Game tackles global issues

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ONLINE games aren't just for fun, they can help change the world, according to science film-maker Annamaria Talas.

Instead of creating another documentary to draw attention to global issues such as deforestation, Ms Talas is developing a social network game called The Hive to really put people in the picture.

It's a little like Farmville with a social conscience - if you plant a tree in the game's online forest, you can pay an extra 50c and a real tree will be planted in a decimated forest somewhere in the world.

Ms Talas is getting development support from the Smart Infrastructure Facility at the University of Wollongong, where she addressed a seminar yesterday.

"Gamers are said to be time-wasters but we think with the right games they can become the unlikely savours of our most pressing problems like the depletion of our natural resources, or climate change," Ms Talas said.

"The only solution to maintain life in this finite world is co-operation. But instead of just preaching about global co-operation in a documentary, we want to give our audience a tool they can use and be part of. By playing the game they can change the world now."

Ms Talas said The Hive, which should be operational by early next year, was expected to attract millions of users.

"It's a village-building game, where you are the leader of your village and you have villagers ... who you have to feed, house and entertain," she said.

"You are reliant upon the nearby forest for everything - food, materials, tools. This is where the conflict comes in - do you just look after the interests of your own village by depleting the natural resources, or do you put the long-term interests of the whole Hive world first and plant trees to keep the forest sustainable?"

UOW professor of simulation and modelling Pascal Perez said the Smart Infrastructure Facility was keen to help develop the game.

"We would like the university to be one of the hubs in Australia where this game will start to grow," he said. "It will be a transmedia project that will be linked to related educational material that can be used by schools, universities and communities.

"It's exciting because for the first time a virtual gaming environment will have direct impact on the reality of villages in some areas of the world."

Networking: Science film-maker Annamaria Talas and UOW Professor Pascal Perez are developing an innovative problem-solving online game.

Ms Talas said she would be working with conservation organisations such as the World Wildlife Fund and WeForest to identify the areas in need.

Smith & Nash - a partnership between entrepreneur Dick Smith and film maker Simon Nash - is a driving force behind the project, which has also received funding from Screen Australia and Screen NSW.