

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

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### **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.

### **Narrative**

Public relations is known primarily for what its practitioners create—texts. The types of texts that public relations professionals plan, create, and evaluate are, in fact, numerous and ubiquitous, and they can be oral, printed, or symbols-based. From press releases to social media, public relations' role in society is a discursive one. Sadly, the focus on texts alone is limiting. So much more is demanded of effective public relations than the mere final product of one's or a group's work to bring a text into being for specific audiences and particular purposes. The outputs of public relations must have a larger yield than what they can gain immediately upon their release. There is always much more at stake in the bigger picture for both an organization and its publics, and public relations can and must complete the work systematically to realize success in that bigger picture.

Public relations students learn that effective PR requires sound process *and* product, the latter being the result of the former. Students learn about public relations process and product through traditional methods, which serve them well. If students secure an internship—which is usually not required for graduation—they can experience PR in "real world" action. But if students want to "try before they buy" public relations as a field of study, there is no way to secure such experience. Recent technological developments, however, offer a way students can experience public relations: virtual-reality games. I am unaware of any other public relations program anywhere that has such a learning opportunity, and this project would be the first of its kind.

Thanks to the support from a grant from Illinois State University's Instructional Virtual Reality Development Initiative, my project creates a virtual world for students taking COM 178 Introduction to Public Relations, which is required of all public relations majors at Illinois State University and is open to other students as an elective. Students would experience "realistic" public relations problems and concepts online in conjunction with course content. The virtual public relations world would initially run on *SecondLife* and, perhaps in a later, more-sophisticated version, resemble a *The Sims* virtual reality game (i.e., a commercially available game that is an electronic simulation of actual life matters). Students would investigate concepts, dig into practices, and play out scenarios based on realistic situations, weigh the risks, and reap the benefits or suffer the pains from their decisions—all based on the content about the profession covered in class sessions and the readings.

Ideally, the virtual PR world in COM 178 would take advantage of the complexity of educational objects in the game to demonstrate realistic and relevant situations from which students can dive into and learn how to handle at a beginner's level. From an instructor's perspective, the virtual public relations world would capitalize on the following pedagogical strategies:

- Engage students in authentic problem that approximate 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.

From a student’s perspective, the virtual public relations world would be a key component to the COM 178 course that would fulfill the following 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.

I already have an online course design for COM 178, and the integration of the virtual PR world would be a fine complement to the course’s content. The virtual world would also complement traditional and hybrid versions of the course. Overall, the basic process for this project has proceeded along the following stages:

- Conceived project after seeing others’ cases in different fields at ISU.
- Reviewed ample literature on game theory, game design, and multimedia and pedagogy.
- Applied for and received the grant and, later, wrote a conference paper.
- Enrolled in course about using *SecondLife*.
- Sketched initial *SecondLife* site content.
- Acquired land in *SecondLife*, which is part of land owned by ISU.
- Consulted with campus guru on *SecondLife*.
- Built initial places and in process of building others.
- Engaged in continuous improvement (never-ending).

All but the last two steps were completed easily enough. I am in the building stage for the site itself, which I call “IntroLand to Public Relations,” in *SecondLife*. Indeed, building the initial site has proven to be the most labor- and time-intensive stage, but “once it’s done, it’s done.”

Thus far during this project’s development, I learned important lessons that are important to share. First and most important, I underestimated the amount of time it takes to make a “good” experience. As my literature survey (below) shows, the most realistic virtual world is essential to making a visitor’s experience as “real” and, therefore, as effective as possible. Creating a “good” site in *SecondLife* requires mastery of the technology and the techniques, both of which are not easily done, even though I am quite comfortable with technology. According to Bill Shields, the developer of ISU’s virtual campus on *SecondLife*, it takes more than a year of constant practice to master the program (personal communication, July 22, 2009). I have only been working on *SecondLife* for a few months. Indeed, through this project I learned that the time dedication for developing a *SecondLife* site takes several hours per sitting nearly daily (or at least weekly). This time dedication includes taking numerous hours of either free or paid training courses available on *SecondLife* and elsewhere, including ISU. Given commitments and responsibilities on and off the job, working on this project has been challenging. The bottom line on development is this: To do a project like this means almost exclusive dedication to it—to almost literally dedicate a second life to it.

The grant given to me through ISU’s Instructional Virtual Reality Development Initiative has been valuable as a starting point for what is truly a bigger project that needs far more work and funding. I have come up with at least three viable solutions to help me along in the completion of my *SecondLife* site. The first solution is to design COM 178 so that students create 3-D places about areas of public

relations, which would amount to large semester project. The second solution would be to apply for more grants that I would use to pay graduate students and/or technical professionals to help me. The third solution is to design and offer a graduate-level class in the teaching of public relations, and have at its core the students applying 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.) In all three cases, having university resources already available would be invaluable.

My *SecondLife* site is formally part of a four “island” cluster that Illinois State University owns, and each island is at a different stage of development. One of the islands is shaping up to be a complete, virtual recreation of ISU’s campus, and it is being created by Bill Shields. My project, then, is part of a larger one at ISU and is much more long-term than originally conceived. I originally planned my virtual public relations world for COM 178 to be developed by the end of the spring 2010 semester then launched in the fall. However, applying the lessons I learned so far, a more realistic timeline now focuses on site development alone, and it will take until the fall 2011 at the earliest to launch.

Ultimately, my vision for my *SecondLife* island is for it, in the near term, to be shared with and used by all members of the public relations faculty in ISU’s School of Communication, giving them a new and potentially powerful teaching and learning tool that can be used in traditional, hybrid or completely online versions of the COM 178 course and beyond. Over the medium term, I foresee the virtual PR world serving as a model for similar teaching tools for other courses in the curriculum. For the long term, my ultimate vision for this project is to lead to a full simulation of public relations decision-making that, like true virtual reality games (e.g., *Darfur is Dying*, *Energyville*, and *The Sims*), could be used in higher education and, especially, in professional training in organizations like the Public Relations Society of America and the Chartered Institute for Public Relations in the United Kingdom. Even with at this early stage of development, there is interest from one textbook publisher that would like to consider using my project to augment its introductory text in public relations and include material suitable to its full range of public relations texts.

### Relevant Literature

This project focuses on using electronic media to create a virtual, three-dimensional world where students can learn about the basics of public relations. Given the vision for this project over the near to long terms, the project can be considered a kind of game to facilitate student learning. Although the point of the “game” is far from being something for entertainment purposes, its very design and content would invite a certain amount of expectations for having fun during learning—short of being “edutainment.” In this way, then, three areas of research are particularly appropriate to this project: game theory, game design, and pedagogy. To the extent that all three overlap, especially in the third research area, application of theory to practice would be especially fruitful.

Game theory covers what people do rationally during games and how outcomes may be predicted. Games include structured play but, more broadly speaking, any situations in which assessments about situations can be made and strategies surmised and enacted to achieve certain outcomes. Game theory can be addressed in highly technical, mathematical terms, as McKinsey (2003) does. For this project’s purposes, a nontechnical understanding is appropriate. Binmore (2007) and Davis (1983) set aside the heavy mathematics to present game theory’s fundamentals. What is most important about these two works is their examples from both the gaming world and the “real world,” like economics, politics and others. Tying the theory to everyday practice is key in these books and this project, as making a realistic experience that fits students’ mindsets coming into a virtual-reality presentation of public relations is key. The gamer mindset is the focus of Wark’s (2007) exploration of gamer thinking at the intersection of formal games and everyday life, where people should be thought of more as gamers than as citizens. This focus on everyday living is also essential to this project, and in particular the combination of game theory and strategy (especially business strategy) is very appropriate. Public relations students should be exposed to the kind of thinking that is germane to the work of practitioners and organizational executives. Miller (2003) addresses how the outcomes of others’ choices influence one’s own strategic moves, and he devises a method for people to cope with and excel in situations where confrontation and competition are central, like negotiations, managing people, managing budgets, pricing,

market positioning, and others. Similarly, Dixit and Nalebuff (2008) extend the basic foundations of game theory to the rationality essential to effective strategy in game situations. Those situations encompass typical life/social experiences and, in particular, business/professional experiences, where people are especially challenged to build cooperation and account for results. Straffin (1993) applies simple algebraic rigor to the same themes to address how to identify the best people to work with, how to anticipate the outcomes of conflict and cooperation, and what implications there may be for sharing success and blame.

Game design addresses the creation of optimum game experiences in any medium that challenge players' abilities to assess situations, size-up opponents, devise strategies, and achieve desired outcomes or reformulate strategies in the face of undesired outcomes. Sources like O'Luanaigh (2006) and Meigs (2003) explain game design by focusing on the resources, opportunities, limitations, and processes necessary for creating games—from the basic story line and characters to the branding and licensing of final game products. Bateman and Boon (2006) take a more theory-driven approach to explain why effective game designs work from a player's perspective, emphasizing the identification of relevant "play styles." Bateman and Boon also address the matters of game production, marketing, and distribution. Extensive "handbook" volumes on game design include those by Salen and Zimmerman (2004, 2006), where they address all matters—from core theory, graphic design and storylines to rules of play, culture and criticism—related to effective game design itself and not the matters related to commercialization. Specific examinations of video games and the theory related to them is addressed in Wolf and Perron (2003) and Perron and Wolf (2009). These two edited volumes explore the breadth of topics in video game theory since its inception in the late 1970s, and they are especially focused on what matters in present-day video games. The volumes set the foundation for the terminology, ideology, and critical-analytical methods for understanding the dynamics among game creators, games themselves, players, and the worlds they share. Increasingly tied to video games is the subject of virtual reality or virtual environments. Sherman and Craig (2003) explain what virtual reality is and how it functions as a medium, especially for gaming but also for other occasions, like education and engineering. The key is rendering a world that appears "realistic" and allows people to engage within that world "realistically," which leans in large part on sensory interfaces and feedback and other features. Stanney (2002) provides a thorough collection of chapters about a full range of topics on virtual environments, including basic principles, systems/technology, design/development, health and safety, evaluation, and example applications.

Pedagogical principles at the heart of this project primarily are constructivistic, where learning precedes the development of students' skills, and an instructor's guidance is similar to a master-apprentice relationship (Karpov & Bransford, 1995, p. 61); whereas, "socially shared activities [transform] into internalized processes" (John-Stener & Mahn, 1996, p. 192). Such an approach, like a virtual reality public relations experience, is one that allows students to participate in knowledge building under the guidance of an instructor or other more-competent person (i.e., working within their "zone of proximal development") that is at once social and individual. An ideal constructivistic learning environment (cf. Driscoll, 2000, pp. 382-391) in courses would take advantage of the complexity of the virtual-reality educational objects to demonstrate realistic and relevant situations from which students can dive into and learn how to handle at an appropriate level (i.e., beginner, intermediate, and advanced). Class discussions or small-group work would facilitate a communal dimension for learning, as students' perspectives on theoretical and practical issues are wrestled with socially and collaboratively. Students would be encouraged to entertain multiple perspectives to understand real/realistic communication situations because multiple views of what can be done can stem from multiple models and research about what effective real/realistic communication, and thereby be used to explain responses to assignments.

Realizing that the choice of media used for instructional purposes has an effect on cognitive processing, Cobb (1997) argues that the most efficient instructional media are those that "do some of the learners' cognitive work for them" (p. 32). This idea means that the way information is presented through a chosen medium gives the learner some amount of data to work from beyond what is in memory, and the learner builds knowledge about the task and subject by working through the problem-solving process at

increasingly deeper levels. This “cognitive efficiency” with which someone works with information in a given medium is based on the rationale that

while different media may not create different cognitive *products*, such as concepts, schemas, and mental models, . . . they clearly do create different cognitive *processes* at different levels of efficiency (with regard to speed, ease, effectiveness). In other words, the form in which information is presented can determine how it is processed in a mind, and hence how it can be learned. (Cobb, 1997, p. 27)

Research has probed how video, films, television, and multimedia generally can be used in particular subject areas. Research in this vein tackles particular pedagogical problems in English as a second language (Aiex, 1988, 1999; Arcario, 1992; Stempleski, 1992), history (Rebhorn, 1987), medicine (Dequeker & Jaspaert, 1998; Sözmem, 2002), psychology (Gregg et al., 1995;), sociology and social problems (Dressel, 1990), and speech pathology (Hallett, 2002). Additional work examines the application of multimedia technologies in the classroom. Such research includes the use of CD-ROMs in chemistry courses (Rodrigues et al., 2001), the use of optical videodisc and CD-ROMs in art courses (O’Connor, 1988), and the construction of hypervideo for dynamic class lessons (Locatis et al., 1990).

Most especially, Rainie (2007, 2009), in his work with the Pew Internet and American Life Project, and Dorman (2007) show in detail the applications to and implications of “new media” (i.e., blogs, podcasts, wikis, social media, etc) on teaching and learning of “digital natives” (i.e., students who grew up with these technologies) and “digital immigrants” (i.e., those [especially instructors] who have come to learn about and use new media later in life). In broad-based analyses of the pedagogical implications of multimedia, Clark and Feldon (2005) address the common misconceptions about multimedia instruction as more beneficial, motivating, engaging, accommodating of multiple learning styles, and problem solving-based. Sweller (2005) examines the impact on memory (long-term and working) that multimedia has on individuals and what instructional design matters must be taken into account. Van Merriënboer and Kester (2005) propose a model for instructional design that accommodates principles of multimedia learning with the four components of complex learning. Each of these analyses offers useful insights about how others have applied media technology at any level of complexity to their classroom situations. Insights achieved and lessons learned from each of these applications may be valuable, and the articles serve as good starting points for my virtual-reality PR project and anyone interested in using these technologies in her or his own courses.

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