

# Toward a Virtual Public Relations World: An Introduction to PR Practice

*Peter M. Smudde, Ph.D., APR*

*School of Communication*





# ABSTRACT

When students want to experience public relations, they may not have to wait until they secure an internship. I am working on a project supported by a grant from Illinois State University's Instructional Virtual Reality Development Initiative that would create a first-of-its-kind virtual world in which students could explore public relations thinking, decision-making, and consequences in an online, scenario-based, problem-solving learning environment using *SecondLife*. Given my existing course design for online and traditional learning for COM 178 Introduction to Public Relations, the ultimate outcome of this project would be a virtual public relations world that allows students to explore the "real world" demands of PR professionals.



# Agenda

- Problem & Solution
- Vision
- Basic Process Overview
- Supporting Research
- Pedagogical Strategies
- Learning Objectives
- Results
- Lessons Learned
- Next Steps



# Problem/Opportunity

- Help students interact more with the material for the introductory class in public relations
- Complement the online and traditional learning environments
- Provide a “place” for students and the instructor to engage in learning regardless of location/distance
- Present resources in electronic and online forms that supplement course topics and facilitate out-of-class learning



# Solution

- *Illinois State University's Instructional Virtual Reality Development Initiative* (initiate work)
- Use *SecondLife* (SL) as a platform to begin development of a virtual world in which students can:
  - Meet with each other and the instructor
  - “Play” with the course material
  - Explore the field and its subfields





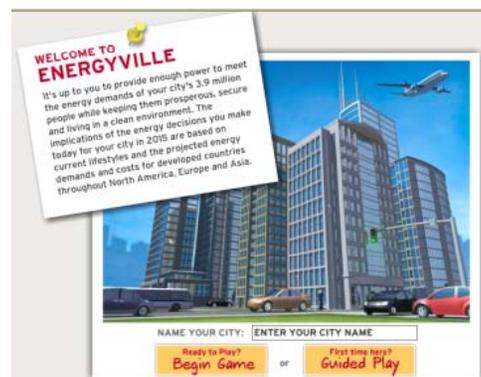
# Basic Process

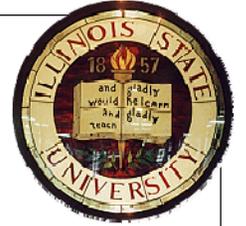
1. Conceived project based others' cases at ISU and elsewhere.
2. Reviewed ample literature on game theory, game design, and multimedia and pedagogy.
3. Applied for and received grant and, later, wrote paper (available upon request) and presented to national PR educators.
4. Enrolled in course about using SL.
5. Sketched initial SL site content.
6. Acquired land in SL.
7. Consulted with Bill Shields, ISU guru on SL.
8. Built initial places and in process of building others.
9. Engage in continuous improvement (never-ending).



# Vision

- **Near term:** Share my *SecondLife* island with all members of the public relations faculty for traditional, hybrid or completely online versions of the COM 178 course.
- **Medium term:** Expand and serve as a model for similar teaching tools for other courses in the curriculum.
- **Long term:** Lead to full simulation of public relations decision-making, like true virtual-reality games:





# Research Basis

- **Game Theory**
  - Structured play
  - Assessments about situations can be made and strategies surmised and enacted to achieve certain outcomes
    - Highly technical approach (mathematics; *A Beautiful Mind*)
    - Nontechnical approach for everyday living (business, negotiations, people management, pricing, etc.)
  - Examples:
    - How to identify the best people to work with
    - How to anticipate the outcomes of conflict and cooperation
    - What implications there may be for sharing success and blame



# Research Basis

- **Game Design**

- Creation of optimum game experiences in any medium that:

- Challenge players' abilities to assess situations
- Size-up opponents
- Devise strategies
- Achieve desired outcomes or reformulate strategies in the face of undesired outcomes

- Dimensions:

- Resource focus (from conception to technology to commercialization)
- Graphic design & interfaces ("realism" is vital)
- Players' perspective (intellect/story line to emotions/excitement)



# Research Basis

- **Pedagogy**

- **Constructivism**

- Learning precedes the development of students' skills
- Instructor guidance is similar to a master-apprentice relationship
- Students participate in knowledge through instructor (i.e., working within their "zone of proximal development")
- Class discussions or small-group work would facilitate a communal dimension for learning (theoretical and practical issues)
- Multiple views emerge based on multiple models and research about effective real/realistic public relations

- **Instructional media**

- Choices affect cognitive processing
- Most efficient media "do some of the learners' cognitive work for them"
- Various media studied over the years, including multimedia (recently)
- Community of "digital natives" (students) and "digital immigrants" (many instructors) participate in learning together



# Pedagogical Strategies

- Engage students in authentic problem solving that approximates the “real world” demands of professional communicators as they assess PR situations, make decisions, take action, and measure effectiveness.
- Nurture problem-solving abilities that require various levels of cognitive processing at different stages during the course’s schedule.
- Give students direction and feedback about their work related to both the theoretical and the practical dimensions of real/realistic PR scenarios.
- Design course content that fits an instructor’s teaching style and planned course content, including customizing content that can be made to fit any introductory textbook that is chosen.



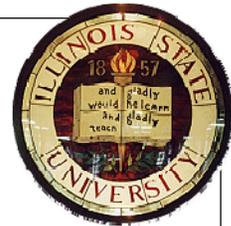
# Learning Objectives

- Learn the process, practices and professionalism required of real PR practitioners.
- Connect the dots better between theoretical concepts from the fields of public relations, communication, and organizations to the practical moves they make in the game.
- Promote self reflection about one's knowledge construction.
- Be well-prepared to solve complex, ill-structured, real/realistic PR problems that may have many solutions.



# Results

- My SL site (still under development) is formally part of a four “island” cluster ISU owns
- First-of-its-kind virtual world focused on public relations thinking, decision-making, and consequences
- Ties into existing course design for online and traditional learning for COM 178 Introduction to Public Relations



# Lessons Learned

- Underestimated the amount of time it takes to make a “good” experience.
  - More than a year needed to learn the technology and techniques of SL—to make “good” experience (per ISU’s SL guru, Bill Shields). Time dedication to developing SL site takes several hours per sitting nearly daily (or at least weekly).
  - Development of my actual SL experience only a few months old (I’m still a “noob”). Integration with other projects, duties, responsibilities, etc. in and out of work has been challenging.
  - Numerous, competing training sources available for numerous hours of learning about SL.
  - *Bottom line: To do a project like this means almost exclusive dedication to it.*
- Having university resources already available to use SL this way is invaluable.
- The idea is sound, and the paper shows it. One textbook publisher is interested in the project.
- Project is much more long term than originally conceived.

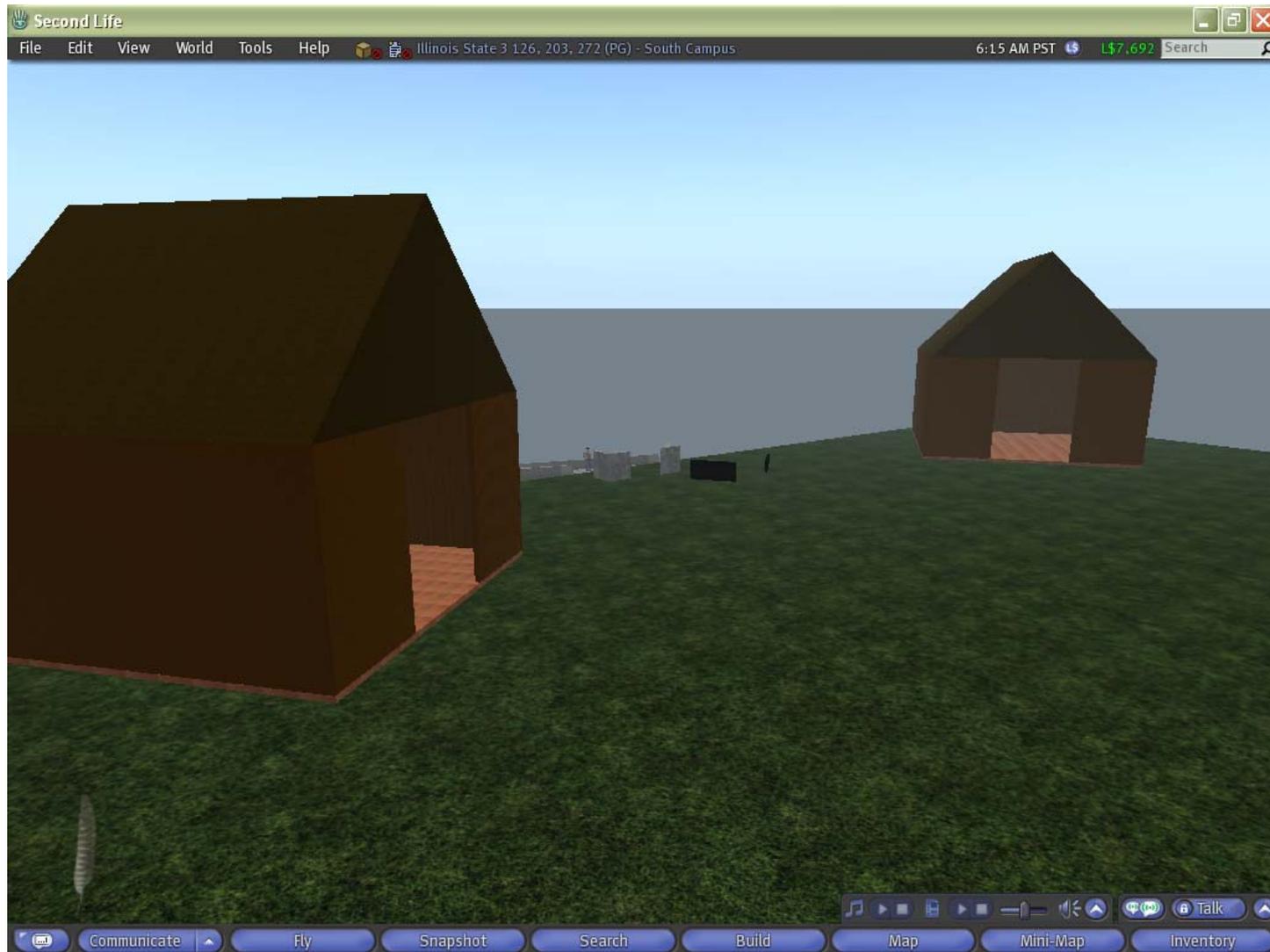


# Next Steps

- Instructional Virtual Reality Development Initiative was a *starting point* for what is truly a bigger project that needs far more work and funding.
- Design COM 178 to have students create 3-D places about areas of public relations.
- Acquire funding to pay graduate students and/or technical professionals to help me.
- Design and offer a graduate-level class in the teaching of public relations:
  - Students apply research, pedagogy and practice to the design and building of areas and functionality of the *SecondLife* site.
  - Familiarity with *SecondLife* would be essential and possibly required.



# My *SecondLife* Site (So Far)



# Toward a Virtual Public Relations World: An Introduction to PR Practice

*Peter M. Smudde, Ph.D., APR*

*School of Communication*

*430 Fell Hall*

*Normal, IL 61790-4480 USA*

*Phone: 309-438-7339*

*E-mail: [psmudde@ilstu.edu](mailto:psmudde@ilstu.edu)*

