Video games: New way to prepare students for community service

January 27 2014

Can video and computer games teach college students how to be better community citizens? Educators and researchers at Tufts University's Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service hope so. They're developing and testing Civic Seed, an interactive video game created in collaboration with the Engagement Game Lab (EGL) at Emerson College, to see if it can better prepare college students to engage with the community—and if it can do so more effectively than a non-gaming alternative.

"Student under-preparedness for working in communities is a pressing issue," says Mindy Nierenberg, senior student programs manager at Tisch College and director of the leadership minor in Tufts School of Arts and Sciences.

"On many campuses, students begin participating in community service and internships with little or no knowledge of the history, assets and challenges of the community. These students may carry presumptions that are destructive to the desired outcomes of working in the community," Nierenberg says.

Enter Civic Seed. The multi-player online video game includes multiple game levels that explore community collaboration, professional standards, sustainability, connecting academic interest to career aspirations, and leadership development.

Civic Seed incorporates a wide range of resources within the context of

an online interactive game. These include video clips from community partners such as the Medford Family Network, Somerville Community Corporation and Boston Chinatown Neighborhood Center; faculty and student interviews; whiteboard animations and info graphics. Students discover how to work effectively with community organizations and respond to questions that form a "civic resume," certifying completion of the game. The interactive game takes about two hours to complete.

Nierenberg wrote the game's content, which included input from a committee of students, faculty members and community partners at Tufts. The EGL, an applied research lab focused on the development and study of games, technology, and new media to enhance civic life, developed the game.

Creative Tension

Civic Seed was originally imagined as an online learning tool. "When the EGL team proposed designing it as a video game, the Tisch College team was intrigued but skeptical," says Nierenberg. "I was envisioning a high level of tension between the playfulness of video games and the seriousness of civic engagement."

The team debated such things as appropriate dialogue for the game and ideal length for the embedded video interviews with community leaders, students and faculty members. That "creative tension" ultimately led to a better product, says Nierenberg. Following six months of promising Beta testing with Tufts students, the video platform is set to launch in February 2014 for use by classes and student groups who plan to do community service work or community-based projects.

The idea is to get students to think through their own motivations for doing this work, understand how to effectively collaborate between campus and community, and make connections between service and root

causes of societal challenges Testing Game and Non-game Options

Tisch College is now developing a self-paced non-gaming online module with content similar to what is found in the video game.

"We'll then test the game and non-game versions of Civic Seed," says Nierenberg. "Tufts students will be randomly assigned to either the interactive video game or the self-paced non-game training. Both groups will complete a pre- and post-test questionnaire that will measure things like critical thinking, communication with diverse populations, individual motivations and values and understanding the importance of certain buildings and pieces of land in each community."

The researchers hypothesize that the video game will contribute to enhanced learning about civic engagement.

According to EGL Founder and Director Eric Gordon, "We feel that Civic Seed can show that video games can be used for the greater good in society, in this case providing meaningful civic learning opportunities. Today's culture tends to only focus on how bad video games can be, so we're hoping this project will show the good they can provide to communities."

If so, Tisch College aims to develop a version of Civic Seed that any institution could use for civic engagement preparation. This version of Civic Seed could be available by late 2014.

Provided by Tufts University