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# Encouraging Role Based Online Learning Environments

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## **Abstract**

This paper reports on progress in the first year of a two year project called Project EnROLE (Encouraging Role Based Online Learning Environments) which is funded by the Carrick Institute for Learning & Teaching in Higher Education in Australia. The project aims to link a small but growing number of university teachers who are using online role play, building them into a community via three strategies: developing a repository of sharable/reusable role play learning designs with an associated peer review process; facilitating evaluation and publication of papers about their role plays (for example the role play stream at this conference); and establishing sustainable national and international role play partnerships. The project also aims to double the number of online role play designers in two years by scaffolding beginners in a four stage process before designing their own role play: awareness raising; participating in another designer's role play; evaluating another designer's role play; and moderating another designer's role play. The strategy for growing the community takes a multi-pronged approach, firstly emphasising personal interaction by fostering university-based clusters of online role play designers, then building into state networks for both face to face and online professional development events. Together, the state networks in the second year of the project will form a national community of practice with international presence via the project's website and repository.

## **Keywords**

role play, simulations, ICT-based teaching, eLearning, peer review, learning designs

## **Disciplines**

Arts and Humanities | Social and Behavioral Sciences

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This paper reports on progress in the first year of a two year project called Project EnROLE (Encouraging Role Based Online Learning Environments) which is funded by the Carrick Institute for Learning & Teaching in Higher Education in Australia. The project aims to link a small but growing number of university teachers who are using online role play, building them into a community via three strategies: developing a repository of sharable/reusable role play learning designs with an associated peer review process; facilitating evaluation and publication of papers about their role plays (for example the role play stream at this conference); and establishing sustainable national and international role play partnerships.

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The strategy for growing the community takes a multi-pronged approach, firstly emphasising personal interaction by fostering university-based clusters of online role play designers, then building into state networks for both face to face and online professional development events. Together, the state networks in the second year of the project will form a national community of practice with international presence via the project's website and repository.

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## Background to Project EnROLE

Project EnROLE (Encouraging Role Based Online Learning Environments) aims to build a stronger community of like-minded, innovative and successful teachers by supporting those already using online role play, and nurturing new entrants to the field. As such the project is fostering a community of practice through the development of a network of teachers who share a common interest in the development of knowledge and experience in the design and facilitation of role plays. Members of this community are bound by the common purpose of working together to generate and share experiences, ideas and resources (Wenger, 1999). The community provides apprenticeship for new members if they need it.

Role play is widely acknowledged to be a powerful teaching technique in face to face, blended and online teaching contexts. Firstly, it provides students with engaging and active learning experiences. It also enables the exploration of real life issues and the development of specific skills in the safety of the classroom setting (van Ments, 1989). In the online environment, role play activities have some added benefits: they can be asynchronous and anonymous (Bell, 2001). Their asynchronous nature allows more space and time for composing ideas and reflecting on action, whilst their anonymity provides freedom for full immersion in the role and uninhibited expression (Linser, 1999). Furthermore, most role play designs have common aims, even though teaching contexts may be quite different: the role play process itself (be it online or face to face) is often focused on the development of generic skills i.e. negotiation skills, understanding multidisciplinary team work, intercultural communication, conflict resolution and in some cases, international collaboration (see Jamaludin et al and Ogilvy & Douglas in this proceedings).

Project EnROLE is a national project funded by the Carrick Institute for Learning & Teaching in Higher Education in Australia which has arisen from a study reported at ascilite06 (Wills & McDougall, 2006). The study tracked the uptake of online role play in Australian universities over 16 years, looking at issues of reusability. It noted that of

the 36 role plays developed during the period, 80% were reuse of another online role play and 60% reused a role play learning design rather than reusing an existing role play<sup>1</sup>.

Project EnROLE was initiated to recognise the importance of facilitating reuse via learning design descriptions however it also aims to overtly encourage the reuse of existing role plays. The Wills & McDougall study (op cit) noted only four role plays that have stood the test of time, been used by other teachers and/or have continued to be used even if the original designer is on leave or moves to another university: Middle Eastern Politics (Vincent & Shepherd, 1998); Mekong eSim (McLaughlan et al, 2001); Idontgoto Uni (Bell, 2002); Pain Management Roundtable (Devonshire, 2006). The EnROLE team identified the following factors as contributing to sustainability of those four role plays and has built these into the project strategies: team approach to design and/or implementation; cross-institutional partners in implementation; departmental support as demonstrated by embedding the role play in the on-going course curriculum; recognition of the role play success by publication, award and/or promotion.

The team, all role play designers, based at five Australian universities in the state of New South Wales, applied for a Carrick grant in order to encourage uptake of online role play by building on and formalising their fledgling network; developing strategies that lead to the sustainability of role plays that have been developed; and addressing issues identified as barriers to uptake for new role play designers.

A collaborative framework is being used to establish university-based cluster groups, building the clusters into a state network and ultimately a national network, of role play designers and facilitators. The aim of this collaborative approach is to provide for the open exchange of role play designs, establish a process for supporting new role play designers, and foster opportunities for cross-institutional and international student and staff interaction.

## Scope of Project EnROLE

Project EnROLE's first task was to refine the scope of the project by developing a better definition for online role play. Some members of the team and the reference group had substantial experience with simulations and some of the exemplars discovered were not using role play as a term but instead referring to their teaching innovations as "authentic learning", "experiential learning", "role based learning", "situated learning" or "virtual worlds" (see Jones elsewhere in this proceedings). The team decided to adopt broader terminology than "online role play": role based online learning environments. The following definition was agreed in order to differentiate role play from simulations, for the time being, otherwise the project would become too large for the time and budget available.

The definition covers educational role plays in Australian universities designed to increase understanding of real life human interaction and dynamics.

- participants assume a role in someone else's shoes or in someone else's situation
- to do authentic tasks in an authentic context
- involving substantial in-role human interaction such as collaboration, negotiation, debate
- interaction between roles is substantially in an online environment
- learning outcomes are assessable and generate opportunities for student reflection.<sup>2</sup>

## Current role play designers

Current role play designers in universities are operating in isolation. In most cases there are only one or two in each university. They may be supported in part by their university's Educational Development centre but they have rarely communicated and benefited from interaction with each other.

In a case study of role play in the recent report on *Dissemination, Adoption & Adaptation of Project Innovations in Higher Education* for the Australian Universities Teaching Committee (AUTC), Alexander reported the following issues for role play designers: workload, recognition and reward, support, policy, sustainability (pp. 103-4). David Sadler from the UK Higher Education Academy, and member of EnROLE's Reference Group, further reinforces sustainability as a major issue<sup>3</sup>:

...where role-players act in isolation there is less possibility of a strategic approach being taken by the Faculty or Department in which the academic is housed. If the role-player were to leave, ...the student experience is denied the role-play opportunity if there is not an institutional commitment.

The project therefore aims to link the small but growing number of university teachers who are using online role play, connecting them into a community via three strategies:

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<sup>1</sup> For an understanding of Learning Design see <http://www.learningdesigns.uow.edu.au/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://cedir.uow.edu.au/enrole/>

<sup>3</sup> Internal email to Project EnROLE

- recognition - developing a repository of sharable/reusable role play learning designs with an associated peer review process
- support and reward - facilitating evaluation and publication of refereed papers about their role plays (for example the role play stream at this conference)
- workload and sustainability - establishing national and international role play partnerships.

Project EnROLE has encouraged the network of current role play designers to improve their academic profile by publishing on the project website and publishing at conferences using strategies such as writing retreats and writing roundtables, both face to face and virtual.

Role play descriptions are published on the project website. Initially Project EnROLE envisaged formally describing the role play learning designs using the Learning Design Sequence developed by the AUTC Learning Designs project (Hedberg et al, 2002). However the team felt that the descriptions in that project were too long for the average teacher browsing websites and decided on a more motivating format for each online role play. A two page flyer format was developed incorporating graphics and utilising agreed headings: abstract, keywords, contacts, description, audience/group size, learning opportunities, timeframe & setting, role play process, assessment, resources, facilitator issues, reusability, references & links. For more on describing role play learning designs see Leigh, Meyers & Rosser elsewhere in this proceedings as well as Wills and Ip (2003).

From the national repository of online role play learning designs, the project will implement a peer review process to provide evidence for these innovative teachers which may be useful in promotion procedures. The project team's thinking on the peer review process is covered by a paper elsewhere in the conference proceedings (Devonshire).

In 2007 the project organised a stream on online role play within an existing conference ie ascilite2007. In 2008 the project will culminate with an international working conference to collaboratively produce an edited book on online role play. Examples of role play designers that have been encouraged to publish more widely about their work by Project EnROLE can be found elsewhere in this conference proceedings (for example Demetrious).

Because the Wills & McDougall study noted that sustained role plays tend to be those that involve partners, a third aim of Project EnROLE is to facilitate partnerships. Partnerships provide opportunities for current role play designers to have their students participate in a national or international role play. Moving a role play from single institution to national or global collaboration adds value to the initial design in fulfilling the graduate attribute of internationalisation. Partnerships also pave the entrance of new role play designers and reduces the workload for existing role play designers as they can take turns being the lead institution rather than having to take full responsibility for a role play every time the subject is offered.

## **New role play designers**

Teachers new to role play design find it difficult to see what a role play looks like and this can inhibit uptake. New role play designers are often attracted to the teaching strategy by hearing a presentation or reading a paper by another role play designer (Wills & McDougall, op cit) yet these vehicles rarely convey the true complexity of the design task and the management skills needed for moderating a role play. New role play designers sometimes flounder and give up after their first attempt especially if there is no mentor to support and encourage them to continue through cycles of evaluation and improvement. Many teachers do not have the confidence to experiment alone with the complexities of an innovative teaching technique.

The project aims to double the number of online role play designers in two years by scaffolding beginners in a four stage process before designing their own role play:

- awareness raising via cluster seminars, state events and national repository;
- participating in another designer's role play;
- evaluating another designer's role play; and
- moderating another designer's role play.

For an example of evaluating student participation levels in online collaborative learning environments such as role play, see Roberts elsewhere in this proceedings.

The project will assist the number of online role plays in growing to an estimated 100 by 2008. The count in 2006 at the beginning of Project EnROLE had progressed to 54 designers in 15 universities from the 48 online role play designers in the Wills & McDougall study. At the time of writing this paper the count has grown after nearly one year of the project to 75 designers. Role play designers in Australian universities have been identified via literature review, search of university teaching and learning websites, email survey, interviews with early designers, and personal approach.

**Table 1: Growth of online role play designers in Australian universities 2007**

State	University	Academics/Developers	State	University	Academics/Developers	State	University	Academics/Developers
VIC	UMelb	11	QLD	CQU	2	NSW	UOW	8 now 14
	Latrobe	1		Griffith	1		UNewcastle	1
	Deakin	3 now 4	WA	UWA	8		UNSW	2 now 4
	VUT	1		ECU	1		MQ	5 now 6
	RMIT	1 now 5	SA	UAdelaide	2 now 3		UTS	5
						USyd	6 now 7	

One aim of the national repository of role play descriptions is to make it easy for new entrants to find an online role play that they might be able to reuse or an idea for a role play that they could modify for their own context. For more on reusing a role play design see McDonald & Lambert elsewhere in this conference proceedings. The repository will be searchable. One of the most common questions asked is whether there is a role play in a specific discipline area. The repository covers numerous discipline areas however role plays in the main address topics in which the generic skills of collaboration and negotiation are important.

**Table 2: Australian role plays by discipline area (some repeated)**

Architecture	2	Engineering	4	International Relations	2	Media, Journalism, PR, Communications	6
Business	3	Environment	9	Health	7	Law, Mediation	2
Economics	1	French	1	History	3	Politics	3
Education	8	Geography	4	Industrial	1	Psychology	1

The repository is not the only strategy for supporting new role play designers. Designing role play can be a high risk and solitary venture, especially for the novice teacher. Project EnROLE takes a blended approach. Each project team member leads a university cluster. University clusters complement the repository by providing personal contact with role models, collegial access to a network of other beginners, seminars and workshops, face to face support on platforms, design and evaluation relevant to the context of each university as well as university-specific advice on issues such as intellectual property and promotions criteria (see Davenport & Barron elsewhere in this proceedings).

The benefits of local cluster group type activities for promoting scholarship, such as writing groups, research groups, action learning groups are widely acknowledged (Lee and Boud, 2003; Crocker and Devonshire, 2000; Di Gregorio and Devonshire, 1999; Little and Hefferen, 2000; Penfold, 2000). Although the ultimate goal of the project is to foster a national community of practice, the community is expected to develop better on a personal basis at the university level first. University clusters then work together to create a state network. The number of role play designers is currently small so there are benefits in organizing activities that provide opportunities for sharing with others in close proximity, with low overheads in travel costs and travel time. The project team, working across five universities in the one state, can testify to the benefits of working together at a state level. Face to face events organized at one university are often advertised at the other team members' universities. Likewise, The University of Melbourne organized a face to face event which was attended by three universities in that state. The NSW State Network has now moved to organizing an online professional development event, including participation in an online role play of course. This online event involved over 35 participants and would not likely have been as well attended without the prior face to face work at the university cluster level.

## The Future of Project EnROLE

Project EnROLE, a Carrick Institute project based in part on two previous national projects, is half way through its two year journey. Following evaluation by an external evaluator, we hope at next year's conference that we can report the EnROLE model, blending online opportunities with face to face communities of practice, has been demonstrated as a successful model for fostering uptake and dissemination of other learning designs such as problem-based learning designs and case-based learning designs.

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