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# Online Role Play as a Complementary Learning Design for the First Fleet Database

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## **Abstract**

Pedagogically, databases of primary source data provide students with a learning experience based on the inquiry learning model however, observations of students and teachers in the past 20 years have indicated that database searching is shallow and investigation perfunctory. Before, we could have blamed unwieldy search engines. The online version of the First Fleet Database has removed this obstacle, but students' research skills still appear to be limited. Other pedagogical strategies have been added to that of the database strategy, for example a discussion forum to enable learners to publish and debate their opinions on history. However our statistics show that the forum is the least used part of the site. Although this in part can be solved by the way the teacher sets up the class dynamics, we have added online role play as another pedagogical strategy to complement the others. Hopefully the role play will lead students into deeper searching of the database as they become more engaged in developing an understanding of the lives of others. The role play has been used with two online classes in different contexts in the past year. The evaluations from these classes suggest recommendations about the key role of moderator/s; effects of non-participation; connecting character descriptions to the learning outcomes; and preparation of kick-start scenarios to follow the kick-off scenario. All of the above impact on the design of role plays in general in other topic areas, especially if the role play is to be made transferable to other teachers.

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Role play, database, history, instructional design, enquiry learning, online collaborative learning

## **Disciplines**

Arts and Humanities | Social and Behavioral Sciences

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# **ONLINE ROLE PLAY AS A COMPLEMENTARY LEARNING DESIGN FOR THE FIRST FLEET DATABASE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Pedagogically, databases of primary source data provide students with a learning experience based on the inquiry learning model however, observations of students and teachers in the past 20 years have indicated that database searching is shallow and investigation perfunctory. Before, we could have blamed unwieldy search engines. The online version of the First Fleet Database has removed this obstacle, but students' research skills still appear to be limited.

Other pedagogical strategies have been added to that of the database strategy, for example a discussion forum to enable learners to publish and debate their opinions on history. However our statistics show that the forum is the least used part of the site. Although this in part can be solved by the way the teacher sets up the class dynamics, we have added online role play as another pedagogical strategy to complement the others. Hopefully the role play will lead students into deeper searching of the database as they become more engaged in developing an understanding of the lives of others.

The role play has been used with two online classes in different contexts in the past year. The evaluations from these classes suggest recommendations about the key role of moderator/s; effects of non-participation; connecting character descriptions to the learning outcomes; and preparation of kick-start scenarios to follow the kick-off scenario. All of the above impact on the design of role plays in general in other topic areas, especially if the role play is to be made transferable to other teachers.

## **KEYWORDS**

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## **THE FIRST FLEET DATABASE**

The database of 778 convicts who arrived on the First Fleet to Australia in 1788 has been an *electronic* educational resource since 1980. It was developed for the Tasmanian Education Department's statewide timeshare network by the first-named author of this paper. The data was based on the works of Cobley (1970) and Robson (1973).

In 1982 it was distributed free to all Australian schools on a 5 inch floppy disk for Apple II computers. Sponsored by Apple and the Department of Industry as part of National Information Technology Week, it was the first educational software containing all-Australian content. Because of memory constraints, the data was heavily coded.

It was re-versioned on a number of occasions for different brands of computers and operating systems, but the data did not change. In fact along the way, various versions produced by enthusiasts, without asking or acknowledging the original creator, introduced corrupted data without realising it.

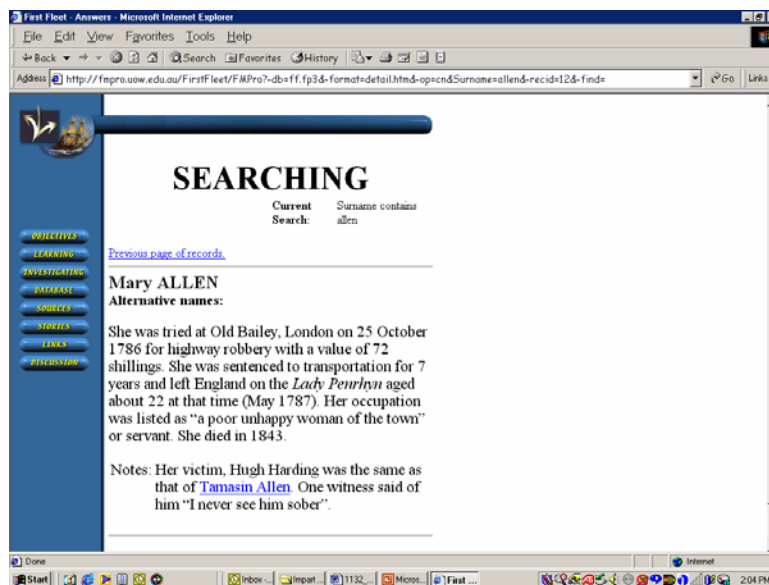
Now very few educational institutions have retained the computers that can run the First Fleet Database and the content was being lost to the next generation of students. So the

content has been re-purposed for the Internet and has been available via a site at the University of Wollongong (<http://FirstFleet.uow.edu.au>) since 1999. A paper for ACEC2000 describes its 20 year journey in more detail (Wills & Bunnnett, 2000). The data in the database part of the website is downloadable and we have had many requests for a standalone version for schools that do not have enough internet capacity. We have recently completed a standalone version (v.1) on CDROM in File Maker Pro and, after evaluation, v.2 will be available later in 2002.

The rich and interesting set of data has been expanded and updated in free text format, using Gillen's book (1989) which provides information about what happened to the convicts once they arrived in Australia. The data now looks very different from its first appearance as heavily coded and abbreviated text with limited and unwieldy search capabilities. The first version of the software provided results in this format:

```
G/NAME: MARY                SURNAME: ALLEN
                               ALIAS: NONE
SEX: F                      SHIP: L                AGE: 22
PLACE: OLD BAILEY          DATE: 25-OCT-86
CRIME: HIGHWAY ROBBERY    VALUE: 72
SENTENCE: T                TERM: 7
TRADE: SERVICE, PROSTITUTE
```

The abbreviations used in the first version have now been converted to plain English and the automatic output is in friendly sentence format (see Mary Allen below). The partners in crime are hyperlinked and the records of over 150 of the convicts indicate that their partner in the original crime was transported on the First Fleet and that about 170 married and/or had children with each other. The relationships between the convicts on the First Fleet make an interesting and revealing research topic.



Previous versions were command driven rather than menu driven. An understanding of Boolean logic was required in order to construct search requests. Constructing such sentences was a time consuming and unsatisfactory exercise given the abbreviated data. Users of the new *First Fleet OnLine* however can get results quickly without grappling with the complexities of logic. *First Fleet OnLine* is a File Maker Pro database delivered via the web. Web browsers automatically provide powerful search engines that are both comprehensive and quick. Many of the requests can be handled via pull down options.

The speed of receiving search results over the Internet is actually faster than any previous version of the First Fleet on a stand-alone microcomputer.

The first version in 1980 contained only the database and teaching notes which were aimed at assisting computing teachers to help students understand databases and computer searching, since without these skills the students could not get to the historical content. Subsequent versions recognised its use in teaching history, in addition to teaching computing, and the accompanying resources were of historical nature rather than technical: wall charts, maps, overhead masters, worksheets, activities etc (Wills et al, 1985).

The nature of multimedia and the web means that the site can now package both the database and accompanying resources together. The site links to other related Internet sites on history, Aborigines, and immigration, thus providing multiple points of view on the issues raised by white settlement of Australia. Links include the Tasmanian Library Heritage Collection Image Database, the Irish Transportation Records, and the Australian Literature Database at University of Sydney. An interactive map of the route of the First Fleet provides links to the web sites of the modern day cities on the route, for example Rio de Janeiro. Some examples of journals and letters from the time are also online at the site plus a scan of an original handwritten record so that students can see the difficulty that historians experience in transcribing incomplete and indecipherable historical records.

Often included with the convict records are their signatures (from Gillen) and this feature has proven to be a real winner with users, particularly those who can trace a First Fleeter as an ancestor. In addition, the accompanying materials include guidance on the nature of enquiry, framing questions, and sorting out evidence to support hypotheses: metacognitive activities that act as warm-ups for the mental gymnastics involved in making serious use of *First Fleet OnLine*.

### **Changing our concept of interactivity**

*First Fleet OnLine* aims to be a model of online teaching and learning, emphasising not only the potential of the Internet to rapidly publish content but also its potential for enabling learners to query and manipulate the content themselves. But the Internet enables even more. It can facilitate meaningful communication and debate between teachers and learners. Via the forum and feedback forms, students, the general public and researchers are enabled and encouraged to question the data and/or send more data to be added, hopefully demonstrating that history is not static and that our perspectives on it are constantly changing. First Fleet descendants in particular have much to debate about the way their ancestors are represented: often the “facts” presented via court records and officials’ journals are at odds with the “facts” passed down via aural traditions.

Previously, with the database on stand alone microcomputers, interactivity was defined as the capacity of the software to enable people to interrogate and manipulate the data on the hardware (Wills, 1994). Now the definition of interactivity is expanded to encompass the capacity of the software to enable people to communicate with other people, not just with the hardware.

### **Evaluation of the database**

Online publishing of educational materials provides a venues for evaluation not possible before. It is easy to add a feedback form to the site and extremely easy for users to respond, anonymously or otherwise. Having a feedback form does not guarantee feedback, however *First Fleet OnLine* is receiving approximately three emails per week from anywhere in the world (mainly Australia, and some UK & USA). This represents about 15 percent of the hits to the site recorded by the statistics counter.

Feedback is requested in three areas:

- accuracy of the historical content
- experience of learning online
- usefulness of learning about learning.

To date, most feedback received has focussed on the first area, a small amount for the second area, and almost none for the third. The users who *do* provide feedback appear task oriented and occupied with the search for family links. This audience does not find it necessary to comment on the second two areas as they are competent researchers and competent internet users. In general, the other audience, school students, do not send feedback other than requests for further information about the officials, which misses the point – the database is about the ordinary people who founded white Australia, not about the officials who traditionally form the basis of history lessons.

Shockingly, some school students also often send requests for answers to their assignments, expecting ready-made answers, by tomorrow (!), rather than investing their own time and energy into researching the topic. Often these requests come in batches indicating that a whole class has been set the First Fleet as an assignment and these requests probably represent the percentage in the class who are not very engaged with the topic and are adopting a surface approach to learning.

It is easy to invite, receive and analyse evaluative data electronically however it cannot be the only method evaluators rely on. We have also reviewed the site via a focus group of history teachers and a focus group of educational designers.

### **Improving students' research skills**

Pedagogically, databases of primary source data provide students with a learning experience based on the inquiry learning model: framing questions, collecting evidence, making judgements from incomplete evidence. Do users take up the opportunities offered by the powerful searching capabilities of the web site? Observations of students and teachers in the past 20 years and email requests from students using the online version have indicated that searching is shallow and investigation perfunctory. Before, we could have blamed unwieldy search engines. Now that this obstacle appears to have been removed, we are evaluating whether we have achieved our educational goal of improving students' research skills.

### **Improving the site's communication capabilities**

In evaluating the site to date, it is noticeable that the forum is the least used component of the site. Currently the *First Fleet OnLine* uses a very basic forum tool, majordomo, a tool not adequate to the multiple, and sometimes conflicting, tasks of providing the students with threaded discussions, the forum manager with editorial and filtering capabilities, and participants with advice of new contributions direct to their email address.

More work is yet to be done in improving the tool used for communication however the main reason for under-use of the forum is probably because the site has not been used in one virtual distributed class as a coordinated teacher-facilitated activity. If it is used in one class, that class is meeting face to face so discussion occurs face to face rather than via the forum. In addition, the site is mainly discovered by individual learners researching the topic of the First Fleet so there is no time for them to participate in, or benefit from, discussion via a forum. However, it also a common complaint of novice educational web site designers that nobody uses the forums (Harisim et al, 1995). Unless participation in forums is tied to assessment and unless the teacher designs real-world collaborative activities which provide a meaningful reason for participation, the forum will remain an under-utilised, albeit potentially pedagogically powerful, feature of web sites for teaching and learning.

Harisim outlines a number of learning approaches that can be adopted in an online communications environment in addition to the “ask an expert” and informal peer support that is resident in the site so far: mentorship, tutor support and structured group activities.

Structured group activities include:

seminars	small group discussions
learning partnerships & dyads	student work groups & learning circles
team presentations & teaching by the learners	debating teams
peer learning groups	networked classrooms
virtual cafes	simulation or role play (see next section).

It is this last learning approach that we decided to adopt for the First Fleet to boost the communications and collaboration aspects above the content aspects.

## **ROLE PLAY**

Role play is a subset of simulations and is sometimes called role play simulation. Gamson (1966) used face to face role playing (SimSoc) to make college-level social science more vivid to students. Online simulations are not new and are well established in the many MUDs and MOOs available online. These are synchronous role plays because the interactions are mediated via avatars. Characters can interact when both are online at the same time.

Role plays have often been used for management training but less often for other discipline areas. In Australia pioneering work in asynchronous online role plays has been done by Andrew Vincent in politics (1998), Mark Freeman in Economics (1999), Andrea Chester in Psychology (1998), Robert McLaughlan in Engineering (2001) and Maureen Bell in Education (2001).

Jones (1995 in Marshall 1999) defines two essential characteristics for a simulation:

- the participants have functional roles
- sufficient information is provided on an issue or a problem to enable the participants to function as professionals.

However it is also essential in the design that:

- there be an issue or problem to be negotiated or solved and that
- participants have to communicate and collaborate in order to share the varying pieces of information they may each possess.

Hence whereas the First Fleet database is about content, the First Fleet role play simulation is about both content and collaboration. It is the analysis and synthesis of information by a group that provides the powerful learning experience in this type of learning design. A fifth optional but interesting characteristic is when:

- the information available to participants includes personality, social relationships and/or political positions for the roles they adopt.

We see the following steps as helpful in understanding how to go about designing a role play:

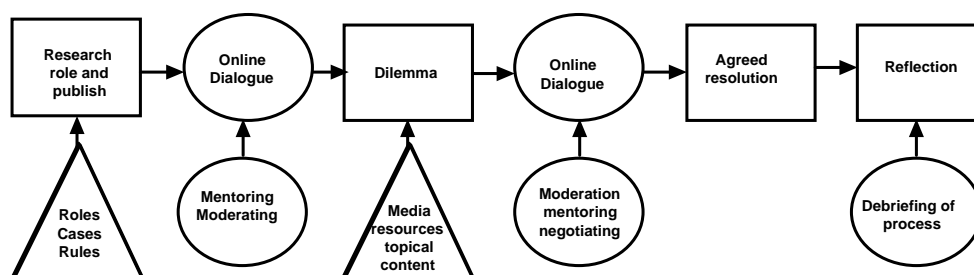
articulation of learning objectives	content objectives affective objectives
engaging scenarios	case study problem vehicle to develop first person experience
effective roles	selection of roles number of roles role specific information
information and information gaps	orientation specific information published information
interaction rules	meeting places social structure
kick start episodes	a crisis or previously private issue becomes open

Online role plays are conducted via email or a combination of email and web-based threaded discussion forum. This is a cost effective strategy because we do not rely on rich graphics to convey the context and “interactivity” – instead the learner is actively participating in constructing the simulation collaboratively, using text in emails. It is not virtual reality via immersion in a computer-generated world but it is constructed reality in the students’ mind via their own imagination. It’s much more affordable, vivid and effective than VR.

We can define online role plays as “dynamic goal-based learning”. Given that all roles must respond 'in character' to an initial scenario, and further, must respond to the actions of other roles, a reflexive and dynamic process emerges that continuously provides participants with the impact of their own actions on the context. The main challenge in designing the kick start episodes is to create motivation for the roles to act and to act as a matter of urgency. Thus, the roles must acquire more information, reflect and then adjust their further actions in order to reach their goals, or indeed perhaps even alter or abandon them and set new ones.

### THE FIRST FLEET ROLE PLAY

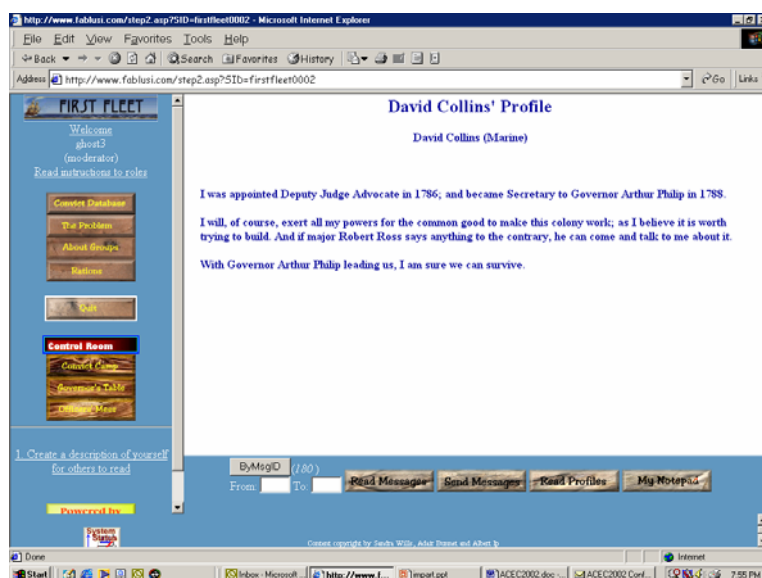
In general online role plays, as devised initially by Vincent and Shepherd (1998), follow this temporal sequence (Oliver et al, 2002). Squares represent tasks, triangles represent resources and circles represent supports.



The first task is for each participant to publish a public profile of their character. Although they will have been provided with some information about their character, they may choose not to reveal all in this first public profile, saving some for later to better aid their strategy. Here is an example of one student’s portrayal of their character, David Collins in the First Fleet role play. He does not say that, despite being married in



England, he is in relationship with a convict Nancy Yeates, even though it's probably a badly kept secret in the new colony.



### Role play generator

Although simulation and role play are pedagogically powerful teaching techniques, they are difficult to design (Shirts, 1975) and often very expensive. To add a role play to the First Fleet, we are using an online role play generator called Fablusi, developed by the second-named author. Underlying support for collaboration has been provided by Fablusi – as designers we need only define the social structure among the characters and create the scenario for interesting interaction, instead of worrying about programming (and the budget). Fablusi's authoring interface makes it easier for learning designers to create role play simulations. It also provides many tools to facilitate administration of a role play.

Fablusi supports a large number of roles in any role play, for example, Linser, Naidu and Ip (1999) reported on an earlier version of the generator used in Political Science at the University of Melbourne with over 80 roles. However, such a rich interaction is a fairly challenging task for students and to achieve specific learning objectives, the selection of a representative group of characters is probably more important.

For the First Fleet Role Play we selected specific instances from the early days of the First Fleet's arrival when everything had to be built from scratch and a range of interesting characters rose to meet the challenges, for example, the arguments and decisions about allocation of rations and how to make convicts work in the gardens when they were at the same time on near-starvation rations. This fits Freeman's suggestion that role playing works best where there is a natural conflict between concepts and where participants can bring strong pre-conceptions or misconceptions to the class.

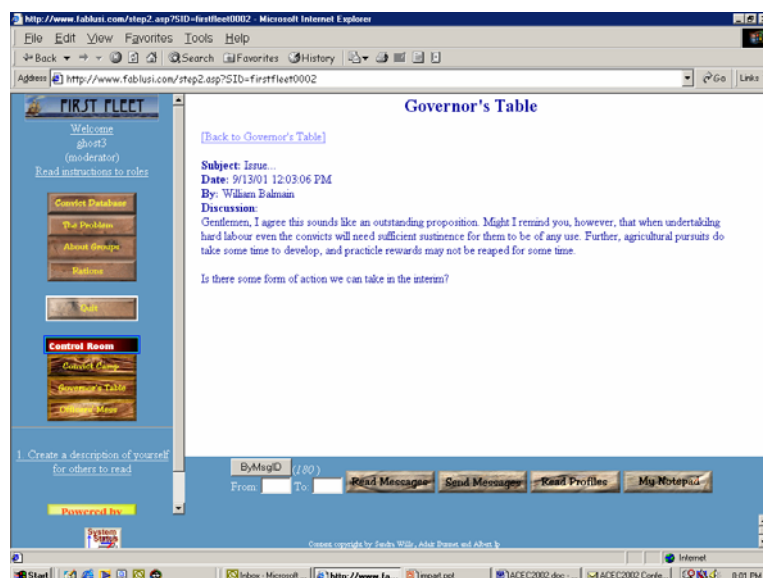
Role	Description in 1789	Role	Description
Governor Arthur Philip	Navy, Governor of the Colony	John Archer/Forrester	Convict
Major Robert Ross	Marine, Lieutenant Governor, command of garrison	John Basely	Convict
Augustus Alt	Surveyor	William Bradbury	Convict
William Balmain	Third Assistant Surgeon	James Clark	Convict
Henry Brewer	Provost Marshall	Elizabeth Cole	Convict
Captain James Campbell	Marine, Second Lieutenant	John Massey Cox	Convict
Ralph Clark	Marine, First Lieutenant	John Culleyhorn	Convict
David Collins	Marine, Secretary to the Governor, Deputy Judge Advocate	John Harris	Convict
William Dawes	Marine, Lieutenant, Engineer & Surveyor	John Herbert Keeling/Kellan	Convict
Richard Johnson	Chaplain	Stephen Le Grove	Convict
James Meredith	Marine, Captain	Elizabeth Leonard	Convict
Andrew Miller	Commissary	Joseph Marshall	Convict
Watkin Tench	Marine, Captain	Susannah Mason/Gibbs	Convict
John White	Surgeon General	Thomas Oldfield	Convict

Captain John Hunter	Navy, Captain	Charles Peat	Convict
		William Richardson	Convict
		Isabella Rosson	Convict
		John Coen Welsh/Walsh	Convict
		Nancy Yeates	Convict

Role play provides the best learning environment for students to understand the problems the First Fleeters faced. The database provides a “factual” account of what had happened to the convicts to bring them to the *Fatal Shore* whereas role play allows the learners to play a what-if situation, projecting into the convicts’ future. It adds *plot* to *character* in the story of early Australia. Plot and character are important elements of an immersive learning environment (Laurel, 1991). Or as Pine and Gilmore say in their book *The Experience Economy*, we need to “ing” the “thing”, that is, turn a product or a service into an experience. They define four Experience Realms on a matrix: Entertaining, Escapist, Esthetic and Educational - the Educational Realm being high on active participation AND high on absorption or immersion (p30).

Students can select one of the First Fleet characters, research their character via the database and then interact in character with other students, asynchronously and synchronously, and at a distance. Fablusi provides the technical support to create social structure (conferences) yet enables any-role-to-any-role communication (sim-mail) with optional real time private chat ability.

It uses the concept of a “conference” to define the social structure for roles. For example, we as designers created conferences to simulate the Governor’s Table, the Officers’ Mess, and the Convict Camp (which has sub-conferences for male and female gossip). The designers define the social structure by controlling what interactions a character is allowed to see. As in real life, a convict would not be aware of the interactions between officers. They can only see officers’ interactions when officers collaboratively agree to convert their Discussion into a Resolution. Similarly officers are not be able see male and female convict gossip until the convicts collaboratively agree to convert their Gossip into a Petition to the Governor. Below is Balmain, one of the colony’s surgeons, discussing over dinner with Governor Phillip the suggestion of giving convicts land to grow food.



Of course David Collins in the Officers’ Mess and Nancy Yeates in the Convict Camp can send private emails to each other due to their intimate relationship and this leaking of

information between conferences can have an interesting impact on the plot. New participants in the role play can view the threaded discussions that have occurred to date and then contribute to the continuing plot, which may take months to emerge and may in fact never finish.

### **Role play face to face vs online**

Two of the features which online role play seems to add to face-to-face role play is:

- anonymity and
- asynchronicity

(Freeman & Capper, 1999) (Chester & Gwynne, 1998) (Bell, 2001). Olaniran, Savage and Sorensen (1996) found that despite some initial student resistance, computer based groups produced significantly more ideas than face to face groups (in Freeman). The asynchronous nature of online role play provides time for players to consider and research alternatives and use “out of simulation” discussions before making a “move”. This asynchronous nature is of high education value. Role playing is a good environment in which to test and play with possibilities, establish strategies, promote confidences and evaluate consequences of any response. Face-to-face role play usually lasts a short time and demands spontaneous action. While it may be of value to some training situation (e.g. sales presentation), it offers little opportunity for reflection. In contrast web-based role play can take weeks to develop. This provides more opportunity for reflection, consolidation and internalisation of the actions taken.

The capability of online role plays to provide anonymity has an added value for adult learners who may find it difficult to role play in face to face situations and for participants whose first language is not the language in which the role play is conducted. In some cases it may enable participants to be more creative and imaginative. Gender swapping is a common outcome of anonymity and one that is not as plausible in face-to-face situations.

### **Evaluation of the role play**

We have run it twice so far and as these were trials, both were voluntary activities not tied to assessment which as noted earlier does have implications for participation:

- entirely at a distance with university teachers distributed over a number of sites in New South Wales plus Dubai, one teacher per character and not all characters allocated, over three weeks duration
- face to face in a computer lab and home use out of hours, with university students spread between four classes, one pair of students per character, over four weeks duration.

The evaluation methods include email logs, video interviews with students, open ended email survey, and first author's ad hoc journal.

The outcome of first experience could be summarized as: many lurkers and a very small number of active and highly creative participants. This meant that the role play fizzled out towards the end because the active participants were not receiving enough feedback from the other characters who they were meant to be collaborating with. As this was a voluntary staff development exercise to merely expose university teachers to the concept of role play as a learning design this didn't really matter as it served to teach us all a valuable lesson: the need for active participation by all characters if the plot is to progress towards a resolution.

The second experience was more fruitful as the four face-to-face sessions provided the discipline and structure to keep the momentum going. However many of the participants were frustrated at sometimes having to wait a whole week for a reply due to the limitations we caused by spreading the characters across 4 classes. In hindsight this was a mistake but at the time we had envisaged that students would be so motivated that they

would be using the role play at many times other than just the set class time. In addition many students were merely “play acting” and having fun and only skimmed the surface of what was required in order to reach a resolution. Fun can be conducive to learning but firm moderation may be needed to move the learning to deeper levels. Both these problems can in part be attributed to the fact that the role play was not tied to any assessment. Unfortunately it is human nature that the weight of assessment gives weight to the worth of the exercise.

Quotes from students, transcribed from the interviews, included many which we needed for improving the interface and debugging the software, for example the need for a synchronous chat function in addition to the asynchronous functions, which Fablusi provides but we had not thought to add to this implementation of the role play. Feedback also included the following:

**a. about learning outcomes related to content aspects:**

*Interesting to find out about First Fleet as I only vaguely knew [about it] before.*

*Learnt much about history – I had already done First Fleet at primary school and high school and now university [sigh] but yes I can [now] understand it from their perspective.*

*We didn't have this kind of opportunity at high school.*

*Great fun, especially for younger people 14-15 years – my brother is currently doing a project on Roman History at school and this type of thing would be good for him to use.*

*Already covered [First Fleet] at university so could do one that is more political and current eg terrorism.*

**b. about learning outcomes related to affective aspects:**

*Doing a profile at the beginning is good because it makes you establish your character and who you are and then how to approach the rest of the problems.*

*My character is a “bad guy” but it's because he's interested in his own survival – yes I have empathy for him.*

**c. about organizational aspects:**

*Probably we needed another week because not enough people were using it in their own time rather than just in this class lab.*

**Lessons learnt**

Although both times it was run the experience was deemed successful, feedback from the teachers involved in running the online role play indicate that we need to do much more work yet, especially if our goal is to have this role play as a transferable resource that is re-usable by others teachers without our involvement:

- better character descriptions that are more clearly linked to the problem to be solved
- need more moderators, at least one for each camp, to keep the participants focused on the problem rather than on surface socialization and clearer instructions/training for those moderators
- more pre-prepared kick start episodes for the moderators to introduce as the role play progresses
- guidelines about assessment and its role in keeping focus
- more clarity on the process of moving from discussion to consensus to framing a resolution
- need for clearer student learning outcomes both in regard to content and in regard to generic skills
- database is a great resource for those participating as convicts but more background is needed for those participating as officers.

These broadly match the lessons learnt from a similar experience in developing the first draft of an adventure-type role play simulation as described by Marshall in the UK:

- confusion with definition of profession and role and character-playing
- role of facilitator
- focus and discussion
- expectations
- facts and ‘learning’.

### **Recommendations about characters**

Marshall’s first point backs up how much harder it is to design good character descriptions than we originally thought.

*“Profession is central to a simulation – participants need to know their position within the structure so they can interact profitably with it. Character is antipathetic to simulation in most cases: “Role-playing and strategic analysis, rather than complementing each other, turn out to be incompatible behaviours, one requires immersion and loss of perspective, the other requires stepping back and objectivity.” (Boocock and Schild 1968) Taylor & Walford (1978) don’t see it quite a cut and dried as that as they put forward the possibility that such a combination could provide an extremely rich learning experience, but that there would need to be enormous preparation, preliminary study and considerable explanation.” (Marshall, 1999)*

Vincent’s Middle East Politics role play works well because the characters are real people but in most role plays characters have to be designed and fleshed out and authors have to tease out the three separate aspects of any character if we want students to be engaged more deeply than mere acting (Marshall’s “character-playing”).

Ip (in press) notes that moderators can assist the designers achieve their objectives about characters by suggesting that at the culmination of the role play: “...individual participants reflect on their experience from three points of view:

- a) **from their own personal point of view**: how well did they do in playing the role? what problems did they have in playing the role? what could they have done better to play that role?
- b) **from the point of view of the ‘roles’**: to what extent was the role able to reach some or any of its original objectives? what difficulties did the role encounter in attempting to achieve their goal? What aspects of the strategy to reach their objectives would the role consider changing in light of the overall results? And
- c) **from the point of view of an ‘objective observer’**: this could be from a theoretical point of view, in the case where understanding theory is part of the pedagogical objectives – to what extent are different theoretical models able to explain the events in the simulation and reality? What biases emerged in the simulation or/and in reality? or from a student point of view – what was learned from the simulation about reality if anything?”

### **Recommendations about moderators**

There are many things that can go wrong in online discussions:

- lack of participation
- lack of focus
- monopolisation of topic
- surface discourse
- deferring to others
- personal verbal attack
- inappropriate language & behaviour
- arguments
- early dry-out

The fact that participants start out with a ‘persona’ that already had particular goals, ensures that each participant has focus and that no participant can monopolise topics. The

dynamic and reflexive nature of the exercise ensures that early dry-out also remains highly unlikely. Personal attacks and arguments between participants, or inappropriate language can occur, but they rarely do because participants using a ‘persona’ have their personal identity protected and therefore are less likely to feel personally threatened.

However even though role play as a learning design counter-acts these problems, our experience is that the moderator’s function is the main key to success. Mason (1991) identifies three role functions that online discussion moderators must provide.

**Social role:** *create a friendly, social environment for learning, especially encourage participation using a friendly, personal tone*

**Teaching role:** *facilitate learning by focusing discussions on crucial points, asking questions and probing responses to encourage students to expand and build on comments.*

**Organizational role:** *set the agenda and objectives of the discussion, the timetable, procedural rules and decision-making norms.*

We propose that the role of the moderator in an online role play is much more complex and we have mapped this in a table against the life cycle of the role play. Ip (in press) provides more detail about each category.

Pre-play	Trust relationship Technical anxieties Role selection Game rules	Guardian angel Administrator Administrator Administrator
Early Stage	Understand role Identifying issues Understand scenario & engage	Teaching/learning resource
Development	Pursue agenda	Guardian angel, manipulative devil, teaching/learning resource, improvising storyteller, administrator
Final Stage	Debriefing & disengagement Assessment & evaluation	Administrator and guardian angel

In future revisions of the First Fleet Role Play we will need to give more attention to the role of the moderator, in fact add more moderators, and provide more training and guidance for the moderator/s

## **FUTURE PLANS**

Trials are essential for ironing out technical bugs, organizational problems and learning design issues. The students that did engage in the role play found it a powerful and enjoyable learning experience despite the limitations caused by other participants. Based on the feedback, revisions to the role play include reducing the number of characters, revising the character descriptions and adding kick start scenarios. In second session we will run it with this year’s university students enrolled in the same subject but this time we will make changes to the organization of the classes: one class per role play world, one moderator per class in addition to the overall moderator, each class with minor variations to test reaction to the variations. Hopefully we will then be ready to run it with school level students.

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