

## Policy Game, Online Game—Simulated: Applying the Ecology of Policy Game to Virtual World

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# Policy Game, Online Game— Simulated: Applying the Ecology of Policy Game to Virtual World

Yong Jin Park

**Courses:** *Communication Policy, Media Law, Emerging Communication Technologies*

**Objective:** *Students will learn the genesis of regulatory gridlock by applying the ecology of policy game (Dutton, 1992; Neuman, McKnight, & Solomon, 1997) in the virtual environment of Second Life*

## Rationale

Teaching communication policy to young college students can be a challenge. Students often consider law and policy as difficult, abstract, or even unrelated to their lives. Yet experienced teachers note that students—especially those who are first exposed to regulatory concepts—benefit when they actively participate, engage, and deliberate for the position they believe is of justice. The transactional model of communication<sup>1</sup> in fact suggests that learning brings the best outcomes when it is treated as a process in which students share experiences and meanings in didactic conversation (Dees *et al.*, 2007). Research also suggests that active participation occurs if students genuinely believe the issue touches their own interests and stakes (Gremmen & Potters, 1997). Similarly, for communication policy studies, the link to didactic engagement can be staged or simulated in an online environment in which individual students assume the role of each policy actor.

The following three principles, derived from the transactional model of communication, can be effectively applied to understand and critically analyze the genesis of new media policy in simulation. The first is cognitive learning in the classroom. The second is affective, which deals with motivation and attitude to enhance students' affinity in virtual environments. The third is an internalizing process of engagement in dialectic. Through the three steps, the students can learn by “doing policy” and are encouraged to ask the following questions: Why is the policy made

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that way? What is the motivation of policy actors? If I am the decision maker, what can I do differently? Ultimately, this will break the disjuncture between the abstract of communication policy, often celebrated in scholarly publication, and the practice students can draw on to translate into daily matters that concern citizens.

The advantage of Second Life, the virtual reality game, is to enable an engaging platform for students to exercise, experiment, or use judgment in choosing policy in interaction with classmates. The students can come back to the real world classroom as the class runs regularly, reflect on the past virtual experiences, and engage with each other to formulate positions. Evidence (see Williams, 2006) shows that online gamers tend to exhibit even more emotional engagement in cyberspace communities than in the real world, as the consequences upon their avatars are perceived as real. Simply put, the students may find new digital environments more comfortable and “real” than law or policy texts. By staging multiple platforms of dialectic interaction, Second Life can bring students closer to abstract class concepts.

### **Procedure**

The course is designed to cover three stages: (1) regulatory principles (7 weeks), (2) simulation (4 weeks), and (3) dialectics, during which the students are given final “positioning” assignments (2 weeks). The first stage, regulatory principles, will build a basic conceptual framework before students exercise their critical thinking to discuss specific policies. In this part of the course, the students are exposed to key generic regulatory terms, paradigms, and forces that shape information policy. The second stage, simulation, will take advantage of the internet as an easy, convenient, and flexible medium in which to build an environment for mimicking the real world. In this mid-part of the course, the students are required to engage in policy formulation in an online village that is created by the instructor in Second Life (see <http://secondlife.com/?v=1.1>), while offline classroom discussion is devoted to specific communication policy topics in conceptual details. In the third stage, dialectics, students will complete an individual policy report and presentation based on the positions they developed in simulation. The students are expected to draw on explicit class concepts to formulate their projects.

### *The Second Life Community*

The simulation serves as a focal point that helps link class concepts to concrete policy formulations. The students are required to register as: (1) head or commissioners of the Federal Communication Commission (FCC); (2) Congress members; (3) members of the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB), or lobbyists for private firms such as AT&T or Verizon; (4) nongovernmental organizations (NGOs); or (5) the public or individual consumers, and so forth. Each week, a different posted policy debate is distributed among the village residents in Second Life. The village has four urgent concerns to address: net neutrality, copyright law, privacy, and (new) media consolidation. Each debate continues, through posting messages, sending

(lobby) comments to each stakeholders, and so on, but discontinues at the end of each week when a new policy topic is posted (see the Appendix).

This process is a particularly salient instructional advantage because students are required to use avatars through which they easily switch roles of policy actors, invest their rational thinking over a period, and represent regulatory behaviors that otherwise may remain unrelated to their daily lives. Tied to the transactional model, Second Life eases the problem of irrelevancy by engaging students in multiple policy settings (albeit of their own village in a developing sense of community) that classroom face-to-face interaction cannot generate in a time-efficient manner. In all, class time is too precious to allocate much of this activity in classroom.

### *Rule of the Game*

Each policy actor has to use a minimum of one regulatory activity a week and must assume not a personal viewpoint but the perspective of the stakeholder being played. Changing position is possible, but it may carry the same type of backlash from the public as in real life. The essential components of policy deliberation, such as public comments, policy hearing, executive orders, and the like, must be present during the four weeks of village life. The rule ensures the advantage of Second Life as an engaging and time-efficient platform (1) to motivate students and (2) to increase their affinity to policy formulation.

In simulating policy games, students should appreciate the rational positioning of each policy actor; that is, the policy interests at stake, the goals of the stakeholders, and each actor's strategies in offline worlds. In this way, students learn the ecology of the policy game in which regulatory actors consistently position these to the best of their vested interests and understand why we witness the recurrence of policy gridlock (Neuman et al., 1997), instead of succumbing to cynicism, or dismissing political disputes as irrelevant.

### **Debriefing**

The final position paper is an opportunity for the students to exercise the critical skills learned in the first part of the course, allowing them to connect online experiences to offline. Students will use the following schema, outlined in Table 1, to facilitate their thinking. In sum, at the end of the term, the concrete outcomes we want to generate are:

- To understand policy gridlock through the practice of the ecology of policy game.
- To master key regulatory paradigms and terms by which to critically question the validities of key communication policies.
- To be able to write policy comments and/or reports derived from online exercises.
- To develop a sense of connection between policy and real life.

**Table 1** The Example of Net Neutrality Debate Among Different Stakeholders

Players	Interest	Goal	Strategies	Position
Actor 1: FCC				
Actor 2: Comcast				
Actor 3: Google				
Actor 4: Public				

### Appraisal

Pilot experimentation shows great promise for an introductory communication policy course. Students often engage in heated conversations with classmates, extending prior online debates to the classroom beyond the required assignment. A student noted, “I like using something like Second Life; it is a tool that, in my opinion, allows the students to be more interactive, as well as gives us the option of learning from home.” Other student pointed out, “It wasn’t the same as coming to class actually interacting in person, but I was able to learn more about the different roles we’re portraying in Second Life.” Another said, “I’m not too much of a debater but if I were, online was an interesting way to try it out.”

For instructors full of classroom agenda items, Second Life would be a reliable alternative to face-to-face discussion group sessions. Also because students can open a Second Life account for free, there will be no pressure to secure financial support. The caution, however, is that instructors need to recognize potential difficulties among students who are not technically adept. At least one training session that addresses technical issues (e.g., setting up avatars, Second Life account, etc in a computer lab should be scheduled. Moreover, it should be clear to students that online policy debate helps create an engaging platform to reinvigorate, not replace, classroom lessons. With these points clarified early in the semester, we are cautiously optimistic of the utility of Second Life in creating a policy game environment.

According to the transactional model of communication, quality teaching hinges on the creation of an environment best conducive to student activities (Dees et al., 2007). Introductory policy course instructors have a dual mission: (1) we must inform students of contemporary regulatory and policy theories, and (2) the ultimate goal is to engage the students. A paradox is that policy classes often remain immersed in arcane requirements tech-savvy students perceive as “merely academic.” The sense of irrelevancy can be subdued in the proximity of media technology which students may find fun to use.

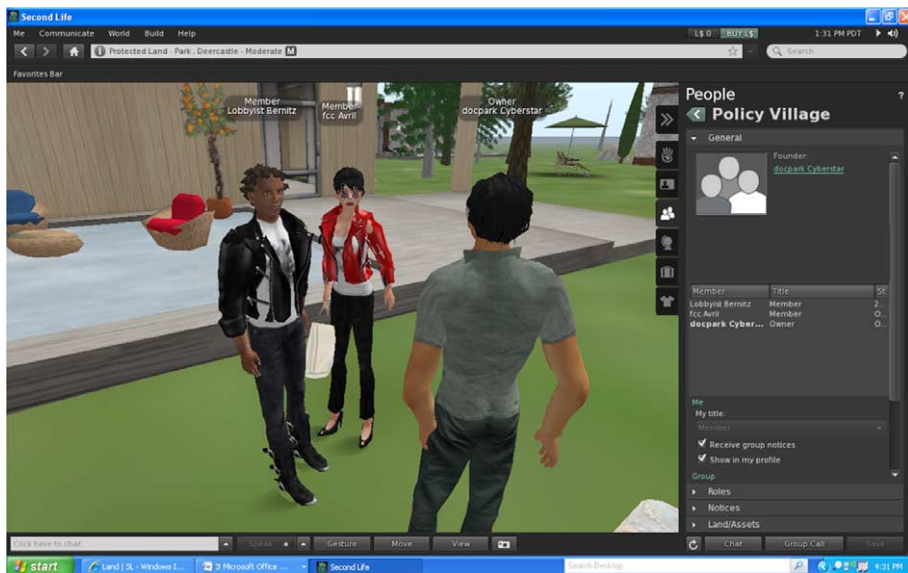
### Note

- [1] The author gratefully incorporated this critical insight suggested by an anonymous reviewer.

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## Appendix A



**Figure A1** Second Life Village: Screenshot.

*Note:* Students visited the Policy Village, a virtual space set up by the instructor. Students, with their unique avatars, assume the role of the FCC, Congress, and Lobbyist in virtual interaction.