Project Name

Osw3go.net: Alternate Reality Simulations as Learning Tools

Principal Investigator Ulises Mejias

Campus

Year of Project 2012

Tier Tier Two

Project Team

- John Kane, SUNY Oswego

Overview Summary

Development of a template to support interdisciplinary 'alternate reality' simulations that are collectively played by students using the Web. These simulations ask participants to analyze a fictional problem based on real-life situations, articulate a variety of possible responses to it, and examine the question of what form action should be taken.

Outcomes Summary

Developed [games](#) to investigate issues such as Islamaphobia and hydrofracking.

Project Abstract

Osw3go.net is a parallel universe to Oswego, New York. Specifically, it is an alternate reality simulation. But the participants in Osw3go.net do not inhabit a virtual world where they control anonymous avatars. Rather, they play themselves in the game, interacting with other real members of the Oswego community, and learning about real local and global issues that impact their community.

The concept is based on what is commonly known as an alternate reality game (ARG). ARGs are openended

narratives that are collectively played by participants in real-time using a variety of interactive tools converging in one social media environment. Based on that idea, these alternate reality simulations are exercises in collective storytelling, deliberation and planning in which authentic social issues are explored. This kind of exercise seeks to involve various members of the community in analyzing a real-life problem, articulating a multitude of realistic and possible responses to it, and examining the question of what form action should take after the game. The activity combines an online simulation with face-to-face activities where the experience is discussed and analyzed.

I have been conducting prototypes of these alternate reality simulations for four years, each time exploring a different theme. The 'alternate' realities considered in past simulations have included budget cuts to SUNY, racism on campus, and the local impact of US-Mexico relations. During the simulations, students respond to a number of scenarios, accessing resources in order to inform their participation and better shape their outcome. The resources can include readings, films, news items, and so on. Students do not merely consume resources, but create and share their own, and they can organize and participate in a number of events such as teach-in's, panels, community forums, and even civic engagement projects. One of the 150 participants in this year's simulation, which revolved around the issue of Islamophobia, remarked:

"When I first heard the Islamaphobia course was going to be offered, I have to admit I was a little skeptical to whether I would enjoy the idea of a 'game' style course. As the weeks progressed I was astonished to see the preconceived notions that I had about the Muslim faith and how bias [sic] they were. I can honestly say this short class was one of the most informative classes I have taken while at Oswego. Not only did it challenge me to think critically about the subject, but it forced me to look at other points of view and really open my mind to the way that this religion is viewed. If I was not graduating this semester I would undoubtedly sign up for the next one."

This is representative of the positive feedback the project has been receiving, and it suggests that learning in our times is (or should be) becoming increasingly participatory. Digital media are transforming the way students are accessing, constructing and sharing knowledge, and they are helping instructors go beyond the traditional walls of the classroom. At the same time, the technology is only as good as the pedagogical models that employ it, and the Osw3go.net project demonstrates that simple tools can be applied in new and effective ways. In other words, this proposal is innovative not only in its use of new media, but in the conceptualization of learning methods that purposefully apply technology to the learning process. In a written evaluation of the prototype, one student remarked: "I got more out of this game than I would have ever received from watching the news or reading the paper." Another commented: "Overall this is a great idea and I wish more teachers worked these scenarios into classes to get more students involved."

During the past four years, I have experimented with different open-source platforms for delivering the simulations. Learning from successes and failures, I am ready at this point to customize one of these platforms to create a template that can be used by anyone in any SUNY campus wishing to conduct one of these exercises. In another comment from last year's prototype, a student said: "I believe this is an effective learning tool that could be used for other classes but especially for any controversial topics." To support the premise that these simulations can be applied in a variety of disciplines, the next Osw3go.net simulation in Spring 2013 will adopt a scientific theme: hydraulic fracturing, or fracking.

In applying for Tier 2 funding, it is important to point out that the effectiveness of this model is not based on assumptions or projections--it is already documented by data from the prototypes. As the above comments demonstrate, I have been collecting student feedback and evidence of direct and indirect learning during past alternate reality simulations. Furthermore, I have put together a model that makes it easy for students to track their own participation and for us to collect assessment data.

In order to achieve the goals of the project, I would follow a tripartite approach. First, as per the grant guidelines, I would release the open-source template under a Creative Commons license for anyone to use. Second, I would similarly make available an online manual describing the process of planning and conducting

an alternate reality simulation, including the scenarios for the simulations that have been conducted as part of Osw3go.net. This manual could be shared through initiatives like Open SUNY, SUNY Leaning Commons, etc. Third, I would plan to attend the CIT Conference to disseminate the model, resources, and lessons learned.

Reports and Resources

- [Project website](#)
- [SOAP wiki on Github](#)
- [Oswego news](#)

Instructional Design

- Gamification (Design)
- Online Education
- Student Learning Support