ABSTRACT
Designed at Duke University, Virtual Peace brings together digital learning technologies previously used for war simulation with international humanitarian assistance techniques. For two hours, students and educators enter an immersive, multi-sensory game-based environment that simulates real disaster relief and conflict resolution conditions in order to learn first-hand the necessary tools for sensitive and timely crisis response.

DESCRIPTION
In the simulation, based on real life, there is a major international emergency following Hurricane Mitch. The region is devastated. In particular, two countries – Nicaragua and Honduras – are affected most drastically and need urgent assistance. A large number of UN and bilateral agencies and NGOs are available to provide assistance. Effectiveness of such assistance requires intensive planning, coordination, collaboration, and diplomacy, as well as an awareness of the limitations of time and resources. Honduras and Nicaragua are in dire need of immediate international aid, but that aid has to be provided in such a way as to put in place a sustainable recovery program.

On entering the simulation, participants are immediately, viscerally engaged with the effects of the hurricane, as what was previously only text and data becomes film and audio of real events. An opening montage introduces the disaster: On October 24, 1998, Hurricane Mitch quickly became one of the most vicious storms ever to hit the Caribbean. At its height, the hurricane sustained winds of 180 mph, and reached a level of Category 5, the highest on the Saffir-Simpson scale.

Once the magnitude of Mitch became apparent, the governments of Honduras and Nicaragua established national emergency structures to oversee national response, and they requested urgent assistance from the international community. It is in response to this international appeal that the students – representing governments, UN and non-governmental organizations – meet in the Virtual Peace simulation.

Participants, who have learned about their roles in advance, represent 20 different organizations, including OCHA: The UN Office for the Coordination of Human Affairs; UNDP: The United Nations Development Program; WFP: The World Food Program; UNICEF: The United Nations Children's Fund; USAID/OFDA: The United States Agency for International Development/Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance; The Office of Foreign Affairs for Nicaragua; The Office of Foreign Affairs for Honduras, in addition to several other international relief agencies. Their task: to negotiate the specific commitments of cash, in-kind and personnel donations that will address immediate needs such as medical assistance, security, water, shelter and food. They also respond to larger issues such as logistical coordination and political rehabilitation.

LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES
Participants represent the governments and organizations that had a role in providing emergency response and early recovery following Hurricane Mitch, and data concerning relief needs and available resources reflect the actual conditions of this international crisis. Rather than simply mirroring real-life events, however, the simulation provides an opportunity for learners to use their skills of analysis and knowledge of concepts, frameworks, and best practices to respond more efficiently and effectively to the disaster.
RESOURCES

The simulation was developed by Duke researchers, in collaboration with Virtual Heroes, a developer known for its work on the military training simulation “America’s Army.” It repurposes the technology used in video games such as World of Warcraft to help train the next generation of international negotiators.

Each participant assumes a role by way of a first-person perspective avatar designed to look like real figures in the international aid community. Wearing a head-set with microphone, they talk via voice- and text-channels within the game-space, which is designed to look much like the real venues where these representatives might convene.

In addition to the simulation, Virtual Peace uses two important pedagogical tools to achieve its aims: the Virtual Peace website and an in-classroom after-action review session.

Before entering the simulation, participants will use the website to gain essential information, including specific details about the extent of the hurricane’s devastation, the needs of the affected people, and the goals of and resources available to their particular governmental or organizational roles, as well as links to important international aid documents. In the two-hour live simulation session, they will interact with one another to achieve successful relief and recovery for the affected people in a way that will best reflect the values and goals – from immediate hunger and medical relief to long-term, sustainable rebuilding plans – of the collaborating governments and organizations.

During the session, virtual tools keep track of needs-met in real-time updates of a chart of commitments, and of the dialogue among the participating parties.

AUDIENCE/GROUP SIZE, FACILITATOR ISSUES and ASSESSMENT

Classes of 16 to 20 participants adopt one role each, presenting their views to the group at large, and then breaking out into smaller groups for planning and negotiations. During the two-hour simulation, moderators can “fly” around to observe the conversations and send “curveball” messages to particular participants to simulate unexpected crises.

Participants and moderators are able to digitally bookmark important events. Afterwards, together, they dissect the simulation experience in order to chart successes and teachable moments, and to ultimately emerge prepared for actual crisis response. Together they can assess whether important goals were met, if participants properly represented the values and practices of their government or organization, and how they could work more effectively in the future.

REFERENCES AND LINKS