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 hopes of drawing attention to what theyoze just read.

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

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 as 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.

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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, politicians, homemakers, nurses and lawyers," he said.

By Greg Olgers '87

Campus Profile

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, cartoon 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 archive, 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 bodyguard; or Alanna Rounds, who had moved to Virginia from the north and grew to support the southern cause—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 Bleyler, 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 is interested 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 Breuma-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 Milk, who is director of educational outreach with the center and was named the 2001 Experimental Education Educator of the Year, appreciates the way that Valley Sim brings the archive to life and extends its reach. "Tools like Clin's give, particularly, younger students a way to make sense of it all," he said.

It's perspective that he's seen 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 classrooms," he said.

Dawn Garvey, a teacher at Corporate Learning Middle School in Virginia Beach, is trying it out 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 something new in the form of conflict. They will communicate with, except the teacher, will know who tells the story and who receives the students portray leaders of the international community, and Happy Honeymoon—being co-developed by Elizabeth Anderson of the Hope Communication faculty—will have students model positive communication strategies in everyday family-like situations. It's a lot 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 always want to see what others will develop from it. It can make it better and do things with it that I never dreamed of," he said.