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Learning design for online role play versus simulation

Abstract
One outcome of Project EnROLE, an ALTC project to encourage uptake of online role play, is a refined learning design for simulation: Simulation Triad. The triad represents design decisions according to emphasis placed on Roles versus Problems versus Rules.

Keywords
Role play, simulation, online role play, learning designs

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Learning design for online role play versus simulation

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One outcome of Project EnROLE, an ALTC project to encourage uptake of online role play, is a refined learning design for simulation: Simulation Triad. The triad represents design decisions according to emphasis placed on Roles versus Problems versus Rules.

Keywords: role play, simulation, online role play, learning designs

As reported at *ascilite 2007* (Wills et al, 2007), Project EnROLE[1] was a two year $200,000 project funded by the Australian Learning & Teaching Council (ALTC) to encourage uptake of online role based learning environments, with particular focus on what is commonly referred to as role play. Role play is widely acknowledged to be a powerful teaching technique in face-to-face, blended and online teaching contexts. Project EnROLE's goal was to encourage uptake of online role-based learning environments by building a repository of role-based e-learning designs which would reward and recognise teachers already using role play and scaffold teachers wanting to get started with role play. *The BLUE Report* (available on the EnROLE website) describes the project's outcomes and achievements in four sections representing four phases of the project: Building, Linking, Understanding and Extending. Over 60 learning design descriptions have been collected in the EnROLE repository.

One hurdle in the progress of Project EnROLE was pinning down the definition of online role play. As a newly emerging area, there was no agreed firm definition. It was prone to change as new examples evolved. Early on the project team agreed to use the broader term of *role-based e-learning* rather than the narrower term *online role play*. Role-based e-learning environments were defined as having the following characteristics:

- 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
- participants undertake authentic tasks in an authentic context
- task involves substantial in-role interaction with other roles for collaboration, negotiation, debate
- interaction between roles is substantially in an online environment
- learning outcomes are assessable and generate opportunities for student reflection.

Although this definition was reasonably broad there were a number of examples of practice that were not included in the repository because they fell outside the definition, notably *DRALE* from University of Melbourne (Riddle & Davies, 1998,) and *Ardcalloch* from University of Warwick (Barton et al, 2007). In these types of learning design, for law students, the roles were secondary to the purpose of the simulation and the emphasis was on process or transaction. Throughout the project, the word *simulation*[2] to describe online role play had been rejected, arguing that simulations at that time involved one role playing against a computer model. Although there are roles in simulations, the roles are not interacting with each other. [3]

A proposal was formulated to view the missing examples as being at one end of a continuum of role-based learning designs in general rather than being a completely separate species. In the end, it was agreed that role plays were a type of simulation and that the definition of simulation needed refinement. A framework called the Simulation Triad (Figure 1) was developed to better position online role play as an emerging type of simulation, accounting for the myriad ways of designing role-based learning environments that the project had catalogued. The Triad also indicated the relationship of role-based learning to problem-based learning. Online role play may involve a simulated problem context and analysis of related data, but the focus of learning is on how the roles interact in dealing with the problem.

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[1] enrole.uow.edu.au
[2] as used by the *Middle Eastern Politics Simulation* (Vincent & Shepherd, 1998) and by Linser, Naidu & Ip (1999)
[3] Now, 3D virtual worlds such as those designed in *Second Life,* can facilitate simulations with multiple roles. However, there is minimal uptake yet (Wills, Leigh & Ip, 2010).

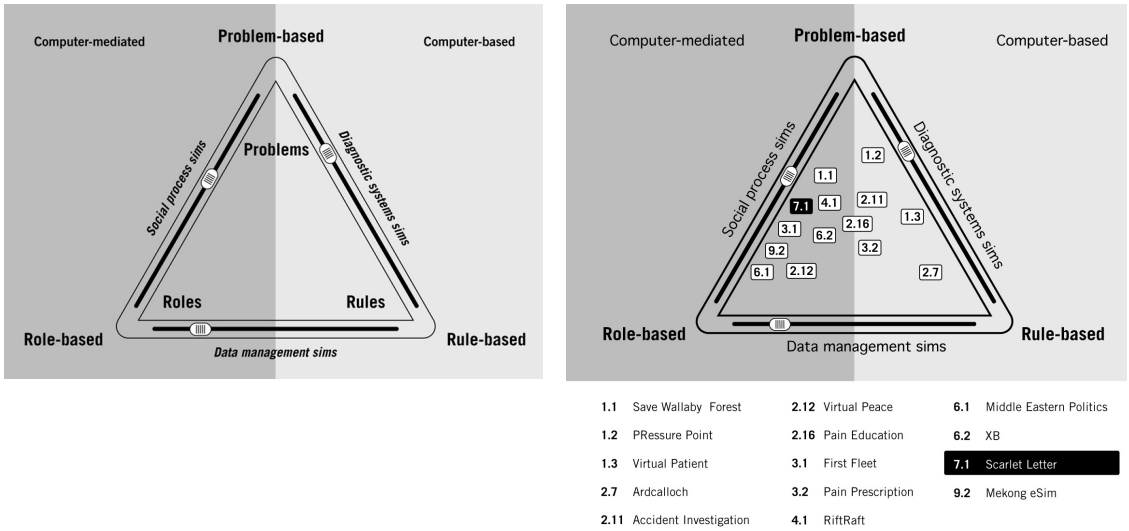

Figure 1: Simulation Triad (left)[+] used to differentiate online role play examples (right)[*]
[+] Triad sides are labelled using categories from Gredler (1992) [*] descriptions of examples are available on EnROLE website

The Simulation Triad takes as its starting point that all simulations involve roles and rules and a problem (sometimes called case, situation or scenario). Developing a framework that recognises design decisions according to the amount of emphasis put on Roles versus Problem versus Rules means that other examples could now be accommodated without compromising the integrity of the role play design that has emerged in Australia following the model first developed by Vincent & Shepherd (1998). Because of the way the project originally defined role-based e-learning, the majority of the 60 online role plays collected in Project EnROLE's repository are along the role-problem continuum and the examples that were previously excluded belong along the role-rules continuum. Figure 1 maps some examples from the repository onto the Triad in order to illustrate the diversity of learning designs.

The Triad graphic also serves to indicate the differing role of the computer in online simulations. Traditional simulations such as those that model Nuclear Power Plants are computer-based. The learner interacts with the computer. Whereas, role plays are computer-mediated, that is, the learner interacts with others, **via** the computer.

The Triad is an alternative visualisation of the learning design for simulation[4]. The "slider metaphor", developed to position role-based learning activities in the field of simulation, is an alternative approach to keyword search. It is being explored as a navigation interface for the EnROLE repository.

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[4] www.learningdesigns.uow.edu.au