

PABLO SUAREZ: At the Red Cross/Red Crescent Climate Center, our job is to help others understand and address what's going on with climate change and with extreme events-- hurricanes, typhoons, too much rainfall, peak temperatures. And these things are complicated. This science is complex. And how to turn science into action is not easy if you're too busy to learn. Most of our colleagues in the humanitarian sector are insanely busy.

When science is communicated, it is very often either incomprehensible or difficult to link to ongoing humanitarian processes. So about six, seven years ago, we started with creating playful activities where participants in a workshop have to make decisions that have consequences. And that's at the core of games. Games are systems where you have to make a decision with limited information.

You're trying to accomplish something, and you don't really know what may happen because there's something in the system that you don't control-- which can be the weather. It can be what other people do. It can be just you're not fully understanding the system. In our experience as humanitarian workers, trying to infuse awareness of complexity into our work, games are the most wonderful tool to wet the appetite, to make people want to learn more and want to do better.

It has been beautiful to work with the MIT Game Lab. We have, as Red Cross family, access to a lot of talent, a lot of enthusiastic brain power that combines analytical competence with creative juices. That is prevalent in the field of game design and among students of games. What we find at MIT is that it's much easier to link to other departments that are directly connected to what we do.

It can be about environmental engineering. It can be about climate science. It can be about technology development. So this partnership is the beginning of something that is inevitably going to grow, to grow beautiful, to grow big. It was also really nice to see how the MIT Game Lab is well-connected to other partners that we have in the game design sector, such as the Engagement Lab at Emerson or the PETLab team at Parsons, and the awareness of reach in the world of serious games. Games that are not just as a playful activity, but with the intention to improve the world somehow.

We could always do better as partners of the academic team if we could allocate more time.

Unfortunately, it is in the very nature of our Red Cross work that we have to travel insanely. I was out of the country for at least half of the time when the course happened. So we did bring in partners and friends who gave a hand. But I think one of the key challenges for this kind of partnership between game related academia and humanitarian teams is to find ways to interact more frequently, more deeply, to learn about each other. We just don't know how we can do more with the limited time we have.

When students engage with partners, clients from the real world, it is not easy for them to get into the shoes of the institution of the organization that has to try to accomplish things. So one of the most important things that we can offer as partners in this course was to give a flavor of the context in which the game would be played. So we have the team working on cholera prevention in West Africa. And they developed a video game that had the flavor of modern wealthy homes. And in West Africa, most of our target audience-- if you're trying to prevent cholera-- chances are they are poor, and the aesthetics need to resonate.

It can be about a super stellar context, or it can be about a thatched roof, but it should be something that can evoke engagement on the part of the player. And that's not easy for students to find out. They actually have to do research on what does a home in West Africa look like?

The other thing we can do is to help narrow down and focus on what matters to us in terms of the gain in forming better decisions, and to weed away and filter out all the things that students want to include because they can. But that's not a good enough reason. Just the fact that it's technically feasible or that you like it, doesn't mean that it should make it into the final prototype.

There were many other things that were a lot of fun in terms of engagement with students that I think were useful to them. In particular, to see how they could get inspired by being aware of how their technical competence can be useful for development work, for humanitarian work, for actually physically saving lives in the long term, or to help people engage with each other in other continents, in other contexts, in fields that they don't even know, but they can help.

When an academic team is offering student brain power and air time during a course for an organization-- specifically in games but also more broadly-- it is our experience that it takes more time than we think to develop the relationship and to understand how we can really get juice out of it. And it is always worth starting. If the client organization, if the partner-- like in our

case, the Red Cross family-- can find someone who spends a little bit of time at the beginning, a little bit of time reviewing prototypes, and some feedback along the way, it's definitely worth it.

But don't expect magic solutions. Don't expect people to be able to read your mind. We come from different universes. And we have an opportunity to bring the real world to academia. By just showing up and spending time, but also to bring academic brainpower, talent, and creativity into our work.

One of the things that I have to say with enormous pride is that one of the prototypes that emerged from one of the groups in this course was actually used in three global events and helped hundreds of people in real time learn what was being thought about. People entered three words as individuals. There were 100 or more people in the room, and everyone saw a word cloud that emerged through very fun game play.

And this can really help, but we need to be aware of the time it takes to mature. We have been working with game designers for at least six years. And that really helped us channel our energy in a more narrowly defined way. Otherwise, it's very easy to go broad and to be disappointed. Be prepared to acknowledge your own limitations, but be prepared to explore the space of possibility.

So the game Snap is already ready to deploy-- has been deployed. I hope we can refine the user interface to give more choices to the facilitator and so on. But that is one game that I predict will be able to change the way real-world events happen. I have that admission. I think we can do something with it. Of the many other games that were good because they were more about a subject matter that is outside of Cambridge, Massachusetts, they will take more time to refine.

I'm very excited about the Cholera game, which we now have a partnership with UNICEF. And we anticipate the demand from UNICEF Guinea, in particular, to try to add digital flavors to their relationship to schoolchildren in prevention of anything-- in promotion of the things that help-- like hand washing with soap, which we take for granted here. But in other parts of the world, they just have to choose between soap and food. It's hard to make that case.

And some of the other game prototypes have very insightful game mechanics-- how to display territory in a small screen. How to display quantities for decisions in terms of disaster preparedness. The representation on a game on heat wave of how people can just collapse if

they think they can just go out and walk on an excessively sunny, hot day.

These are things that are there, are latent, and we have opportunities to work deeper either with these students or with future students of MIT and beyond. They will need more time to refine. And we have, as Red Cross, more work to do in terms of identifying the potential player and identifying what are the decisions that can be improved, or what are the discussions that can be enriched by engaging in this game experience.

From the Red Cross/Red Crescent Climate Center and from the humanitarian family, I hereby thank profusely the MIT Game Lab, and by extension, game designers that have helped us become partners with you now, for setting up a space where we can learn how magically powerful but analytically clear game play can be to help accomplish humanitarian goals. Thank you so much.