What would it be like to be inside the White House at the time of a world crisis? That’s what visitors to a new interactive program at the Reagan Library can find out. Using cutting-edge technological programming, hardware and educational theory, "The Situation Room Experience" offers students a 360° view of what it’s like to be at the core of an emergency.

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The Situation Room Experience is amazingly life-like. This is the opposite of virtual reality. It is an educational simulation—which kids today really need. Most kids have a relationship with an electronic device. This is an experience based on human interaction.

How does it work?
We typically have groups of high school or college students. Various roles are assigned to each student from Secretary of Defense to network newscaster.

I'm seeing three different areas: White House Press Room, Situation Room and a Hospital Command Center.

Once students have roles assigned, we drop them into a modern, fictional foreign policy crisis based on an event from the Reagan administration. Every detail in the simulation has a "historical analog" to what happened in 1981, when President Reagan was shot and Vice President Bush was out of Washington. There were a couple of hours when essentially no one was in charge.

I understand the simulation uses actual historical artifacts ...

In 2006, during the administration of President George W. Bush, they decided to renovate the Situation Room. Nine sitting presidents had used it. So the table, chairs, TVs, microphone, carpet—even instructions on how to put on a gas mask that were taped on a cabinet door—everything was literally removed, put in crates and shipped here.

How did you go about creating this experience?
I had access to records of what happened that day including the National Security Advisor's records. I wrote 600 pages of content.

I noticed the students get to use tablets and Twitter.
We needed to use current technology but we wanted it to facilitate human interaction. Students get information in real time and make decisions that can change the direction of the story, but the simulation is really about people talking to each other and making decisions that have real consequences.

Are there any surprises or revelations?
Students get an understanding of how hard it must be to be in charge and how easy it is for misunderstandings to occur in the heat of the moment. Some of the kids are surprised at their ease in taking a leadership role. Sometimes we'll see a shy kid blossom as they take on a role like Director of Communications.

What is your background and what's next for you and your firm, Wishcraft Simulations?
I put on large-scale social games at national conventions (Battlestar Galactica, Game of Thrones). Going forward, I'm working with the Reagan Library in joint projects with Mount Vernon, the home of George Washington, and a Middle Eastern coup scenario with UCLA.

How come one of the four electronic clocks above the TVs notes the time in, of all places, India?

No idea. The day that they removed all the items from the White House in '06, for some reason, the time in India was something they were watching.

For more, go to situationroom.archives.gov