

CEASEFIRE ISLAND – LIFE IN THE HOOD

Kevin Harvey
Asst. Director of Development
UIC-SPH-CADE

Colleen Monahan
Director
UIC-SPH-CADE

Lars Ullberg
Asst. Director of Development
UIC-SPH-CADE

SL: Qwerty Hansen

SL: Sweeny Todd

SL: Wolfe Larsson

1603 W. Taylor St. 10th Fl
Chicago, IL 60612
cade@uic.edu; 312-996-1360

ABSTRACT

CeaseFire Island is the answer to Grand Theft Auto. Instead of rewarding violence, former gang members are trained in how to stop real killings.



Figure 1. CeaseFire Island

A team from the University of Illinois at Chicago School of Public Health, CADE has created this unique training environment in Second Life (SL) to leverage and expand the CeaseFire training program. CeaseFire, an initiative of the Chicago Project for Violence Prevention, is a strategic community-based effort to stop shootings and killings through street-level outreach, public education, and community mobilization. The training curriculum is heavily driven by scenarios and role plays that are illustrative and evocative of the situations that CeaseFire workers encounter in their day-to-day work out in the streets of the community. CeaseFire Island will allow “Violence Interrupters” (VI) and community “Outreach Workers” (OW) across the country to safely practice responses to these scenarios, while being observed, coached, and corrected. Virtual Worlds will be used to save real lives.



THE PROJECT

The initial challenge was to develop an Island that replicates the look and feel of a representative neighborhood where typical CeaseFire activities take place. Since CeaseFire has its roots in Chicago, we decided on typical African American and Latino urban “hoods” with the city as a backdrop (Figure 1).

CeaseFire staff went to actual target sites and took photos that became references for building designs (Figure 2) and textures in SL. The entire build was completed in three months using six builders and two scripters.



Figure 2. Reference photos



Figure 3. Sketch based on reference photos

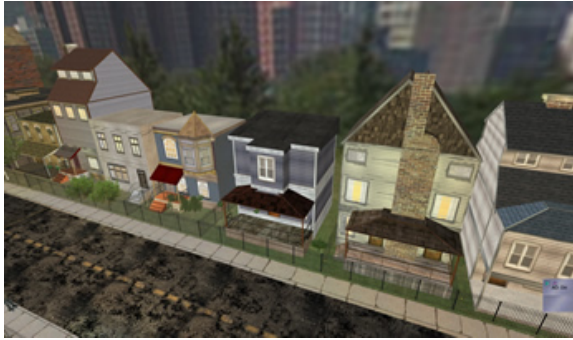


Figure 4. SL Build based on above

THE AUDIENCE

Most CeaseFire case workers are former gang members. The two main groups are “Violence Interrupters” and “Outreach Workers.”

Violence Interrupters (VI) try to anticipate situations that lead to violence, using their street credibility (“street cred”) to keep their finger on the pulse of the community, gather information on how a situation might escalate, and find ways to cool it down. Often the potential violence is retaliatory - someone may have to pay with his or her life if the VI doesn’t stop it. Outreach Workers (OW) work with high-risk individuals who want to change not just their behavior, but their life as well. OW’s work with them to teach them life skills.



Figure 5. Role-playing a gang member

About 99% of the VI’s and 80% of the OW’s have been in prison for violent crimes; some have served more than 20 years. Many of the VI’s were top-tier gang chiefs or shooters. Most have no formal employment experience and very limited or no computer skills – they are on the other side of the digital divide.

Some of the Outreach Workers have completed college, including a few with Masters degrees. These represent driven individuals who have made bad decisions.

THE GOALS

In short, the goal of CeaseFire Island is to help train its workers in the skills it takes to anticipate, and prevent violence. The virtual environment will enable CeaseFire workers both to practice these skills in a realistic environment and to train new workers at any CeaseFire site in the country. Additionally, when these workers train others in the CeaseFire method, they strengthen their own skills as well.

In SL, VI’s learn how to cool down a hot shooter and stop a shooting or how to mediate between two groups in conflict (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Violence Interrupter

OW’s learn how to introduce themselves to prospective clients and learn how to build trust as well as how to create a personal development plan with clients as their relationship deepens by having simulated experiences in SL (i.e., virtual home visit, virtual office visit, virtual banking, etc.).

Although the primary mission in the training is to stop shootings and killings, the goal of virtual CeaseFire is not just reactive training, but also proactive in the form of teaching life skills. In the long term you can’t follow people around all the time and prevent possible violence.



Figure 7. Fast-food restaurant

CeaseFire training involves both behavioral and attitudinal change. For most of these former gang members, the unknown is frightening. Many have been told their whole life that they are incompetent and stupid and have built defenses against that. They often are uncomfortable when confronting the limits of their abilities. Most have learned skills that helped them to survive in the environment in which they grew up – an environment that was often not a nurturing one. There may have been violence, substance abuse, or neglect. And when there was a loving and caring parent or parents, that parent may have been overwhelmed with the hardship of supporting a family with marginal resources. Many had to raise themselves and had no one to help them with life skills.

Society at large expects most people to know what is appropriate at a work environment, how to behave in a restaurant (Figure 8), to get help for themselves, identify resources, negotiate bureaucratic processes., and develop healthy balanced and respectful relationships.



Figure 8. Developing life-skills

So, one of the goals of this SL training is to help

this population to develop these life skills, moving them from high to low risk. The virtual environment is ideal for a safe place to practice and achieve these skills so that they can feel good about themselves and achieve goals through peaceful and not violent means.

THE METHOD

Guided role playing in the virtual world can help to achieve the above mentioned goals – both violence prevention in the form of immediate interventions and prevention in the form of relationship building and life skills.

Second Life provides a virtual platform for CeaseFire trainers to engage trainees and act out scenarios, practice and discuss them.

Violence prevention is traditionally very high stress conflict management situation. The Virtual World is removed from the face-to-face interactions which has several benefits. First, even though one can “experience” high risk situations, there is no real danger in a virtual environment. You can brandish a virtual weapon without the real danger of getting shot. Second, it allows one to take advantage of the abstraction of the Virtual World to unpack violent choices and violent behavior. Third, it allows situations to be observed that are not observable in field conditions.



Figure 9. Practice in a safe environment

VI’s can only operate because they have “street cred” and can be effective in a way that others cannot be. Additionally, because of the sensitive nature of the work – one in which people are often involved in illegal, highly prosecutable activities, including homicide - trust is central and outsiders would not be welcome. An observer would likely be seen as a threat, possibly with the authorities. Therefore, there is

no safe way to capture or evaluate the interactions.

Because there is no reliable way to hold the VI's accountable for the intervention, they cannot get feedback on their behavior or skills. In the Real World, the only measure of success is the outcome – whether someone got shot or not. In the Virtual World, not only can the scenarios be observed, but they can be recorded and discussed at any time.



Figure 10. Steet Corner on CeaseFire Island

CHALLENGES

Most of the target audience are not skilled with computers and many are afraid of them. They are often fearful of making mistakes and looking foolish.. What would it do to their reputation that people say that they can't even sign on to a computer ... something a seven year old can do? It's the unknown that causes anxiety.

Because SL looks game-like, the target audience show more interest than if you just taught computer skills. Just the act of getting an avatar, changing the look, learning basic movements and generally, using the technology, is training in itself. This is also a way to teach them to embrace the technology. As they start to feel more comfortable with it, they can use both the meta-computer skills and the in-world training to move from SL to a job search.

IN CONCLUSION

Virtual World training can take many forms and have varying degrees of success. We all know the power of Virtual Worlds, but often don't understand exactly how to harness it and make it productive. The CeaseFire Virtual Worlds project is an ideal candidate for using the extraordinary capabilities of this unique environment. And success in this project translates directly into tangible and meaningful results – namely, lives being saved. That is

something that everyone can *really* feel good about.

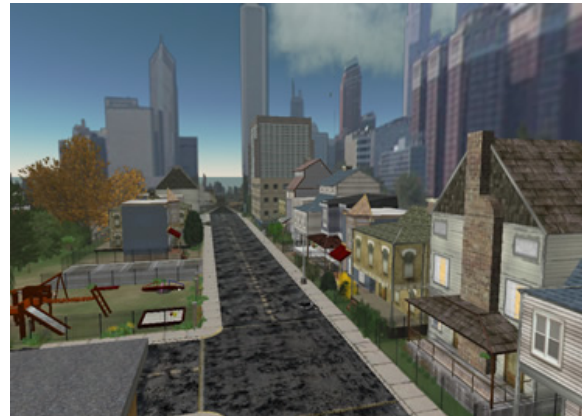


Figure 11. CeaseFire Island neighborhood

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to the fine people at the Chicago Project for Violence Prevention for their kind support in this project. They include, Gary Slutkin, MD, Executive Director;; Candice M. Kane, PhD, Chief Operating Officer, Elena Quintana, Ph.D., Director of Evaluation; and Amanda A. Geppert, M.P.H., National Partnership and Technical Assistance Coordinator. For more information on the projects, see <http://www.ceasefireillinois.org>.

ABOUT CADE

The Center for the Advancement of Distance Education (CADE) is a self-supporting unit within the School of Public Health at the University of Illinois at Chicago. CADE brings innovative technologies, such as games and simulations, to a wide audience both in the field of public health and beyond. CADE specializes in unique, integrated, user-centric solutions. For more about CADE's work in virtual worlds, see <http://www.advancedrealities.com>.

