



# Online in a House Divided

By Greg Olgers '87

It's early afternoon, and the computer laboratory on the second floor of the Martha Miller Center for Global Communication is filled with students spending time online.

Through the Internet, the world is at their fingertips, and it's a simple matter to call up the day's newspaper.

It's not an easy read. The country has been becoming increasingly polarized, seemingly

unable to talk across the divide created by deep differences of opinion. Today's headlines report that the situation has turned much, much worse, with armed men having seized a federal building in the hope of drawing attention to their cause.

To some, they're heroes; to others, criminals. Everyone has an opinion, and soon cyberspace is alive with the students sending messages back and forth as they react to what they've just read.

It's October 1859, and John Brown is in Harpers Ferry, Va.

The students are enrolled in a class using Valley Sim, an interactive, online textbook developed by Dr. Christian Spielvogel, associate professor of communication. Valley Sim casts students in the roles of real-life residents of two Civil War-era communities of the Shenandoah Valley: Augusta County, Va., and Franklin County, Pa. Just 200 miles apart, the two counties ultimately found themselves on opposite sides of the destructive conflict.

The goal, Dr. Spielvogel noted, is to bring the war and its issues alive for the students.

"The Valley Sim strives to not only provide an accurate history of the war but create a space whereby students can dramatically understand the motivations and sacrifices of former soldiers, newspaper editors, pastors, farmers, politicians, homemakers, nurses and lawyers," he said.

Dr. Spielvogel began developing Valley Sim during a 2007-08 sabbatical at the University of Virginia, supported by grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Virginia Endowment for the Humanities. He was seeking to more fully realize the educational potential of the Internet as not only a way of obtaining



The department of communication's course in conflict resolution uses 21st century technology in bringing the 19th century to life to help students make sense of their times. Through the Valley Sim, students learn about the Civil War and then engage in its issues through online discussion with each other while portraying real-life members of two communities that were on opposite sides. Junior Anna Bouma-Prediger of Holland, Mich., interacted as Alansa Rounds, a young New Yorker who had relocated to Virginia and sided with her new home. (The background illustration, a work by Edward Beyer in the 1858 *Album of Virginia: Illustrations of the Old Dominion*, shows Stribling Springs in Augusta County, and is courtesy of the Valley of the Shadow archive.)

information but of producing and interacting with others about it—a progression that he dubs "Web 2.0," as opposed to the earlier "Web. 1.0" days of read-only.

"Web 2.0' essentially gives users more opportunities to interact with material—to create content, to share content, and to post in blogs and chat rooms," he said. "It provides more opportunities for students to become engaged."

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The Virginia Center for Digital History at the University of Virginia provided the ideal resource: the award-winning *Valley of the Shadow* digital archive, which contains more than 100,000 digitized photographs, diaries, letters, maps, census records and newspaper articles from the two counties.

Dr. Spielvogel used the materials to develop online newspapers for each community, with each issue carrying the timeline forward four to six months, beginning with Brown's 1859 raid and through the end of the war. Each includes links to photos and other materials from the archives, some about the period's major events but others to convey a sense of the times themselves (like a letter to the editor complaining about spitting tobacco on the church floor), as well as original articles to help put things into context.

Crucially, he also used the archive's detailed biographies and first-person accounts to create 25 "characters" for the simulation—actual residents from the two communities. People like Jed Hotchkiss, the schoolteacher who became Stonewall Jackson's topographical engineer; or Alansa Rounds, who had moved to Virginia from the north and grew to support the southern cause—in opposition to her parents; or Rachel Cormany, a young mother in Franklin County whose husband was a Union cavalryman.

The students choose one of the characters and then role-play that person's perspective of the day's news—say, the Emancipation Proclamation—through online discussion with classmates doing the same. They don't reveal who they're portraying, to deepen the immersion by keeping everyone's focus on the characters and not the players.

Senior Taylor Fox of Clayton, Calif., has participated in the simulation twice: during a pilot session in 2009 and more recently this semester in Dr. Spielvogel's "Communication and Conflict" class. The first time, he played a Union soldier; the second, a Confederate.

"I wanted to see both sides of the coin," he noted.

He was struck particularly by the tone and content of the letters and diaries of his second "character," Brigadier General William Baylor, in light of those of his first.

"It's interesting to read those and find out that he was the same as the guy I played in the north," Fox said. "And that was that he did not want this war, either."

Dr. Spielvogel's interest in engaging students with the Civil War stems from his scholarly focus on conflict resolution and political communication. Outside of character, the students in "Communication and Conflict" reflect together on their experience in the

simulation and the source material, relating the rhetoric and attitudes they encounter to present-day disagreements.

"It's really, really applicable," said junior Anna Bouma-Prediger of Holland, Mich. "It fits really well with the class—what we read about and how we apply it to current conflicts."

The Valley Sim experience doesn't end with Hope. The University of Virginia's Virginia Center for Digital History has been sharing the simulation with dozens of secondary teachers through training sessions to prepare them to use it in their classrooms.

The leader of those sessions, Andy Mink, who is director of educational outreach with the center and was named the 2003 Experimental Education Educator of the Year, appreciates the way that Valley Sim brings the archive to life and extends its reach. "Tools like Chris's give, particularly, younger students a way to make sense of it all," he said.

It's perspective that he sees endorsed by the teachers who, when there are more demands on classroom time than ever, are choosing to add Valley Sim to their curriculum.

"That's actually the evidence—that they're trying it out in their classroom," he said.

Dawn Garvey, a teacher at Corporate Learning Middle School in Virginia Beach, is using the simulation this spring.

"Valley Sim allows my students to not only look at events, opinions, people, and relationships that occurred during the Civil War from a new perspective, but it also allows them to react," she said. "The primary resources available and the capability of Valley Sim are phenomenal. Each student will also be secure in the knowledge that no one that he communicates with, except the teacher, will know his true identity. This allows students to push the envelope without fear of peer repercussion."

Dr. Spielvogel has also made the Valley Sim platform available for others around the U.S. to use in crafting simulations of their own. *Crime Scene: Edinburgh* will take students through a 19th-century murder investigation, *The United Nations Responds to Genocide* will have students portray leaders of the international community, and *Happy Homes*—being co-developed by Dr. Isolde Anderson of the Hope communication faculty—will have students model positive communication message strategies in everyday family-life situations. It's a list that's growing, and Dr. Spielvogel is pleased to see others take his model in new directions.

"I've created something that I'm proud of, but I believe that other teachers and students can make it better and do things with it that I never dreamed of," he said. 🐦



Multiple experiences and goals blended well for Dr. Christian Spielvogel, developer of Valley Sim, his hope to more effectively utilize the Internet as a teaching tool meeting his interest in the Civil War and his scholarly focus on communication in conflict. Other scholars across the nation are now adapting the platform for themed projects of their own.

