possibility of hiding the real world identity can give rise to a decoupling of the individual and their virtual counterpart in Second Life. A question arising in this context is: who is the accountable self - the avatar or the real world individual?

NGO accountability literature has taught us that in the competition for funds, the financially oriented accountability relationship to the funders can override the downward more informal accountability to beneficiaries. How will the relationship to the funders and the beneficiaries be affected by a virtual social world context and do the used accountability mechanisms differ? A funder who entrusts the organization with resources wants to make sure that the money is used efficiently and the beneficiaries want to have the right resources at the right time.

Also, in previous research the hierarchical and socializing accountability is put forth. Hierarchical accountability is created through the use of accounting as a control tool and the presence of a hierarchy and the hierarchical structure affects the creation of a socializing form of accountability. Is there a hierarchy in a Second Life context? How is that established and how does the person at the top claim accountability? For a Second Life context, socializing accountability might be more difficult to establish. It is therefore interesting to study whether there exist substitutes for physical meetings (watercooler talks, journey to and from work) in order to create a form of socializing accountability. Do individuals then relate on a personal basis?

Further, virtual organizations tend to be more fluid with regards to member participation and therefore trust might play an even more prominent role. It is therefore interesting to look at how individuals deal with trust in accountability relationships in social virtual worlds. Is it easier to betray a trust due to the usage of avatars or are the avatars considered an extension of the real life individual?

This leads to our second, general research question:
RQ2: How and which accountability mechanisms are established in a born virtual NGO?

3 Methodology and methods

3.1 Research design

Overall, this study is directed at providing an increased understanding of the accountability mechanisms in a virtual NGO. Our purpose is to describe, analyze and understand the behavior of individuals using the ones who are being studied as a starting point, which is a typical characteristic of qualitative research (Lundahl & Skärvad, 1999). Therefore, qualitative methods have been used in order to engage in interpretations specific to the context of our case organization. Also, when extending existent literature into new fields and when the researchers' objective is to discover new things, it has been suggested to follow an abductive approach based on systematic combining (Dubois & Gadde, 2002).

When conducting qualitative studies, the researcher is not interested in how the world is, but rather how the world is perceived and interpreted. Therefore qualitative studies are considered appropriate when the aim is at understanding how individuals or groups perceive for example work organizations (Lundahl & Skärvad, 1999). In contrast to positivist studies, in a qualitative study the intent is to shed light on certain aspects of a field that are part of social reality rather then being objectively real (Ahrens & Chapman, 2006). We acknowledge that there has been a debate to what extent objectivist findings are included in interpretive studies (Ahrens, 2008; Kakkuri-Knuuttila *et al.*, 2008a, Kakkuri-Knuuttila *et al.*, 2008b). For our study we reside on the assumption of interpretive research that "social reality is emergent and subjectively created yet (successively) objectified in social intercourse" (Ahrens, 2008, p. 296). We do not take a fundamentally subjectivist stand on our research and acknowledge that both subjectivist and objectivist findings will enter our analysis. In essence, a qualitative methodology is chosen for this study in order to pursue interpretations specific to the context of the case company, i.e. a qualitative single case study.

3.1.1 Single case study

There has been a debate on the usefulness of a single case study or multiple case studies (Dyer & Wilkins, 1991; Eisenhardt, 1989, 1991). Choosing one case study provides the best conditions for a deep and aspect-rich study (Lundahl, Skärvad, 1999). The disadvantage is that the case study can be too situation specific in order to be interesting for other contexts (ibid). In addition, Eisenhardt (1989) emphasizes the importance of multiple case studies and methodological rigor. She proposes using multiple-case logic in order to derive good theory. However, Dyer and Wilkins (1991) emphasize the importance of providing a rich description of the social scene and to describe the context in which the events occur in order to provide a picture of the underlying dynamics of the case. The authors stress the importance of providing a description of the context to such an extent "to make the context intelligible to the reader and to generate theory in relationship to that context" (ibid, p. 616). When the phenomenon is described well, it enables others to identify the same phenomena in their research (ibid). Therefore, Dyer & Wilkins (1991) critique Eisenhardt's (1989) focus on multiple case studies and constructs, and claim that she misses the context, which keeps researchers from developing path-breaking theories. Therefore, we propose a single case study approach in order to provide more depth and context.

The research field of this paper, accountability within a virtual context, is comparably new and there is a lack of knowledge within this field. Therefore, a single case study is deemed to be appropriate to use since the case company represents a rather revelatory case, which provides us with an opportunity to observe and analyze a phenomenon that is new (Yin, 2003). In addition "... when the problem is directed towards analysis of a number of interdependent variables in complex structures, the natural choice would be to go deeper into one case instead of increasing the number of cases" (Dubois & Gadde, 2002, p. 558). The less researched area of organizing in Second Life and the added complexity of avatar usage leads us to go deep into one case.

We would have liked to include one other case study in order to enable comparison, but given the limited resources we have, we acknowledge that there is a trade-off between on the one hand multiple case studies providing breadth, and on the other hand single case studies providing depth (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). Put in other words, there is a trade-off "between the deep understanding of a particular social setting and the benefits of comparative insights" (Dyer & Wilkins, 1991, p. 614). It is however difficult to know in advance how to decide upon the trade-off between depth and breadth and whether the chosen direction of using just one single case study in this context is going to lead to better analysis and contribution to research. This is something we can only speculate on and hope that we have made a well-educated choice.

3.1.2 Selection of case company

We chose Peace Train as our case company as it represents an extreme case of virtual organizing: the organization was founded exclusively in Second Life. The founding members had never met in person, and in the beginning did not even reveal their real life identities until many months into the existence of the organization. That implies that it has mainly been and today still mainly is organizing in the virtual world of Second Life. This makes it an interesting and extreme case of a virtual organization and hence also a virtual way of organizing. Furthermore, another reason for choosing Peace Train resided in data accessibility. It was very important to be sure to be able to conduct at least 10 to 15 interviews with different stakeholders, which was ensured beforehand.

3.2 Data collection

Yin (2003) suggests three principles of data collection, which have been followed in this paper: the use of multiple sources of evidence, the creation of a case study database, and the maintenance of a chain of evidence. The first principle, the use of multiple sources of evidence, is followed by both conducting interviews as our main source of evidence, and complementing them with internal documents, observations during meetings and secondary, external and public data. Further, we have created and maintained a case study database, including all our interview recordings, their transcriptions, the corresponding interview guides as well as a calendar with interview dates and folders comprising all relevant articles of previous research. By linking our data collection documentation closely to our derivations in this paper, we also establish a chain of evidence.

3.2.1 Primary data: Interviews

"To be accountable means to be accountable to *someone else*, and to reduce the notion of accountability to the justification of one's own sake is to misconstrue accountability" (Messner, 2009, p. 921). Therefore accountability needs to be studied in the relation to others. Interviews are usually appropriate when conducting an exploratory and theory development study, and when gathering "soft data" about rather qualitative relations (Lundahl & Skärvad, 1999). Consequently, we conducted multiple interviews with people who are working together or have been in contact with Peace Train due to the pursue of Peace Train's activities as our main source of data.

3.2.1.1 Interviewee selection

In the choice of individuals and events, we have chosen those that we have reason to think will lead to knowledge generation that is relevant for the research questions (Lundahl & Skärvad, 1999). Interviewees have therefore been chosen to include a wide range of possible roles and functions within and in relation to the studied organization. The interviewees can be divided into three groups: 1) the active core team of Peace Train, who organize the events, are part of the board or have another assigned and well-defined role within the organization, 2) volunteers or contributors of time, talent and technology, who help during the events or donate their talent to perform at one of the events organized by Peace Train, and 3) external stakeholders, such as funders, beneficiaries or other people indirectly involved in Peace Train's activities. For some

Role	Group
Co-founder, board member	1
Co-founder, board member	1
Board member	1
Volunteer	2
Intern	2
Intern	2
Performer, Co-Organizer	2
Performer, Co-Organizer	2
Organizer, friend, supporter, panelist	2/3
Supporter, Sim-provider	2/3
Beneficiary	3

Table 1: Interviewee selection

interview partners, the boundaries of these three groups were blurry, and some interviewees could be categorized within both group 2 and 3. In these cases, we reflected this in our interview questions. In total, we have pursued 12 interviews with 11 different individuals (see Table 1).

Our first point of contact was one of the three co-founders of Peace Train, who in turn provided us with further interview contacts. During the conduction of the interviews, we identified different other roles and persons that would be valuable to speak to, and requested their contacts. During the conduction of the interviews we also noticed that some of our interview partners were only very loosely tied to Peace Train. In these cases we adjusted the interview questions to understand their external perception of Peace Train as an organization and their general stand towards organizing in a virtual context.

3.2.1.2 Conduction

Semi-structured interviews have been used in the gathering of empirical data during the period of October to December 2011. In line with the semi-structured approach, some questions were pre-determined and sent in an interview guide via e-mail to all interviewees beforehand (Lundahl & Skärvad, 1999). During the interviews, the questions were complemented with follow-up questions and specific individual questions. In addition, during the interviews the respondent formulated the answer by him-/herself. The interviews were recorded and transcribed to allow for a careful and thorough interpretation (ibid). They lasted between 30 minutes and 1,5 hours.

In order to make the most of the interviews some interview techniques were followed. After a presentation of the interviewers themselves, all interviewees were warmed up with non-controversial background questions (Lundahl & Skärvad, 1999). Further, interviews were tried to be guided conversations rather than structured queries (Yin 2003, p. 89). Other authors have further pointed out the importance of asking "friendly" and "non-threatening" questions in order to avoid creating defensiveness on the informant's part (ibid). This is especially important in a context like ours, where informants are often non-professional volunteers and we could not meet them in person, due to resource constraints, but only via Skype. We also used web camera in Skype whenever possible in order to increase the personal connection and create trust. Both authors of this paper were present at all interviews, which enabled us to make the most of each interview.

3.2.2 Secondary data

In addition to the interviews a number of evidential sources were examined including: publicly available information on Peace Train, their internal but publicly available wiki (a webpage, used collaboratively by multiple users, that allows the creation and editing of online documents such as a calendar or tables, and is mainly used for internal organizing), Peace Train's website (www.peacetraintrust.org), and their social media presences (Facebook, Twitter). We also used internal documentation, which we had been provided with by one of the founders, and attended a meeting in Second Life to observe the behavior of the organizational participants. During the meeting in Second Life we were also able to gain access to internal documentation such as Second Life notecards and posters. We also had access to interview material and survey responses from a previous research on Peace Train.

3.3 Data analysis

The analysis of our data was a continuous process, which was started right after the first interview. We constantly went back an fourth between our theoretical framework, the empirics and the analysis and tried to identify patterns and themes to follow in subsequent interviews (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). We went through notes and interview protocols directly after each interview while all information still was fresh in memory (Lundahl & Skärvad, 1999). This analysis helped build up a pattern of issues for further in-depth probing questions in subsequent interviews. It also served as a basis for interpretation and analysis prior to the formal post-interview phase processing and interpretation of the empirical evidence gathered.

After all interviews had been conducted, in a post-interview phase all transcriptions were gathered in a single 114 page document, and we thoroughly read it repeatedly. We tried to identify trends, themes and patterns. One of the main tasks was data reduction, in that we filtered out the important parts underlining our identified themes.

During and after the analysis process we sent follow-up questions to important interviewees in order to verify and expand our reasoning. In addition, we conducted a follow-up interview with one of the founders. We also had discussions with other researchers not involved in the study in order to improve objectivity.

4 Empirics

The following part is structured as follows: we first address the background, the virtual setting and purpose of the case company Peace Train and describe its organizational structure. After that, we present the stakeholder network that Peace Train is embedded in and describe the mutual relationships. In the second half of this section, we will provide empirical evidence on the accountability mechanisms, both internally and externally, towards funders and beneficiaries.

4.1 Background & case context: Peace Train Charitable Trust, a born virtual NGO

Peace Train is a non-governmental, not-for-profit charitable organization, which has been founded in late 2007 and is primarily organized through the virtual space of the social medium Second Life and uses primarily the virtual space to fulfill its goals. It is therefore an organization that can, borrowing from Teigland (2010a), be termed a 'born virtual': an organization that has been created to discover and exploit opportunities primarily in the virtual space. In 2008, Peace Train has gained status as a federally recognized public charity (501(c)3). Its mission is stated as follows:

"Our mission is to create a culture of peace by raising funds and awareness for small organizations doing work on issues of poverty, human rights and peacebuilding. We use technologies to bridge the geographical divides, and create powerful shared experiences. We are inclusive of all who aspire to make a positive change in the world, regardless of age, gender, religion, sexual orientation, nationality or culture." (Peace Train, Internal Wiki, 2011)

Peace Train promotes itself as being a loosely organized but tightly focused group of people, which is dedicated to raising awareness of and funds for identified peace-building efforts around the world. The definition of peace building efforts appears thereby rather broad: organizations that have been included in the range of beneficiaries range from Asian rural development agencies to Afghan Women's Rights organizations. Furthermore, Peace Train educates people about peace and the work of the beneficiaries that are sponsored each year (see Figure 2). As one interviewee pointed out, "Peace Train exists to ... highlight the work of small NGOs throughout the world. You know the ones

Figure 2: Peace Train event informing about the work of one of their beneficiaries

that don't get a lot of visibility, that can't come into the US and buy commercial air time or do mass mailing to a million people. They are doing little projects in far flung areas of the world, but they are valuable. So our organization has taken it upon itself to find them and help them get the word out through a platform like Peace Train that is you know global, … so it's an awareness raiser."

Peace Train does this by organizing one major event per year in the virtual space of Second Life, PeaceFest, and several smaller ones throughout the year. Besides serving functions of fund and awareness raising, the events organized are also a place where beneficiaries have the opportunity to meet other organizations that can help them. As such, Peace Train acts as an intermediary and a matchmaker. Since the major part of the events take place in Second Life, and the user base of Second Life is globally dispersed, Peace Train targets a population that otherwise might be hard to reach for these small beneficiaries.

Furthermore, donating in Second Life is very easy: once a user has put money into their Second Life account, it only takes a right click on the mouse to donate. Also, it eases the reluctance some people might feel towards the entering of payment or credit card details on a beneficiary's website: "... in Second Life you're doing it all through a system that you use anyway. It's equivalent to putting your hand in the pocket in the street and putting into a collecting tin." Hence, there is a familiarity with the system that decreases the perceived risk of donating and the donating only takes a few seconds. As such, the burden for donating is lower compared to searching for the beneficiary and finding out how to donate directly to that charity, not to mention then actually going through with the donation.

Functions of Peace Train
Fund raising
Awareness raising
Education
Intermediary/matchmaker
Tapping new donor markets
Easing donation process
Bundling of money

Table 2: Functions of Peace Train

In addition, it is easy to give small amounts. Therefore Peace Train receives many small donations from a large group of dispersed donors. Because of this, Peace Train also has a role in bundling this money before it is donated to the beneficiaries. As one beneficiary stated: " if every person did it [donated money] individually we would have a hundred donations from a hundred different people and we would have to track each one of those. Now the advantage for us is that we then have their information and we can send them our e-mails and updates and all of that, but the disadvantage is that we have to do a lot more accounting and database work if they all come separately." For a summary of the functions of Peace Train, refer to Table 2.

The virtuality of Peace Train's organization leads to the fact that there is no common physical office or geographical anchor. The formal representation of Peace Train exists exclusively as a virtual representation in Second Life, except for a mailbox that is maintained in the United States for communication with non-Second Life participants and as a requirement for the registration as a recognized charitable organization. External representation outside of Second Life is guaranteed through a blog, a Facebook-page and a Twitter account. The virtuality of the organization also leads to a diversified member base, including individuals from dispersed locations, who most of the time never meet in person. Still, among the founders, the prevalent cultural background is US-American. Peace Train is organized internally through a board of four voting members and a non-voting financial officer. Around this board, Peace Train assembles a group of several volunteers that are involved in different awareness and fund raising activities. The number of these active volunteers is constantly changing and increases in times when there is a fund raising effort coming up. Main means of internal organizing are characterized by the heavy reliance on information technology, as all meetings take place in Second Life. Second Life communication is complemented with other technologies such as Skype, e-mail or Google documents.

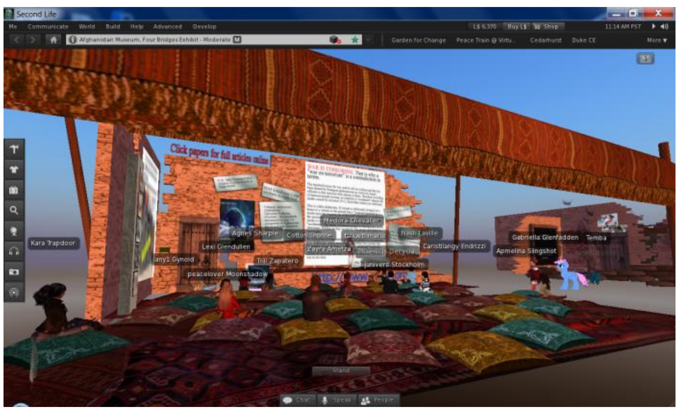

Figure 3: PeaceFest 2011 kick-off meeting

Peace Train's fund raising efforts are mainly centered around the organization of annual, multi-day virtual events, named PeaceFest, which are planned and conducted mostly in Second Life (Figure 3). The first PeaceFest was conducted in 2008, the idea of which is claimed to be the original driver behind the foundation of the organization: "Our initial strategy was to conduct the largest and most compelling multi-day charitable events in Second Life" (Teigland, 2011). This first three-day event, encompassing over 100 live events, took place exclusively in the virtual space of Second Life, attracted 8,000 to 10,000 individuals and raised approximately USD 3,300 (870,000 Linden dollars) from 3,000 unique donors, that were then donated to ten real world charitable organizations (Teigland, 2010b). The events organized comprise music performances, lectures, panel discussions as well as auctions. Since the first PeaceFest in 2008, annual PeaceFests have continued to take place, which the 2009 and 2010 festivals both comprising between 40 to 50 individual events (Peace Train, Webpage). Further efforts include the organization of up to six further speaker/panel events in addition to PeaceFest during the year (Peace Train, Internal Wiki, 2011). But despite the founders' explicit wish for the organization to grow, attendance and funds raised during the events have been steadily declining. While the first PeaceFest raised an amount in the thousands, with USD 800 raised in total, the last IMAGINE PeaceFest in 2011 did not make it to a four-digit number.

Peace Train claims to give 100 percent of the donations received to the selected charitable organizations. Donations can be made either through the payment system in Second Life, or through the Peace Train website. While the proceeds from the first PeaceFest went to ten different real-life organizations, in recent years only three beneficiaries have been selected, as is claimed that this increases both the financial and the awareness raising impact for the single organization. Furthermore, Peace Train has seen a strategic shift towards the stronger inclusion of other social media apart from Second Life for external communication: while earlier, the external presentations of Peace Train, such as a blog and a Twitter account, have only received moderate attention, new efforts have now been started to increase Peace Train's non-virtual presence in other social media. Furthermore, Peace Train is starting to incorporate real-life events to simultaneously take place with PeaceFest, in order to reach out to people outside the social media sphere.

4.2 Stakeholders and organizational structure

4.2.1 Stakeholders

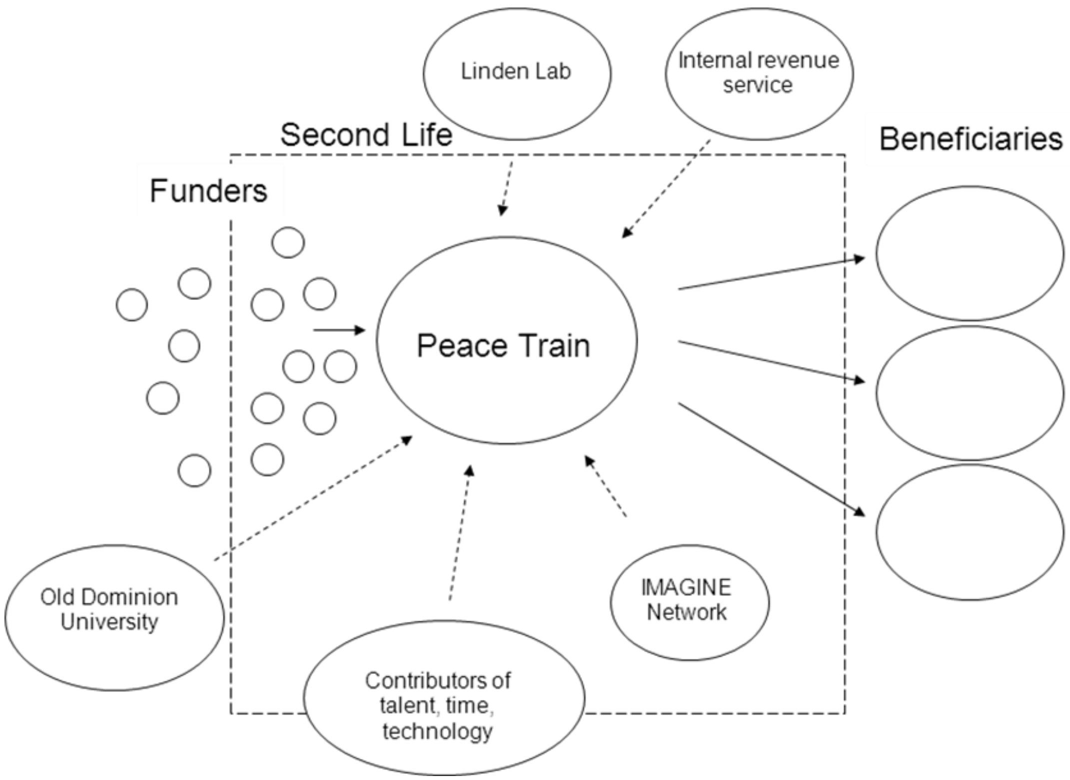

Figure 4: Stakeholders of Peace Train

As stated earlier, to understand the accountability relationships that Peace Train is involved in, it is crucial to obtain a clear understanding of the network of stakeholders that surrounds the organization. Peace Train is embedded in a network of stakeholders that includes both actors inside and outside Second Life (see Figure 4). When asking our interviewees for their view on stakeholders, they tended to identify different ones. The two stakeholders that have been identified by most of our interviewees were the beneficiaries and the Peace Train team members, the former one mostly being pointed out as the most important stakeholder.

Beneficiaries are seen as providing the organization with a reason for being: “it has to work for them, otherwise we’re not doing anything other than working hard and having fun ourselves, and that’s not the point”. Interestingly, the effort put into maintaining the relationships with the beneficiaries seems to not match their high priority status, as is also acknowledged by one member: “they take the least amount of work sometimes. Because once [we] get them convinced that we’re not just making stuff up, they’re happy”. Beneficiaries are selected by the core team and are usually contacted in advance of one of the Peace Fest events. They are usually small, real-world organizations that work either with human rights, development aid or education.

The core team, another stakeholder of Peace Train, consists of the three co-founders, one member that joined the organization later, and a non-voting member responsible for taxes. The three co-founders consider each other to be close friends. All of these members have taken on different roles within the organization, although this has never been set up formally: “we struggled with that, when we started out we said we’re gonna be an official organization, we should really have a chairman of the board, different officers within the board structure and that sort of thing. We quickly realized that it didn’t make any sense, because we’re so small, and we just call all of ourselves co-chairs”. But operationally, there are different roles: while one member is more active organizing in-world coordination, another member has taken on responsibility for financials and external contacts, and yet another member is mainly responsible for scripting and building event sites in Second Life. The core team itself has recently been complemented by a set of two interns, which have been recruited via a real life university. They are formally responsible for the social media presence of Peace Train outside Second Life.

The core team is surrounded by a group of “volunteers all around”. These volunteers can be seen as any contributor of talent, time or technology. This group includes performers at the events, greeters (avatars attending the event and greeting new arrivals), supporters, artists, panelists and sim providers (providers of virtual land to host events on), and can include members both from the virtual space as well as from real life.

A further group of stakeholders are the funders. Interestingly, they have mostly only been identified upon giving further hints to our interviewees. Funders can give money either through the virtual space of Second Life or donate it directly through the website. The relationship towards them appears to be rather loose and informal, as the funder base is very dispersed - avatars from all over the world give very little amounts of money, in a process that can be compared to giving small tips to an artist on the street - and as fundraising in itself is not perceived to be Peace Train’s main activity: “In terms of fund raising … it’s more micro financing to the group of designated beneficiaries”.

A further set of stakeholders can be defined as partners, both in the virtual space and outside. One main partner in Second Life is the IMAGINE network, a network of volunteers working with awareness raising for the same causes as Peace Train. Their cooperation consists in organizing the 2011 IMAGINE PeaceFest event together and also support each other in a few events. An important external partner is a Northern American University, Old Dominion University, with which Peace Train has established cooperation in order to attract interns to the organization.

To conclude, further external stakeholders include the Internal Revenue Service, with which Peace Train is registered as a federally recognized charitable organization, and Linden Lab, the provider of Second Life, who sets the stage and frame for what can or cannot be done in Second Life. However, even though Linden Lab was not mentioned as influencing Peace Train's operations directly they were still mentioned to have an indirect influence: "Linden Lab is taking ... [Second Life] into a direction that's much more geared towards entertainment and not to educational and non-profit organizations". By this, Linden Lab attracts a demographic the interests of which might not be in line with Peace Train's educational and non-governmental proposition, and therefore make it difficult to reach a big audience of keen individuals in Second Life. As one of our interviewees put it: "Linden Lab does not have a stated interest in helping educational institutions and non-profits use the platform. Because, log into their website and what do you see - it's just pure entertainment: it's people meeting their love of their lives, having these fantasy spaces and doing things - ... what that means is that it's attracting people to that space for a very particular reason, and that reason is not in the domain of learning about non-profit work in the world." Therefore, Linden Lab has an indirectly influencing role on Peace Train's success.

4.2.2 Organizational structure

As was mentioned above, Peace Train consists of a core team and is surrounded by volunteers. As Peace Train gets closer to the PeaceFest, more help is needed as one interviewee mentioned, "... because at different times and at any given time during the year unless we have an actual event going on, the membership can go back down to the core. When we have something actually happening we need to ramp up and get people involved to do different things." This also implies that the organizational structure is quite fluid: "… it is a very fluid kind of organization. This isn't the kind of thing where we come in and have a definitive [structure], it's not a very hierarchical structure and it's not an organization that is very rigid in its definition of roles and assignments. It's a very fluid situation and in that sense it gives the flexibility to apply, to ramp up when needed and scale back and let everybody go back to their normal life when not necessary."

Besides a weekly Monday meeting, which is held in Second Life, there are not many formal reporting or control mechanisms in place. Also, when being asked, interviewees had difficulties to pinpoint the exact number of members of Peace Train, and even members of the core team differed in their definition of who was and who was not a member of the board. This also ties to the fact that it was hard for most our interviewees to give an estimate about the size of Peace Train - even experienced members needed to look up the number of members in the group on Second Life first, and sometimes their first guess deviated substantially from the actual number of members in the group. In addition, there are different relationships to different members, some come back and help out on a yearly basis while others are satisfied with helping out once.

Another aspect of membership and being organized mainly in Second Life is the importance of becoming familiar with the software and platform of Second Life. A few of the volunteers actually mentioned that they struggled in the beginning and that these difficulties made it hard for them to help out: “I am not having a whole lot of success with Second Life, so in this past week I started talking to [one of the co-founders] again about maybe doing stuff more in real life”. This seems to be the case for volunteers that wanted to become involved with Peace Train first and because of that had to learn Second Life. On the other hand, for members that first started using Second Life and then got involved in Peace Train, no difficulties were mentioned besides the restraining aspect of technology and that “we are only as good as our technology”. This also implies that you need to have quite a modern computer in order to be able to actually use the Second Life software: “Majority of people that I would like to reach out to don’t have Second Life, and they don’t have computers to support Second Life. Because if you want to play in Second Life, you have to actually have a relatively modern computer, to be able to download Second Life. Then you need someone to teach you what to do and how to do it.”

Within the core team there is no hierarchy and we observed a consensus style of decision making. However, towards the interns one can see more signs of a hierarchy since formal goals and targets were implemented and the interns and Old Dominion University will also be provided with a formal evaluation. Yet the interns experienced a lot of autonomy in how to pursue their tasks and reach their goals. The volunteers such as the contributors of talent and time are usually also given a lot of autonomy in how to pursue their tasks. They are given some information on what to say to visitors as a promotion for Peace Train but besides form that they are free to do their own thing. Being organized in Second Life enables Peace Train to be global in its reach of visitors but internally, the organization is mainly centered in the United States and Western Europe.

Organizing in Second Life allows for lower or even no operational expenses (the little yearly expenses of approximately USD 500 that they incur are entirely covered by the co-founders, so that 100% of the donated funds can go to the beneficiaries). Organizing online demands fewer resources since “all the resources you need to have a very strong presence online are free”. Donors can either give money to the PeaceFest Pevency, a designated donation avatar, or through Peace Train’s webpage using PayPal. The PeaceFest Pevency is a designated avatar that exists purely to receive donations for the cause of Peace Train. Hence, avatars can donate Linden dollars directly to this avatar, which is then transferred to the organization's bank account. The advantage of using this avatar is that it is very easy to trace the respective money flows, who has donated when and what amount. After PeaceFest, all the collected funds are dispersed and transferred to the three chosen beneficiaries.

Despite the fact that our interviewees did not themselves explicitly notice a difference in communication between Second Life and real life, from the interviews we still found that the communication was affected by the virtuality. This did not necessarily apply to the tools used, since both voice and chat were frequently used, but rather to the communication lines. Whereas communication lines in real life organizations, which have a physical office, tend to be multi-directional, members of Peace Train who mostly work with real world activities usually only had one single point of contact. In a physical office it is more likely that they would have bumped into other members and then communicated more broadly.

An important theme in virtual organizing is the additional layer put between individuals by their only interaction through avatars. Therefore, it is important to understand the complexities this implies for accountability relationships. Most of the core team members stated their avatar to be an extension of their real life, and given the amount of time and resources put into the appearance and reputation of an avatar, the avatar can be seen as a valuable resource that will not easily be given up.

Also, the existence and use of multiple avatars is not perceived as a threat to virtual organizing. On the contrary, all of our interviewees admitted freely that they had created multiple avatars, which they call "Alts" and which they used for different purposes: some use different avatars to separate between work and leisure activities, another interviewee uses additional avatars to circumvent technical limitations, one interviewee has different avatars to be able to do research incognito in different places, and most of them stated that they had a different avatar just to ensure some privacy in Second Life when they did not want to interact with anyone. The latter reason is closely linked to the way Second Life is organized: an avatar can "befriend" other avatars, and then is shown as being online to all of their virtual friends once logged on to Second Life as this certain avatar, and will therefore usually be shortly contacted by the friends on their list.

But despite this appreciation of the existence of multiple avatars, it was stressed that it was important to use the same avatar for the same purpose and to be transparent about the usage of different avatars. One interviewee claimed that it was a safe way to destroy trust "to have an Alt, and show up at a meeting as an Alt, and then later tell you 'I was there, but I was there as my Alt'". Therefore, our interviewees did openly and freely admit the usage of multiple Alts and one even stated to "tell [others] upfront: 'I have an Alt, so if you ever see so and so logged in, that's me, but I don't want to talk about work, so this is my "I'm just here to hang out at the beach"-Alt (...)'".

Also, our interviewees pointed out that many of the unaccepted behaviors such as the in-transparent use of multiple avatars were usually exhibited by what is commonly referred to as "newbies", individuals that are new to the virtual world. Newbies can be easily detected by looking at their profile, which publicly states the date of entry into Second Life. Interviewees appeared to assume that more experienced avatars behave in line with what they deem appropriate behavior, which is why a certain length of "being part of Second Life" can create an easier form of trust.

Even though the lack of an official office building enables lower operational expenses, an important virtual aspect of organizing in Second Life is the lack of physical face-to-face meetings. However, many interviewees didn't see this as a problem or didn't even recognize that there is a difference between meeting with your avatars: "... I immediately felt a sense of immersion when I went into Second Life. There is very much a sense of place there, it's not like surfing the web", "you say 'I'll meet you at Four Bridges or I meet you at Virtually Speaking' [two different destinations in Second Life], your avatar goes there and there is that sense of, you're in a place but it's in the virtual world. We'll talk in voice or some people prefer to type, but it's very much a sense of being there" or "I have to say that there is no difference. They are a place, just like any other real life organization, so they have been recognized, they do have a place, it's just in Second Life". During and after the meetings we attended, we were able to observe the happening of socializing meetings within the organizing team: taking a walk together in the park after a Monday meeting, or teleporting together to different locations to spend quality time together.

4.3 Accountability mechanisms

After having laid out the organizational characteristics of Peace Train, we will now turn to describing its accountability mechanisms. Peace Train, in accordance with previous literature, is embedded in several internal as well as external accountability relationships. Our empirics reveal the presence of several sets of accountability mechanisms, which will be presented in the following section. Referring to our theoretical framework, the following section will be structured as follows: first, we will present empirical findings related to internal accountability, both in the form of formal and informal accountability mechanisms. Then, the external accountability relationships will be addressed, both in an upwards sense towards funders, and in a downwards sense towards beneficiaries. It is stressed once more that the classification into "upwards" and "downwards" is borrowed from terminology used in previous significant research (Awio *et al.*, 2011; Ebrahim, 2003; Edwards & Hulme, 1996; O'Dwyer & Unerman, 2008) and is not meant in a hierarchical way. The formal and informal division will also be used in the external accountability relationships.

4.3.1 Internal accountability

This section will describe empirics related to internal accountability mechanisms within Peace Train and the different stakeholders involved in the organizing of Peace Train's activities, i.e. the core team, the interns and contributors of talent, time and technology.

4.3.1.1 Formal accountability

Formal accountability mechanisms appear to be widely absent within the core group of Peace Train. The only apparent formal accountability mechanism was the weekly meeting on Mondays, which takes place in Second Life. During such a meeting we observed that the meeting in itself more takes the shape of a discussion between equals. Still, one member took the role in guiding and steering the meeting, meanwhile the decision making was consensus based. This year there was no formal agenda because the team members were too busy in real life, but previous years an agenda was sent out before the meeting. Furthermore, throughout the meeting, avatars kept joining and leaving in a freely manner. According to one interviewee, the purpose of the meeting is primarily to *inform* other team members about each other's progress, and is not seen as a form of reporting since "that implies that there is some upwards trajectory, and … that is not what we do".

Besides from the Monday meeting, the organizing in the core team was characterized by a lack of control, reporting and hierarchy. As two interviewees put it: "I don't use hierarchy ... I don't, everybody is important on the team. And if they are not, then they probably should not be on the team. We build a team; we try to build on experience" and "I don't want to have a hierarchical model, people on top, and there's a presumption that they are better, smarter, faster, whatever. That's not where I wanna be".

The two interns also have a weekly meeting with one of the co-founders. This relationship is characterized by formal goals that should be met, "We have a goal that we're trying to reach as far as followers for Twitter, people that visit our page on Facebook", however there is a lot of autonomy in how to pursue those goals, "I pretty much have a ridiculous amount of autonomy". The interns have a contract through their university and they as well as the university will receive an evaluation after the internship, "kind of like an evaluation sheet to see if we reach our goals and how we did actually". Both of the interns are quite new to Second Life and have decided to focus their efforts completely on other social media such as Facebook, the blog and the Twitter.

Also, in relation to the volunteers or contributors of any kind of talent, time or technology, such as the performers or artists, only weak formal control mechanisms were found to be in place. The relationship towards them can be seen as partly hierarchical when it comes to volunteers helping out with the events: “There are some rules for people taking part in the festival, which is part [of] our original notecard and the invite to take part ... It’s got guidelines in it ... for arrangers”. Still, the relationships are mainly characterized by a large extent of autonomy: “we give them the material and the guidance about how we want those things to happen. And then we organize a slot in the calendar and say: now, the rest is yours. Autonomy, you organize your show, you broadcast the event through your channels and your memberships.” It was being stressed by many, that a lot of autonomy is needed and wanted for a creative process to be successful. Both members of the core team as well as volunteers themselves stress the fact that there is also no formal evaluation requested. Some of the artists stated that they would receive feedback on the performance of their tasks upon request, but mainly for their own purposes and interest.

4.3.1.2 Informal accountability

For the core team and the set of contributors of talent, time or technology within Second Life, the existence of a common set of shared values could be observed, which acted as a form of informal accountability mechanism. The common goal, that ties the organization together, is the mission of spreading peace, to which all of our interviewees felt dedicated and which sets the ground for a common understanding: one member described Peace Train volunteers as “values-driven people”. This also leads to the fact that working with the team is perceived to be “fun”, and that people are expected to “work hard and take responsibility and do a good job”. Further, since the core team and the volunteers dedicated their time on a voluntary basis, the time spent on this project needs to be valuable and fun, which contradicts the presence of a large extent of formal control mechanisms: “that’s very McKinseyesk and thank God we haven’t got McKinsey in Second Life. The whole world is being taken over by that sort of stuff and everybody is spending their time filling in reports … actually it is deadening for most people’s souls I think.”

Further, between several volunteers and the core team, there are strong informal ties, that enable the sharing of information on a friendship-basis: “...there isn’t much reporting going on, but we share information, just because I’m curious.” In the core team, they consider each other to be close friends and spend quality time in Second Life besides only discussing Peace Train related topics: “The people that I work with are people that I consider my friends, [one of the co-founders] and I go shopping in-world or just hang out together or go to a concert together.” The fact that organizing is based on friendships rather than formal control also shows in the language of the following statement: “There isn’t a mammoth project plan written down somewhere. It’s people getting together once a week and you know sometimes we discover that none of us have had time to do something in the intervening week but you know we forgive each other”. Being close friends is accompanied by trust which was mentioned by one interviewee: “... it’s almost the system builds on trust because they all know each other very well through Second Life”. However, the importance of highlighting the performance of others especially since there is no face-to-face contact was emphasized: “With this virtual organization, and when you get really busy, it’s harder to take the time to be in the virtual space at the same time those people are in the virtual space, and have those interactions that are really critical to the maintenance of trust. And as I said, in the absence of that, some people will go to a negative place where they interpret your silence and absence as something negative."

One further informal control tool is also the use of up-front selection criteria for the people Peace Train chooses to work with: "I know them by reputation or by word of mouth or I actually have seen them and I know that they play gigs in Second Life, so that there is some sense of 'oh this person is going to show up and do this show and is capable of it'". However, Peace Train allows and encourages everyone to join and acknowledges the role of people that only give ideas without implementing them later: "There is a role for people having ideas as well, I don't want to downplay that, as actually being a positive input ... but you don't want that [people don't follow through] when you're relying on people to be there and to do the organizing for you, so you just have to be a little bit cautious".

4.3.2 External accountability

While the empirics show the presence of many informal accountability mechanisms in an internal sense, previous research has stressed the fact that external accountability mechanisms tend to be rather formal. In the following section, we will present both formal and informal external accountability mechanisms observed.

4.3.2.1 Upwards accountability

In line with what has been described in the section about stakeholders, Peace Train is accountable to its funders for how the donations are used.

4.3.2.1.1 Formal accountability

External upwards accountability seems to not be organized in a well-defined, predetermined manner: there was no formal set of guidelines on how to handle Peace Train's upward accountability towards funders. This coincides with the fact that there are not many formal accountability mechanisms towards funders, besides a financial statement which is published on Peace Train's website. However, this statement is not very up to date and is unaudited, but it shows that 100 % of the donated funds accrue to the beneficiaries. Furthermore, Peace Train is accountable to its funders in terms of how the funds they are provided with are being used by the beneficiaries. But we could not find a coordinated way of following up with their beneficiaries and a communication of that information to the funders.

As mentioned earlier, Peace Train is registered as a 501(c)3 Charitable Trust. This implies that their legal status as a federally recognized corporation can be verified on the US Internal Revenue Service webpage and was brought up in the interviews as a way to prove Peace Train's legitimacy. Furthermore, the usage of a designated avatar for donations, the PeaceFest Pevency, also has a legitimizing role but in addition it is convenient to separate all transactions referable to PeaceFest and being able to just print the account summary.

4.3.2.1.2 Informal accountability

Accountability towards funders is mainly based on the fact that Peace Train is entrusted with financial resources. Accountability mechanisms in a financial context can mostly be expected to be formal. Still, some informal accountability mechanisms could be found. Peace Train entertains a social media presence outside Second Life, partly in order to keep their funder base up to date, by putting up information and giving regular updates on Peace Train's activities on their blog, their Facebook page or through their Twitter account. Still, up until the time of the study, all of these social media presences were not frequently maintained and updated.

4.3.2.2 Downwards accountability

The accountability relationship between Peace Train and the beneficiaries is reciprocal. The beneficiaries are accountable to Peace Train for how they actually spend the funds received. However, Peace Train is also accountable to the beneficiaries in terms that they are taking up their time in the awareness raising process and need to make sure the name of the beneficiaries is used to their advantage.

4.3.2.2.1 Formal accountability

In order to prove their legitimacy towards the beneficiaries, interviewees put forth Peace Train's status as a federally recognized public charity (501(c)3). This registration fulfills the same role here as with regards to the funders. One beneficiary stated that in order to establish a sense of Peace Train's legitimacy, this registration was helpful: "They're a registered 501(c)3 non-profit in the United States, which gives them legal status. So you know legally they're a legitimate non-profit just like the Red Cross." But on the other hand, in order to accept money from Peace Train, it was stated that this legitimizing function was not needed: "It's not very different from the way we get most of our online donations, where people can do it anonymously". The beneficiaries seem to kindly accept the money received: "They offered to raise money for us and they sent us that money. And even if they hadn't sent it we would have said 'oh well thanks for trying'. It's not like we had some kind of contractual obligation with them". Furthermore, due to the fact that Peace Train has this formal status, they are obliged to formally report about their financials to the US Internal Revenue Service. This provides an externally anchored accountability for their legitimacy, which the beneficiaries rely on: "Peace Train … [has] to accurately report where they get their money [from] to the Internal Revenue Service, and if they don't do that accurately they can get in all kinds of trouble. But from our perspective, that is not really our job to audit our donors in that level of detail. So Peace Train needs to make sure that all the avatars like aren't using stolen credit cards and are committing fraud, but that is not our requirement, that is Peace Train's requirement".

Furthermore, Peace Train is using the beneficiaries' time, when they engage in panel discussions during their awareness raising events, but they also use their name when they include it on the information posters and on their websites. Therefore, they enter into an accountability relationship in terms of making sure that their work is actually beneficial to the sponsored organizations. But our empirics did not show any internal mechanisms, targeted at evaluating Peace Train's efficiency in their events.

It was mentioned that it was important to reveal the real life identity and not only using the avatar name when dealing with money: "especially if you're dealing with other peoples' money you have to [reveal your real life identity]. People want to know." This shows that the Second Life layer is removed in contact with the beneficiaries, which serves as a legitimizing mechanism.

Overall, there seemed to be a lack of following up on cash flows and how they were actually spent. However, one beneficiary stated that it is also hard for them to track the exact amount that was given by Peace Train since most funds end up in a common pool except for larger donations that sometimes are ear marked, for example for children's doctor appointments: "when a general donation comes in it just goes towards our operating budget so we don't generally have the ability to say this 500 dollars went to this and this 1000 dollars went to that". Neither Peace Train asks, nor the beneficiaries tell how the funds are spent.

On the other hand, Peace Train, through their selection process, ensures beforehand that the beneficiaries selected are legitimate organizations. The selection of these beneficiaries is done within the core team and the process is rather informal, while the only criteria a beneficiary needs to fulfill are their activity in a particular area of interest: "we want to deal with poverty, education and human rights. We want something representative of those three particular things, discuss it in advance, and then go off and research on our own then come back to a meeting and say okay these are my suggestions, and then arrive at a consensus as to which groups will be our beneficiaries". Often, the first contact with a beneficiary is established through a recommendation of someone affiliated with one of Peace Train's core members.

4.3.2.2.2 Informal accountability

The only signs of an informal accountability mechanism in the relationship to the beneficiaries is a newsletter that is sent out if the beneficiary is on Peace Train's e-mailing list.

Overall, there are very few formal and informal accountability mechanisms towards the beneficiaries. This is worth noting since most of the interviewees mentioned the beneficiaries as the most important stakeholder: "I would definitely say that the charities are much more of an important stakeholder. … Without them, there is no us.".

5 Analysis

After a detailed presentation of the empirics we now turn to an analysis of our data to address our research aims. The following section will be structured as follows: First, we address peculiarities of the stakeholder setting and how the characteristics of Peace Train are shaped by its virtuality. Afterwards, we present an analysis of the accountability mechanisms, whereby we address how the virtuality of the organization shapes its internal as well as external accountability relationships and subsequently draw therefrom a conclusion about its implications.

5.1 Analysis of stakeholders and organizational structure

The empirics show that Peace Train's network of stakeholders does not differ from the ones identified in prior research on physical NGOs. We have in line with Edwards and Hulme (1995) also identified donors, beneficiaries, partners, supporters and employees as stakeholders. In addition, the emphasis on other aspects besides economic ones were highly emphasized also in Peace Train (Gray *et al.*, 2006). The complication that is added to Peace Train's network is that parts of their stakeholders are within, and parts are outside their platform of main activity, Second Life. But while this does not seem to have an effect on the nature of the overall set of stakeholders, organizing through Second Life adds one additional and unique stakeholder: Linden Lab, a California-based company and the provider of Second Life. By providing the technical infrastructure of the virtual world, Linden Lab sets the frame for what is and what is not possible in Second Life. For example, Second Life restricts the number of visitors to a particular Sim, so that the number of visitors to one event is limited by Second Life's technical boundaries. Furthermore, the quality of the Second Life software directly influences communication in team meetings or the way of organizing, e.g. through Second Life notecards. Therefore, Linden Lab takes a role in shaping the environment that the organization is embedded in, and it sets the boundaries of its virtual activities - a government-like stakeholder-role taken on by a privately held company, something that seems to differ from real life organizations. But although Linden Lab, from an external perspective, could be seen as powerful and important, as it also even might have the power to shut down Second Life and therefore deprive Peace Train from its organizational basis, neither of our interviewees have identified them as particularly important, and neither was their ability to potentially shut down Second Life or individual accounts perceived as a threat to the organization.

While the stakeholder setting appears to be very similar to what has been identified in previous research on real life NGOs, the characteristics of the organization are influenced by its virtuality. The fact that Peace Train ramps up when necessary and scales back sometimes to the core, coupled with the few formal control mechanisms, shows that the organizational structure of Peace Train is fluid. Also the size of the organization is hard to both get a feel for and define, since becoming a member of the Second Life group Peace Train is just a mouse click away and that does not necessarily imply any involvement in organizing activities. Becoming a member of Peace Train in Second Life just implies the joining of a virtual group, whereas the adherence to a real life NGO usually involves more steps than just one mouse click, lowering the barrier to entry to Peace Train comparably. In addition, some volunteers might only help out once, which further complicates the perception of the already blurry boundaries of the organization. This is in line with the reasoning in Hemetsberger and Reinhardt (2009) that membership at the periphery is fluid. All in all, this leads to a situation where the organization is in constant movement around the core: Organizational size is difficult to grasp, even for the core team members, and it is hard to pinpoint who is actively on board and who is not.

When we started the process of conducting this case study, we expected to find organizational complexities associated with the usage of avatars related to how the usage of avatars and the possibility of decoupling would affect accountability and the accountable self. The option of easily deleting your avatar when things go wrong, thereby just getting rid of all responsibility and the downsides of bad reputation, could imply that there is a limited downside of misbehavior. Hence, you could think that the individual risk return framework in Second Life might differ from the one in real world and the appetite for risk might be increased. In addition the ethical burden of the exposed and mediated self (Messner, 2009) could be expected to be lower because when you use an avatar you can more easily escape the imposed expectations through not logging into Second Life.

Therefore we consider it an important finding that we found something completely different from what we predicted. All Second Life users that had been in-world for a while have apparently invested a lot of time and effort into building and strengthening their Second Life identity. It appeared to be the case that the identity and network the avatars have in Second Life are very similar to their real world identities which was emphasized by our interviewees: “I suppose, we have all been in-world for quite a long time, so my avatar when I am here feels very much like me. And this *is* me in fact.” This is in line with Hemetsberger and Reinhardt (2009, p. 989) who stated that “the difference between human and technological actors becomes blurred” and Kaplan and Haenlein’s (2009) findings who described the avatar as an extension of the real life, despite the fact that some of the interviewees do not openly reveal their real life identity. Therefore, it can be argued that deleting your avatar after misbehavior and the subsequent creation of a new one is not perceived to be common. Hence, it also follows that there is no such thing as a limited downside of the risk due to the option of deleting the avatar and the risk return framework is probably not altered. From this it also follows that the ethical burden placed on the individual, explained in Messner (2009), is probably existent also in Second Life. The reasoning about the opaque, exposed and mediated self will likely be applicable to the avatars.

The fact that the interviewees felt united with their avatar also implied that they felt as they were a part of Second Life and that environment, as one interviewee put it: "... I immediately felt a sense of immersion when I went into Second Life". Therefore, most interviewees did not see the obstacles of not meeting each other physically face-to-face. The perception that meeting in Second Life is very much like meeting in real world was emphasized by the interviewees engaging in socializing meetings.

5.2 Analysis of accountability mechanisms: Cost structure as a mechanism for persistency but also a growth trap

5.2.1 Easy to establish...

A natural way of thinking about accountability relationships is to ask the questions of "What is at stake?" for all parties involved. The more there is at stake, the higher the need for a form of accountability (Messner, 2009). Also, the more dependent someone is on somebody else's performance, the greater the need for accountability. Often, the 'stake' that is generally referred to, are financial resources - the more important the resources are, that people are entrusted with, the higher is the need for being able to hold them to account.

But the empirics have shown that there are almost no operational cost for setting up an organization in the virtual world, and most of the resources needed are for free - the few operational expenses, in the yearly range of approximately USD 500 incurred are bared by the core team members on a private basis. This means that there are low barriers to entry and that a virtual organization is easily established. On one hand, this implies that Peace Train does not have to raise donations in order to survive - they will also without money raised be able to keep a momentum. Also, it allows them to freely define the purpose of their organization without paying increased attention to fundraising. On the other hand, Peace Train does not dispose of significant financial resources, neither internally nor externally. This does influence both internal as well as external accountability relationships, the former of which will be addressed first in the following.

Formal accountability mechanisms, which usually are based on financial flows and the fact that individuals are entrusted with resources, are difficult to establish in a context with marginal financial resources. Holding members formally accountable for their entrusted resources is difficult in an environment where basically all resources needed are free. Members also do not receive a salary for the work they do, which is partly due to the NGO-character and its basis in volunteer work. Since members are volunteering time, there needs to be an intrinsic motivation behind getting involved, and members will expect tasks to be fun (Hemetsberger & Reinhardt, 2009). This is also in line with one of the findings of Kaplan and Haenlein (2009), who emphasize innovativeness, since one of the key motivations to spend time in Second Life is to have fun. This, together with the lack of entrustment with financial resources, hinders the set-up of formal control, reporting and evaluation mechanisms.

Further, as set out in previous research on virtual worlds, many people use Second Life for recreational purposes such as a tool for self-expression, for exploration of novelty or for a liberation of social norms (Partala, 2011). When asked about how they became attracted to Second Life, most of our interviewees stated interest in a joyful experience as one of the first reasons, as is portrayed in the following quote: “I quite liked the idea of flying around in a virtual world, and when I started flying around, I liked the fantastic nature ... [I] sort of enjoyed having a look around and discovering that you could build things an so on in Second Life and then after a bit it became much more focused on the fact that you can meet people from different parts of the world and make friendships, so that’s what’s kept me in Second Life.” One more interviewee stated that “Second Life is fun for me. It’s like adult game - when you were a child you played with dolls … now I am an adult, I play in Second Life because it’s fun.” This recreational attitude creates a culture which speaks against the implementation of formal control mechanisms, as “nobody can be the boss in Second Life ... it’s all consensual, and if people don’t like the way things are doing they stop being involved in it.” This reasoning emphasize that there are weak conditions for implementing formal accountability mechanisms.

But despite this lack of formal accountability mechanisms, the organization has continued to exist in a persistent way for four consecutive years, being able to organize yearly PeaceFest events without exception. Also, the core team has essentially stayed the same over this period, also indicating stability. Therefore organizing in this complex environment is possible and successful, and the team has found ways to hold people accountable without the formal accountability mechanisms, which have been deemed to be of particular importance to bridge physical distance before (Roberts, 1991).

Our empirics show that one reason for this can be seen in the fact that formal accountability mechanisms are substituted with very strong informal ones. Core team members frequently and publicly named the other core team members “close friends”, thereby creating multiplex relationships when at the same time being both colleagues and friends. This creates a control mechanism in itself, in that one member does not want to let the other friend down. Furthermore, trusting each other can decrease or eliminate the need for control and be used as a risk mitigation, which is in line with the literature stressing that there is a trade-off between trust and control (Gallivan, 2001; Grabowski & Roberts, 1999; Handy, 1995). In addition, the intrinsic motivation behind the involvement, spreading peace, also incentivizes the members to follow through, since spreading peace will lead to self-satisfaction, and therefore they get something in return for their performance. The co-founders also appeared to have a special connection and therefore a special form of perceived informal accountability to the organization that they once helped create, and will hold on to and work with the project as long as they perceive a risk for it to be destroyed and disappear if they quit.

Furthermore, another strong form of informal accountability is the shared value base of the common goal of spreading peace, being ensured by the continuous outspoken statement of the "shared passion for spreading peace" by the team members. This value base ties the members together and serves as a ground for a common understanding, implying that tasks are being done in a proper way in order to reach the common goal and making formal controls redundant. The shared value base can also be strengthened by the fact that empirics showed that core team members engaged in regular socializing meetings in Second Life, such as walks in the park or shopping in Second Life. It is likely that their conversations are in line with what Roberts (1991) calls sense-making talks. The continuation of this common set of shared values is further ensured by the fact that this NGO attracts a certain type of people as members, creating a culture of mutual reliance on each other's passion for the cause.

The lack of formal hierarchy but at the same time the need for certain tasks to be done also influences the way task allocation is organized. Peace Train is comparably small, and there are not many constant active members. Therefore, as some tasks are essential and need to be done in order for their activities to be realized, core team members have limited freedom to freely choose what tasks to do. But through having this free atmosphere with no reporting, control or evaluation, they create a sense of freedom and playfulness - they seem to trick themselves into believing that their choice of which task to take on personally is free and therefore they can engage in activities they feel rewarding. This was mirrored in the statement of one member that "nobody can be the boss in Second Life ... it is all consensual, and if people don't like the way things are doing they stop being involved in it. And so everybody has to have autonomy, that's what gives them satisfaction in the work".

The only exception to the lack of formal accountability within Peace Train can be observed in relation to the two interns that have been recruited through an external university. Neither are they being paid nor entrusted with any resources. However, the formal targets and goals, the continuous follow-up meetings and the evaluation that will be sent to the University, function as control tools and the evaluation can be seen as a substitute for a salary. Hence, there is an externally anchored incentive and accountability mechanism, which contrasts with the motivations of the other members of Peace Train. The presence of formal accountability mechanisms can therefore be seen in accountability relationships, that are anchored or complemented with external actors outside Second Life.

The lacking cost base also influences the external accountability relationships. Due to the fact that organizing in Second Life is free and there are no large costs that need to be covered, Peace Train does not need to attract large funders and does not need to create and sustain long-term relationships to donors. In addition, there is an ease of donating small amounts in Second Life and one interviewee even compared it to just putting the hand into the pocket, and therefore the funders from their side do also not demand a strong form of accountability. These two reasons, no costs of organizing in Second Life and the ease of donating small amounts, imply that the donor base of Peace Train is very dispersed. Since there are many donors, each one donating small amounts, the relationship to each of them is considered less important and hence we observe a lack of upward accountability relationships. This contrasts with previous research, highlighting the often prioritized upward relationship of real life NGOs (Ebrahim, 2002; O'Dwyer, 2005; O'Dwyer & Unerman, 2007).

But even though Peace Train does not have a distinctively close relationship to any of their donors, they do entertain a couple of external formal reporting mechanisms in order to establish legitimacy, such as the publication of a financial statement on the publicly accessible Wiki. This financial statement is very basic and not regularly updated, which is in line with previous research stating that accounting information has a competence symbolizing character (Goddard & Assad, 2006; Chenhall *et al.*, 2010; O'Dwyer & Unerman, 2008) even though accountability mechanisms do not play a significant role in internal decision making (Goddard & Assad, 2006) and that technical accounting excellence is not vital (ibid). Further, they complement their virtual presence by a status as a federally recognized charitable trust under US-law, providing further legitimacy, and entertain a dedicated donation avatar, PeaceFest Pevency, to externally show a separation of financial flows to PeaceFest from any private account.

Since Peace Train does not constantly need to raise funds to finance their existence, it is possible for them to have other purposes besides fund raising, such as awareness raising and education. This implies that they do not have a strong strive towards raising funds and the funds provided to the beneficiaries usually are not large in total amounts. This affects the observed formal accountability relationship towards beneficiaries. On one hand, Peace Train's members claimed that beneficiaries were seen as the most important stakeholder. On the other hand, a special focus on this relationship or specific accountability mechanisms towards them could not be observed. Neither did the empirics show that Peace Train sustained strong relationships to the beneficiaries, nor was there any external reporting targeted towards the beneficiaries (besides a newsletter that is received if the beneficiary is on Peace Train's e-mailing list) showing Peace Train's own efficiency in their work. Also, since Peace Train donates rather small amounts they also have less of a say in exactly how that money is spent. The marginal cost base of Peace Train therefore influences the relationship to its downward stakeholders, with formal accountability being apparently disregarded, as the focus of the organization shifts towards non-financial activities.

But also, the awareness raising activities of Peace Train could be expected to create an informal accountability relationship, in terms of a follow-up on Peace Train's performance during the awareness raising process. As it can be observed in other NGOs (O'Dwyer & Unerman, 2008), downward accountability can be maintained by asking for feedback on the NGO's performance, checking up on the NGO's efficiency and so on. Neither of this could be found within Peace Train. This can be related back to Peace Train's culture of reluctance to corporate efficiency mechanisms and its rather loose, free structure of people who came together to share the same passion. This self-definition seems to not naturally lend itself to the fact of being evaluated, neither in an internal nor in an external, downwards sense. This self-understanding also shows in the statement of one of the members that "beneficiaries are getting money from [Peace Train], so I don't really see the necessity of proving to them that we are a good organization." In sum, in contrast to prior literature, the explanation for the lack of downward accountability is not that the upward accountability is prioritized at the cost of downward accountability (Najam, 1996; O'Dwyer, 2005). Instead, it seems to be rather due to the low cost base and the organizational culture, the former of which allows Peace Train to formulate other goals besides pure fund raising and the latter creates reluctance towards control and reporting.

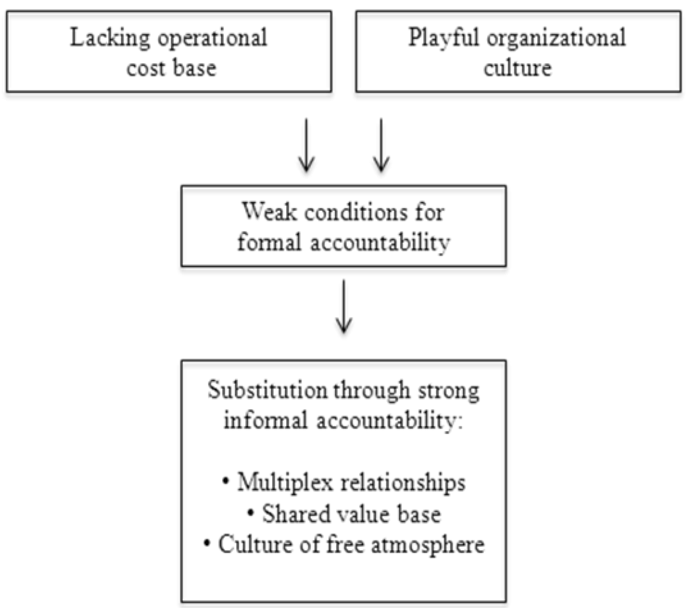

Figure 5: Internal accountability mechanisms to create a persistent organization

Overall, one can see that Peace Train's lacking cost base, which is caused by the organization's virtuality, leads to the absence of formal accountability relationships (see Figure 5). A further reason for the lack of formal accountability mechanisms is the emergence of a particular playful culture that provides weak conditions for the implementation of formal accountability mechanisms. But still, Peace Train has created strong informal accountability mechanisms to substitute for the formal ones, such as a shared strong value base, the declaration of being each other's close friends, and a particularly free atmosphere, and thereby managed to create a persistent and successful organization, which has been up and running for more than four years.

Peace Train's internal lack of formal control based on the very low operational cost base is also mirrored in its external accountability relationships: the lack of an operational cost base gives Peace Train freedom to focus on other activities besides fund raising, which is why the financial accountability towards their funders is not perceived of top priority. Together with the dispersed donor base and the fact that donated amounts are relatively small, there is no perceived external pressure for formal upwards accountability. Furthermore, based on the fact that total funds provided to beneficiaries are relatively small, and a general reluctance to formal control in the organizational culture, downwards accountability is widely disregarded.

5.2.2 …but difficult to grow

Peace Train has survived in the complex Second Life context for a rather long time. But even though one might think that the virtual environment enables easy growth, as there are basically no financial resource constraints, there has not been any observable growth in Peace Train - in fact, Peace Train's events have continued to decline in funds raised and attendance. This is despite the fact that Peace Train and its founders have expressed an intention and a need to grow, since they see themselves in competition with other event providers in Second Life for visitors in terms of providing entertainment. Furthermore, in their perception, growth is needed to keep up the motivation of the founders: "The thrill of the first one or two big events we did, was what really kept us going. And the fact that this had never been done before. ... without the growth in the platform, where you could anticipate larger audiences and more dynamic things happening, it has lost its appeal in the sense in terms of just a place where you want to be.". In the beginning, the major attraction of their activities was the perceived newness and revolutionary aspect. By now, they would have wanted to grow and experience development in order to keep up an appeal. We argue that as a major drawback of this type of organization, the virtual surrounding has prevented Peace Train from further growth beyond its starting state.

On one hand, the creation of the organization through Second Life, which provides low barriers to entry in terms of being free and enabling a free creation of an international enterprise in a hindsight, may also be seen as an obstacle to the attraction and the retention of further members. Overall, affiliates can be clustered into two different groups: those, who were interested in Second Life in the first place, and then became involved with Peace Train, and on the other hand those who are interested in Peace Train's work and in consequence need to familiarize themselves with Second Life. Entering Second Life is a learning process for everyone not previously involved. For members already familiar with the platform, becoming a member of Peace Train is very easy. For externally interested individuals, for whom the primary motivation is helping with Peace Train's cause instead of the pleasure of being involved in Second Life, entry barriers can be seen to be rather high. In fact, all of the core team members were involved with Second Life before they joined Peace Train, and none of those interested in Peace Train before joining Second Life made it to the core team. External recruitment in order to grow is therefore difficult.

We also argue that Linden Lab had a role in preventing growth. Perhaps not directly, but indirectly through the direction they have chosen for the platform. Peace Train perceives that Linden Lab has decided to focus more on entertainment instead of helping non-profits and educational institutions. This attracts a certain type of individuals who are primarily in it for the fun and not to increase their knowledge within peace building activities and donate funds.

Therefore the demographics of Second Life can be seen to be biased to the non-benefit of Peace Train.

The low cost base and the not-for-profit nature of the organization also shape the organizational structure and who the organization attracts as members. This creates the appearance of a certain type of organizational culture, which is characterized by a lack of controls, a consensus based style of decision making, a reluctance to accept any form of "corporate speech", the lack of corporate efficiency mechanisms, of hierarchy, task delegation and the stressing of the fact that everyone is *free*. It is a culture where everyone is perceived to be free and the implementation of formal control mechanisms, which would enable and foster growth, is very difficult, as is also stated by one of our interviewees: "... of the core team members, very few of us want to impose any kind of formal structure. Because we get plenty of that during our regular working day."

Furthermore, while being stable at the core, the organization is rather fluid at its boundaries. But it is difficult to implement stable mechanisms to keep people at the periphery permanently committed to the organization: in the lack of face-to-face contact and given the physical distance, it is easy for people at the periphery to feel not valued for their contributions. As one of our interviewees put it, it is difficult to establish a "social fabric" that keeps volunteers at the periphery motivated. This leads to a constant shift of people at the periphery, creating an environment of low commitment. Also, the lack of formal accountability mechanisms has a motivational downside: formal accountability can also serve as a tool to make contributions of individuals more visible. In the absence of a formal reporting mechanism, volunteers can have the impression that their efforts are not being noticed, making it easy for them to withdraw. It is therefore easy for individuals to become members but it is also easy to drop out.

Furthermore, even though there was a perceived competition in terms of entertainment for audience, there is no observable external demand for increased efficiency. Pressure from sponsors is low: due to Peace Train's dispersed donor base and their contribution of rather small amount of funds given, there are no top-down donor imposed formal reporting requirements as in Ebrahim (2002), which would incentivize Peace Train to show financial efficiency. In addition, there are no influential stakeholders that control access to key resources as mentioned in O'Dwyer & Unerman (2008). This might be good with regards to the fact that the organization is able to focus other non-financial goals such as awareness raising, but there is no need for improvement and growth.

While the just mentioned arguments are based on the lack of an externally imposed efficiency pressure, there is also an absence of internally anchored organizational pressure. Some argue that physical organizations use virtual platforms to increase efficiency by lowering travel costs or commuting times (Mahaley, 2009). These organizations have limited resources and are constantly pressured to improve. Peace Train on the other hand, does not have this real world anchored efficiency demand since they are completely virtual. Therefore, Peace Train does not need to use the virtual platform in that same sense. It can therefore be argued that Peace Train does not use Second Life to its full potential. To elaborate, in Second Life, real-world physics do not apply (ibid) and therefore, the virtual platform can be used to create completely new experiences and ways of organizing. But as stated in Wasko *et al.* (2011), peoples' imaginations are still restricted by what is possible in real life (chairs in meeting rooms, sitting down during a meeting although avatars do not get tired, dancing at a concert), a fact that can be observed also at Peace Train's events. By replicating real life settings and not creating completely new virtual experiences, Peace Train is experience-wise simply shifting what is possible in real life to a virtual platform, thus not creating a unique selling point for its visitors and an attraction for growth.

There is yet another reasoning about the growth trap that was put forth by one interviewee. Namely that there is not only a constant flow of people within the organization of Peace Train, there is also a constant flow of people in Second Life. While some individuals are constantly joining the platform, others are constantly leaving. This implies a constant flow of people, which further emphasized the difficulties of recruiting and retaining members.

6 Conclusions

6.1 Contributions

In order to understand accountability relationships in a virtual world, first a thorough mapping of stakeholders was conducted. The stakeholders of Peace Train have been found to be in line with the identified stakeholders for physical NGOs, except for one particular stakeholder very specific to the virtual organization: the provider of the virtual environment (Linden Lab). This stakeholder is unique in a sense that it has taken on a government like role in setting the stage for what can and what cannot be done in the virtual world, and also was acknowledged by the interviewees to have an influencing role - yet no special relationship was maintained.

Special characteristics of the virtual organization are a fluid membership at the periphery and blurry boundaries of the organization. Furthermore, the additional virtual layer added through organizing through avatars did not have the expected complicating effects on accountability: avatars were used as an extension of the individual's real life self. This ties to the fact that there is a sense of place in Second Life, despite the fact that the organization has no geographical anchor. Furthermore, the virtual environment enables the organization to be small but global.

The virtuality of Peace Train stipulates a very low entry barrier to establishing the organization, as it enables creating an international organization at basically no cost. This lacking cost base influences internal organizing, as it, paired with the organization's voluntary character, makes formal accountability mechanisms hard to create. This lack of formal accountability mechanisms raised both motivational as well as organizational problems: it was difficult to retain volunteers at the periphery due to a lack of holding them formally accountable. But Peace Train replaced the missing formal accountability mechanisms with very strong informal ones, making it a stable organization at the core.

The lacking cost base also influences the external accountability relationships, as it allows the organization to shift its focus away from fund raising and therefore enables the existence of a dispersed donor base, with relationships that do not need to be continuously nurtured. The same logic affects the downwards accountability relationships, since the donations will be of less significant amounts and are not at the center of the organization's activities. These findings are in contrast to previous research which finds that top-down donor imposed relationships are sometimes prioritized (Ebrahim, 2002; O'Dwyer, 2005; O'Dwyer & Unerman, 2007).

But despite Peace Train's explicitly expressed desire to grow, the organization's activities' success has declined over the past years. Our analysis shows several explanations for this phenomenon. Due to Peace Train's virtual character, it is difficult to attract and retain active membership: despite the advantages and the possibilities that arise due to the low costs of organizing in Second Life, the technological skills demanded in order to become involved can be an entry barrier. Missing formal accountability mechanisms make it difficult to keep an active and committed member base. Furthermore, Linden Lab's, the company behind Second Life, chosen focus on entertainment has further made it difficult for Peace Train to attract members since Peace Train's explicit focus on volunteer work and education stands in contrast to the interests of a big part of the demographic population of Second Life, who is primarily in it for the fun. What's more, Peace Train attracts a certain type of individuals due to the culture shaped by the low operational costs and the non-profit nature, making it difficult to establish formal accountability mechanisms, which could serve as tools for implementing growth. Additionally, there is a constant shift of members at the periphery, due to a lack of social fabric, which, creates a constant in- and outflow of knowledge and skills. All of this, coupled with the lack of external pressure for efficiency due to a dispersed funder base and the lack of influential key stakeholders and the fact that Peace Train is not taking advantage of the full potential of Second Life, makes it hard for the virtual organization Peace Train to grow.

To conclude, *the low costs of organizing in Second Life enable the easy creation of a virtual organization, but at the same time, due to its lack of entrustment with resources, it is difficult to establish formal accountability relationships. But through the substitution of formal accountability relationships with informal ones, Peace Train managed to create a persistent organization. At the same time, trough this lack of formal accountability mechanisms, making it difficult to tie members permanently to the organization, paired with the technical barriers of entry, Second Life's focus on entertainment, the culture and the missing resource constraint, growth is not incentivized.*

This implies that organizations that want to take advantage of the low costs of organizing in the virtual platform of Second Life, need to i) implement formal and informal accountability mechanisms that tie members permanently to the organization and make individual contributions visible, ii) help new members with overcoming technical entry barriers and iii) strive towards using a platform whose intentions are in line with the organization's in order to foster growth.

6.2 Research limitations

Results from case studies can not be generalized for a whole population. However, it can be used to create theories, discover patterns and utilize previous theories as a reference against which the empirical results will be compared (Lundahl & Skärvad, 1999). This also applies to our case study: it is hard to assess how representative our findings are for other virtual organizations. Furthermore, while validity and reliability, as criteria for the quality of empirical research, are well established for quantitative research, it is debatable to what extent they can also be applied to qualitative research and its procedures, which are mainly based on communication, interaction and the researchers' subjective interpretations (Flick, 2011). Often, these bases are seen not as biases, but as strengths of the research (Ahrens & Chapman, 2006; Dubois & Gadde, 2002). It has been argued that “ultimately, in qualitative field studies matters of reliability and validity cannot be sensibly distinguished” (Ahrens & Chapman, 2006, p. 833). Therefore, it has been suggested to reformulate the concept of reliability to focus more on procedural issues, focusing on how data is produced, and the quality of recording and documenting data becoming a key issue (Flick, 2009). Since reliability is a necessary condition for validity (Lundahl & Skärvad, 1999), we will first discuss reliability and then validity, being aware of the difficulty to separate the two.

6.2.1 Reliability

In order to make the process of data gathering and interpretation transparent, and in line with our principles of data collection (Yin, 2003), both of us were present and active at every interview. We both took independent notes, and compared and discussed them right after the interview in order to allow for different interpretations and view points. Further, all interviews were recorded, transcribed and stored in a common database.

After each interview, we went back to the interview guide and tried to adjust and reconfigurate the questions according to the knowledge we had gained from the previous interviews, in order to make the most out of the upcoming ones (Flick, 2009).

Further, we have opted for a clear separation of the presentation of our empirics and their subsequent analysis, in order to make it explicit to the reader what is a statement of the subject and where the researchers interpretation begins (Flick, 2009, 2011).

Limitations that can be brought up include the fact that we were not able to gain access to a representative sample of interviewees in all aspects. For example, we were only able to speak to one single beneficiary, and some of our interviewees were rather new to the organization. However, despite their limited experiences, since Peace Train is a dynamic organization with constantly changing volunteers at the periphery, this could also be seen as a representative feature of the organization. To the extent possible we also tried to use a web camera in order to establish presence and trust, but we never met anyone in person, which might have influenced the level of trust toward the interviewers and thus the answers given.

In our conducted study, we used one case company. This implies difficulties when comparing and contrasting the findings since it is important to find previous studies that are considered comparable. This is especially so since some previous studies point to the differences in accountability mechanisms for different type of NGOs. Still, due to our limited resources focusing on one case study enables us to obtain more depth.

With regards to our conclusions, we have striven to disentangle virtual aspects of organizing a NGO. However, Peace Train is a small organization and some of our findings might also be influenced by the fact that they are small or that they are a NGO, and not purely be attributable to virtuality.

6.2.2 Validity

When conducting interviews, responses might be biased by the fact that interviewees answer in a strategic manner, especially due to Peace Train's NGO culture and the fact that we as researchers are business students. This was something that we have tried to be aware of. It decreases the validity of the study, but we tried to scrutinize interview situations for any signs of strategic communication.

In order to further increase the quality of our findings we engaged in communicative validation (Flick, 2009, 2011): we integrated the interviewees into the research process through sending them parts of our analysis and asked for comments and whether they can relate to it, but we were unfortunately not able to obtain answers from all of our interviewees. We also conducted a follow-up interview to obtain more clarity.

Throughout the study, we had regular meetings with other people who were not part of the research team in order to get feedback and to disclose our own blind spots, as well as to discuss working hypotheses.

It is important to constantly bear in mind that "Research aims at presenting reality, not reproducing it." (Flick, 2009, p. 388). Therefore we have tried to ground our constructs in those of the interviewees so that we ensure that we see what we think we see.

6.3 Future research

As of today, while studies have been conducted on organizing through virtual teams, not many studies have been made on almost exclusively organizing and accountability within and through virtual worlds and the platform of Second Life. In order to establish virtual characteristics of organizing and accountability, there is a need for more papers within this field. Further, Peace Train is a comparably small company, which makes it interesting to study other virtual organizations both of equal and bigger size, in order to be able to separate the effect of size from the effect of virtuality. In addition, it is of interest to conduct studies on both further virtual NGOs as well as virtual for-profit organizations, so that virtual characteristics can be established and separated from the type of organization studied. Finally, Peace Train is comparably young in comparison to organizations studied in previous NGO research. It would therefore be interesting to extend this study to other born virtuals in order to control for the effects caused by the comparable "newness" of the case company, and to examine the mechanisms through which such an organization can ensure its persistence throughout a change of leadership and membership.

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Appendix

Interview guides have been sent out to all interviewees in advance. The questions included in the guide were complemented by follow-up questions throughout the interview. Furthermore, the interview guide was modified to account for the interviewee's position in the organization and their knowledge in certain fields.

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Personal / history of peace train
Tell us about your background.
When and how did you get involved with Peace Train?
What are your personal motivations/goals for being involved with Peace Train?
How did you become involved with Second Life? What are your motivations for using Second Life?

Stakeholders and organization
Please describe from your point of view the organization's stakeholders (any group or individual who is affected by or can affect the achievement of an organization's objectives)?
What is the purpose / unique selling point of Peace Train?
What is the organizational structure within Peace Train (different functions, who is doing what etc.)?
What are the financial flows, internally and externally? How are they followed-up?

Tasks
What are the different tasks within Peace Train?
Please describe your ordinary tasks for Peace Train. Who do you work with, what do you do?
Do you have a lot of autonomy in how to pursue your tasks?
Can you please provide us with some advantages and disadvantages with organizing in Second Life. Please exemplify.
Can you give us examples of when you have faced challenges and problems? How were they handled?

Reporting and outcome
Do you report continuously to someone about your tasks?
Do you get feedback on the performance of your tasks?
Is there a form of external reporting, for example towards the funders and/or beneficiaries, about the usage of the funds or the success of an event?
How are the beneficiaries selected?

Socializing
In virtual worlds, you meet through your avatar instead of meeting each other physically face-to-face. What kind of virtual socializing meetings do you have instead?

Expectations
What is your relationship to your avatar(s)?
Do you reveal your real life identity to others in Second Life?
Who do you feel accountable to for your actions?

Trust
Overall, have people in the organization been trustworthy?
In general when you meet someone in Second Life, what do you base your first impression on?

Communication
Describe a situation where communication worked well.
Describe a situation where communication did not work.

Do you have anything else you would like to add?

INTERVIEW GUIDE - beneficiary

Personal / history of connection with Peace Train
When and how did you get in contact with Peace Train?
Who is your main point of contact?
What communication channels do/did you use?
What is your relationship to Peace Train?
How have you established trust towards Peace Train? What have they done to prove their reliability?
Are you involved in Second Life?
Can you provide us with some advantages and disadvantages with organizing in Second Life? Please exemplify.

Stakeholder relationship and reporting
What do you see as the purpose / unique selling point of Peace Train?
What were the financial flows between Peace Train and your organization?
How are they followed-up?
Are there any conditions for your organization in order to receive the money?
Do you receive accounting information from Peace Train (profit and loss statements, financial targets etc.)?
Do you receive other types of information about the outcome of organizational activities? What type of information do you receive?
Peace Train is registered as a 501(c)3 organization. Has that affected your perception of Peace Train?
Do you know why you as a beneficiary were selected? Did you have to fulfill any selection criteria?

Do you have anything else you would like to add?