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Earth Viability Center / Place4Us

Reflection #2

During my second 50 hours of my internship with the Earth Viability Center and Place4Us I began to settle into the work and research that would eventually be useful for the platform. In the first 50 hours I was still figuring out how Place4Us was organized and what I needed to specifically look for. In the next 50 hours I was better able to narrow my research to issues of cybersecurity and privacy instead of just exploring the website. My primary project was focused on User Roles and Authorities, but I also continued to research User Privacy, MyFiles, and GAI Detection. Through this portion of the internship, I learned that security work is not necessarily finding a single visible security problem: a lot of what you do is understand how the security system works and then do research and asking questions.

One of the biggest things I learned was how Place4Us breaks down the authorities into platform and VCC levels. Hans-Peter told me that platform-level authorities are assigned by the system administrator, and VCC-level authorities are assigned by the administrator of the individual VCC. If a user has a VCC-level authority in one VCC, they do not necessarily have the same authority in any other VCC. VCC authorities also do not automatically impact platform-level authorities. I now understand that this is one reason we need to know the scope of an authority, not just the name of the role. I checked the Registered Users pages, member profiles, VCC Administration, governance section, my Workspace, and privacy settings to discover where roles and authorities show up. I found that ordinary users do not have a notable place to see their

authorities. I learned not to automatically think that a person's professional position should also be their Place4Us role.

I researched other cybersecurity concepts related to the project, including role-based access control, least privilege, authentication, authorization, separation of duties, and privileged access. I made a list of an authority lifecycle of Request, Approval, Assignment, Use, Review, and Removal, which helped me to understand authorities as something that might be managed over time, rather than something that is assigned to a user and then sits around doing nothing. I wrote a draft User Roles and Authorities report to document what I learned, raise questions, include a role and authorities' matrix, and offer some first ideas on potential approaches. Making the report was helpful because I had to organize my research rather than just take notes. I then posted the draft on Place4Us for comment and potential adoption by the developers.

Another part I investigated was User Privacy. While exploring the actual account cancellation process, I discovered that Place4Us explains that there is a difference between deactivating and cancelling an account, and that some published contributions may still be viewable unless the user deletes them all. But I was unable to discern clearly what could happen to other information attached to the account, such as the profile information, login logs, activity logs, or VCC membership information. This is what prompted me to investigate data retention, and the fact that different pieces of information may have different retention durations. I found that privacy concerns not only the privacy of the information itself, but also what was collected, why it was collected, who has access to it, the duration of storage, and how it can be disposed of.

I also considered MyFiles – an access-control and privacy feature. Place4Us offers distinct levels of access – Private, Members, Users, Public. However, I observed that the Place4Us page for this

feature does not state what differences are between all the several types of access choices there. This could lead to a misunderstanding as to who would have access to the file, so giving a clearer description for each option would allow users to make more informed decisions before sharing something. I investigated security logging, as the site will log user activity for security. I have posed a few questions about this feature, e.g. who would have access to these logs? How would the data be protected to prevent tampering or deletion? Should administrator actions also be logged? And how long should these records be kept for?

Another topic I worked on with fellow interns was GAI Detection. The team already had quite a comprehensive list of indicators for images, videos, and text, so I wanted to avoid the same searches. Instead, I looked at what should happen once content has a potential GAI signature. I created a process of Content submitted, Possible AI indicators present, Additional verification, Human Review, Final decision, Record the decision. What I learned from this exercise is that any single indicator cannot be a conclusive sign of AI detection. For example, truncated or missing metadata, text uniformity, abnormal image details, or other indicators may be cause for suspicion, but additional evaluation by humans is warranted. Working on a topic in collaboration with others allowed me to practice contributing to something new, rather than replicating what my colleagues had already researched.

This internship has also been a step forward in my professional growth. I am at ease receiving feedback and in leveraging it as a way to continue to move in my work, for instance, the feedback from Hans-Peter allowed me to understand that my main outcome should be the User Roles and Authorities and that the work should lead to a specific outcome, in a way that it would be useful for the Place4Us developers. Another thing I learned to do is to be careful with assumptions, for instance, whenever I encounter a governance position, profile position, or

administrator title, I should not assume what the technical authorities should be for these individuals, I have to cross-check the system. I think this will be helpful in cybersecurity to not be biased by assumptions.

To conclude my 2nd 50 hours, I can now better understand how cybersecurity research can be used on an actual platform. I made progress on the main User Roles and Authorities project, developed and published a draft report, continued my research into privacy and data retention, reviewed MyFiles access controls, worked on the security logging, and contributed to the GAI Detection work, and learned to organize my research better, ask specific questions, respond to feedback, and relate key cybersecurity concepts to real features on Place4Us. I still have questions to be answered on this project (mostly the specific authorities which are on a platform and within VCCs), but I now have more direction on how to finish the project.