



Something about simulations

By Clark Aldrich

Most e-Learning companies have at least one senior-level person who has worked for Oracle, PeopleSoft, SAP, Baan or Cisco. It's no wonder, then, that many of the industry's new e-learning tools are being sold as enterprise applications, and are getting closer every day to becoming either enterprise resource planning (ERP) or knowledge management systems.

The fact that both vendors and their customers are focusing so much on infrastructure is, in essence, a huge promissory note. Everyone seems to be promising that sophisticated content is coming soon to make these purchases worthwhile.

Probably the best model to fill the hole will be immersive simulations — courses that put students into a role and give them a problem to solve. By early 2002, a slew of off-the-shelf business simulations are expected to become available. You can already hear the marketing machines revving into high gear.

Yet many of the companies developing these simulations will disappear by 2003. Building a good simulation is a difficult, high-stakes gamble for vendors. And because of the number of options that will be available, choosing the right one will not be easy for customers.

When evaluating simulations, consider these points:

Keep it real.

Some simulation providers use metaphorical or fantasy settings, but be careful: In order to be effective, the scenarios must be authentic and relevant to the task at hand.

Pressure works.

When students are forced to make a series of quick decisions, they're less likely to get bored and drop out of a course. In a negotiation course, for example, pressure helps participants learn when to force issues and when to sit back and wait.

Keep the options open.

Users should feel like they have unrestricted options, albeit within the relatively small simulated world. Every time the user hits a wall, it breaks the mood.

Go beyond multiple choice.

Many early, misguided simulation models relied on "entertainment," such as using a loud game show setting to present simple multiple choice questions. In effective simulations, lessons come from the way the environment responds to the students, not from bells and whistles.

Replay it again, Sam.

Just as a pilot in a flight simulator can try conservative and aggressive strategies and weigh the advantages of each, a business simulator must allow users to try different approaches and see the results of their choices.

Have it your way.

When a company spends a large sum of money on a simulation, it should expect something that's customized to its unique culture, in the same way that people buying new cars can order different styles and options.

Brand it.

Hot companies, magazines and even business schools will be able to attach their names to worthy' simulation products. Branding strengthens learners' commitment and provides an assured base for the vendors' expensive content.

Give people time to think.

Learning requires some mulling. A good simulation will extend the learning past the actual course, acting as a standalone performance support tool after students have gone through the training.

Other problems

Even if you buy a simulation that meets all of these criteria, there will still be challenges to conquer. Until bandwidth limitations are overcome, good simulations will be delivered by CD-ROM, although some synchronization will happen over the Web. Users' computers will need drivers such as DirectX, and will require more horsepower than the traditional corporate standard.

Two simulation companies, Cognitive Arts and Ninth House Network, have laid some ground here. However, both have relied too much on precanned branching video and not enough on dynamically generated computer animation.

Evolving simulation technology is just one more reason to avoid committing to a contract with an e-Learning vendor for more than two years. The

primary content providers probably won't be good at producing these simulations, and today's learning management systems won't be able to run them.

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