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Battling Napoleon in the Western Civ Classroom

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author bio

The following article first appeared in the American Historical Association’s May issue of Perspectives Magazine.

Editor’s Note: Continuing the tradition of publishing descriptions of innovative experiments in pedagogy, we print below an essay about the use of a computer simulation game in a history classroom. To help launch the project, the author received 50 copies of the game from Breakaway Games, Inc., the maker of the game; but he clarifies that students participating in the project now pay for the licensed use of the game and there is no other commercial relationship with the company.

Historians—like other teachers—are always seeking ways to introduce new pedagogical methods into their classrooms. This is especially true for those introductory courses that so easily can consist of nothing more than the tried-and-true classroom lecture. Since 1998 I have been incorporating increasingly sophisticated presentation technologies, the Internet, and computer-based content into my courses. The most recent innovation has been to utilize a historical simulation project, built around a sophisticated computer game, as an important element of my Western Civilization survey class. This article will briefly illustrate what has been learned in developing this program over the past two years and describe the observed outcomes of and student responses to this approach.

As I perused an outstanding Napoleonic history web site, www.napoleonguide.com, seeking battle animations for my Napoleon lecture, I found a review of an upcoming computer game, Austerlitz: Napoleon’s Greatest Victory, developed by Breakaway Games, Ltd. As I investigated further, it became clear that not only did this company display an exceptional understanding of visual pedagogy and game theory, but it also paid very careful attention to the historical details of the battle. The weather conditions, the battlefield topography, the uniforms,
the armies, capabilities of the two sides, the “fog” of war, and much more were effectively and accurately represented. I realized that a well-directed, collaborative student project, centered on competitive student teams, which would engage in computer “combat” operations using the Austerlitz simulation against designated opponents, could result in these students gaining a better appreciation of Napoleon’s generalship, the nature of early 19th-century warfare, and a deeper understanding of the Napoleonic era. After a few phone discussions in the spring of 2002, Breakaway Games agreed to provide 50 copies of Austerlitz for the simulation project. Beginning with the fall semester 2004, students paid a license fee of $12.50 per semester for the use of the game.

Beta Testing a Project

*Before writing the initial parameters of the simulation, beta test the concept.* One of the good things about using computer simulations in the classroom is that concepts can be tested ahead of time. Indeed, one should not incorporate new technological approaches into a course without previewing and testing. With proper planning and beta testing, serious problems with the software or simulation may be discovered before classes begin. There are several important questions to answer and points to address while designing such a classroom project. For instance, how should the simulation be structured to be an effective pedagogical tool? What would it cost? What technical issues need to be addressed? Is the game sufficiently sophisticated and appropriate for use as a simulation? What “bugs” in the proposed project have to be addressed *before* implementing the simulation (and, if the “bugs” are part of the computer program, does the software developer or campus IT department need to be notified)? How much control over the gaming environment should the professor have? I have found, for example, that the game’s settings and level of difficulty should be set by the instructor and provided in the project manual, and should not be altered. If these are left to the students, chaos will result!

Since I lacked any expertise in computer gaming, I had three students who were excellent “gamers” beta test the Austerlitz game to assist me in addressing these questions. Such students can be found on any campus and are an excellent source of information and assistance. Their advice regarding the simulation’s design and potential pitfalls was instrumental in the project’s later success. They later became my unpaid TAs, who would provide training and advice to the project’s participants and give a critical critique at the conclusion of each semester’s simulation.

*Prior to launching any new technologically based program, consult with your IT department.* With the beta testing concluded, the proposed simulation project and the academic goals of the program were discussed with the IT department. Was this a workable project within the technical universe of the Maritime Academy? Sometimes, ambitious projects are just not possible given the technical limitations of a campus. For example, campus computers may not be capable of handling the latest-and-greatest software. If the project is feasible, then one must ask what would be the best way to implement the technical elements of the simulation? In my case, the IT department’s advice and insights confirmed that this was indeed a feasible academic
A majority of present students are not sophisticated computer users. This is important to remember. Just as some historians are slow to embrace new technology, students may not be familiar with the latest technological innovations as well. I have found that 50–60 percent of students in my classes have little experience with computer simulations, 25 percent have some experience, and only 10–15 percent are advanced computer gamers. The diverse range of gaming expertise must be taken into account in assigning the student teams. To address this issue, all students are asked at the beginning of the course fill out a simple form indicating their level of computer game proficiency (none, moderate, or experienced). Using this information, and some other parameters unique to the Maritime Academy as a guide, 3–4 person teams with roughly equal gaming experience, representing either Napoleon or Alexander I, are constituted (by me). Team rosters are posted within the first two weeks of the semester. It is important to ensure that experienced computer gamers are not concentrated on only a few teams.

Provide sufficient time for the student teams to prepare for the simulation. I have found that a 3-4 week training period is vital to the success of the simulation. While it is not difficult to learn the game, students need to be reasonably proficient in operating their units and to develop team cohesion. This is analogous to an army’s combat training. It is also during this period that the teams devise their battle plans and compose a major paper. This training period is followed by “battle week,” during which all teams must engage in the battle simulation against their opponents and report the results to this professor. Each team member must execute the operations under his or her responsibility. No single member of a team is allowed to perform the majority of the battle for the team. Team work and esprit de corps is reinforced by a one-page note (given to every student) on how to work well in collaborative projects. Approximately six weeks is necessary to complete all the requirements of this project.

The Academic Project

The game/simulation is just a tool to enhance a fundamentally academic project; it alone does not create a viable academic experience. Academic work is the major factor in this program. A team’s evaluation is based upon four elements of the project.

First, each team must prepare a formal paper with a minimum of 5 pages (30 percent of the grade) which is due at least a week prior to “battle week”. This paper must include the historical context of the Battle of Austerlitz, the tactical challenges faced by each side, each army’s objectives, a description of the course and outcome of the historical battle, and the team’s tactical plan for victory.

Second, since winning and losing in warfare has serious consequences, the victorious team in the simulation receives a higher grade for this element than its defeated foe. Since this outcome is 30 percent of the grade, this differential does not necessarily have a major effect on the final grade, but it does heighten the competitive aspect of the project. The game itself determines the
score for each team and this is the basis for the battle grade. For example, if the outcome is a “massive victory,” the victor receives a “100′ for this section of the project and the vanquished “65′. However, if it is a “minor victory,” the victor obtains an “85′ and the defeated force an “80′. The only exception to this rule is if a team surrenders and negotiates an outcome.

Third, each team has to compose an after-action report (20 percent of the grade) of 2–4 pages, which analyzes why the team won or lost and to what degree or not the team’s tactics coincided with those used by its side in the historical battle. This report can be challenging for it requires a team to provide an honest self-evaluation of its successes and failures in performing the simulation. Any ‘spin doctoring’ is not allowed.

Finally, each team’s members fill out a peer evaluation form (20 percent of grade) that grades each member’s contributions to the team.

The Gaming Environment is Key

*It is vital for the success of the project to create a competitive environment.* Although the development of team spirit within a team is encouraged (and is indeed required), war and conflict are by definition competitive and this reality must be reflected in the simulation. Otherwise, students will not be as engaged in the project as desired. Competitiveness is heightened several ways. First, the project is valued at 25 percent of the course grade. Second, as already noted, winning and losing the battle can affect the project grade. Additionally, since this is a battle simulation, spying and misinformation are allowed. Teams often find themselves facing many of the quandaries which have confronted historical commanders. Is the received information reliable or part of a misinformation campaign? Is the subverted member of the opposition team truly a traitor or a double agent? Is the opposition’s wish to negotiate sincere or an effort to gain an advantage? As the simulation project has progressed, an increasing percentage of the teams have recognized the possible advantages to be gained by engaging in subterfuge against their opponents. However, there are limits to what is permissible. No computer hacking is allowed, for example, and any team papers held in the professor’s office cannot be read or copied by any participates nor can teams steal their opponents’ plans from dormitory rooms. It is illegal to use online shortcuts to artificially enhance a force’s capabilities or to gain any other advantage outside the simulation’s established parameters. And should one team decide to stop play and surrender, this is scored a major victory for the opposition.

A system to secure the games and to address intellectual property rights needs to be established. All copies of the game are stored in our library and can be only signed out by the students as an overnight loan. It is strongly emphasized that the students have to respect the intellectual property rights of the game’s producer.

The teacher needs only to manage the simulation and does not need to know how to operate the game. This project does not replace any of the standard elements—lecture, papers, and class discussion—of the course.
Final Thoughts and Lessons Learned

Since its inception, approximately 300 students have participated in this simulation project. It has significantly enhanced the presentation of the Western Civilization survey and heightened the students’ engagement in the course. Although this project requires much effort by each student, it has proven very popular, and the benefits have extended well beyond building a better academic understanding of the Napoleonic era. To win, the teams have had to understand the tactics and operational parameters of various military units, and maintain a clear view of the “big picture” without losing sight of the details of battle. Each team had to learn to organize effectively, to work well together having established clear lines of responsibility, to build and execute a strategy, to evaluate and adjust to unforeseen circumstances, to anticipate future situations, and ultimately, to bring all this together in a highly competitive, and often emotionally intense, battle simulation. All these are skills that can spill over from the academic into real-world situations.

Furthermore, the use of computer simulations need not be limited to the field of military history. There are now games on the market that simulate election campaigns, for example, or put the player in a key decision-making position at a determined point in history and challenge him to make a judgment that either conforms to historical events or runs counter to history. It is worth noting that the game itself is not the academic experience. Students still must learn their history so that they understand the game’s context, but simulations can help students learn to weigh and apply historical knowledge in an interesting and competitive environment.

It is clear that history courses lend themselves to the use of simulations as an integral part of their presentation. The simulation model this article has described is only one of many possible approaches that can be considered. For myself, I will continue to incorporate, and to refine, this project in the Western Civilization survey that I teach.

Ronald Smith is professor of history at the Massachusetts Maritime Academy, where he has taught since 1972 and is also an adjunct professor in the history department at Bridgewater State College, Massachusetts. Beginning in 1998, Smith began to incorporate online content into his courses and later integrated computer and Smart Board presentation technology into his lectures. He has presented papers and demonstrations about technology issues in higher education at numerous conferences. Should one wish to discuss this topic further, Professor Smith can be contacted at rsmith@maritime.edu.

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