Ideal features of Web-based role play generator

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Discussion Schedule
Discussion: 12 - 22 February 2001
Summing-up: 23 - 24 February 2001

Pre-discussion paper

Disclaimer
One of the products that Digital Learning Systems P/L carries is a web-based role play simulation generator called Fablusi. As such, readers and discussants are advised that the moderator has a personal interest in the software referred to in this discussion.

Role Play as a Pedagogy

Role play as a pedagogy is not new. Back in 1966, Gamson started using his SimSoc in classes and SimSoc has been used in a large number of institutes since. Information about how Gamson still runs his class (Spring 1998) at Boston College can be found at http://www2.bc.edu/~gamson/. Soft skill trainers have been using this methodology for decades. Some insights into the design of training simulations may be found in Ten Secrets of Successful Simulations and Ten "Mistakes" Commonly Made by Persons Designing Educational Simulations and Games.

I believe (and many others too -I am just too lazy to find the references) that recent advances in technology hold out great potential for role play simulation, including:
- The web as a huge resource - thus enabling information-dense learning environment (see e.g. http://www.dls.au.com/papers/NEF_Reuse.htm)
- The web as a communication layer to support collaborative learning
- The ubiquitous availability of web browsers as a common platform for delivery.

It is no surprise that efforts are made to make role play available via the web. Notable examples of some recent attempts are: International Communication and Negotiation Simulations (ICONS) Project and Politics and International Relations in the modern Middle East at Macquarie University, Australia. The technology used behind the "Middle East simulation" was by customizing existing generic communication software, see http://www.jime.open.ac.uk/98/11/ vincent-98-11-14.html.

A search on the web using "Role Play" as keyword reveals a large number of sites devoted to role play as a fantasy game in which players are engaged in adventures. These are typically "rule-based" games in which the software depends on some algorithm to determine the "strength" of the player as s/he encounters different fantasy creatures and engages in a fight for survival. In many cases, an element of chance is introduced into the game. By way of contrast, the examples cited in the last paragraph are "communication-based". The software environment does not provide "rules" to determine the consequence of a "move" and equally important, at the end of the exercise, there is not a game to win or lose. See a discussion of the three related concepts: simulation, games and contest. I would like to focus our discussion on how role playing may be useful in a teaching and learning environment.
Related Discussion Question:
Is Role Playing a pedagogy that can be applied to disciplines beyond politics and soft skill training?

Role Playing Simulation generator

Early 1999, a generator, based on the abstraction that interactions are communicative events was developed to support the rapid creation of online role playing simulation. Although it was an evolving process (the generator is undergoing continuous development while real courses with real students were using the system) and there were numerous late nights modifying the system to meet new demands and needs, the simulation co-ordinator, Roni Linser admitted that without the generator, he would not be able to deliver the level of activities he was doing. Our pedagogical underpinning and engine experience have been reported.

Implicit in the design of any role playing activity is the definition of roles and starting scenario. The roles define the way a player will behave in the simulated world and the scenario creates the goals to pursue in the activities. In another paper, we have identified four foundations to building a learning environment for role playing activity:

- Scaffolding (tasks that lead the players to achieve particular learning outcomes);
- Resources (information that is subject matter and content specific provide either as reading material for the learners or to set up the scenario for the simulation);
- Interaction facilities (sim-mail, sim-conferences and private chat rooms for communication); and
- Social structure (framework that supports the rules for playing the game).

Related Discussion Question:
Are there other important fundamentals in an ideal simulation to support effective learning?

Implementations

The foundations are supported by software tools such as sim-mail, sim-conferences, private chat rooms, tasks, information provided to different roles and rights in the sim-conferences.
Related Discussion Question:

Interested readers may following this link to find out the features available to the role play generator and comment on whether the current feature set meets the requirement. Alternately, we can engage in an imaginative situation. We can articulate what are the ideal features to support the identified or additional foundations.

Some Usage

In April 2000, Fablusi, the new name of the generator, supported a 48-role simulation. In 3 weeks, the students generated nearly 3000 sim-mails, participated actively in 10 sim-conferences ranging from 130 messages in the "News Agencies", 50 in the "International forums" to less than 10 in some other sim-conferences.

In May 2000, Fablusi supported another 40-role simulation. Again in 3 weeks, the students generated over 4000 sim-mails, participated actively in 8 sim-conferences and created over 130 private chat rooms.

Related Discussion Question:

This volume of activity means that mechanisms are needed to help the simulation coordinator run the simulation effectively. What are the ideal features that a simulation engine should have to support this level of teaching and learning?

Future features

During the discussion, I shall describe some planned features that will be available in the near future in Fablusi.

Post Discussion Summary

The discussion of the Albert Ip's paper on “Ideal features of Web-based role play generator” occurred on the IFETS discussion list from February 12, 2001, to February 24, 2001.

Tuesday Feb.13

Jane E. Golding relates about her public school situation where “teachers can take university courses for professional development and if, upon successful completion, and they have been approved by the superintendent, the district reimburses the teacher for the cost. Historically, this has been easy because we are all familiar with our local universities, thus know the quality of the courses.” Jane closes with the question “what criteria would you suggest be used to judge the quality of online university courses?”

Michael Cenkner highlights three problems with role-playing:
1. Usually ad-hoc preparation of students.
2. Difficulty of sourcing material.
3. Difficulty of evaluation.
Michael relates that “he has been developing a data-base, interface and e-mail system to make this kind of activity more systematic. At the same time, it does promise to be deliverable at a distance.” He shares a web site with an abridged version of his methodology for role-play.
http://www.ualberta.ca/~mcenkner/michaelCenkner2/solocombo.htm

Dennis Nelson focused his discussion on the four questions raised by Albert Ip:
I. In which discipline area (or just general discussion) your users use VTC conference? II. Any experience you can share with us? III. Is your role play structured? IV. Is it played in real time?

Dennis offers a detailed response to the four questions.
“I. Just general discussion. My principle point was that role play can be used for what we traditionally have labeled hard disciplines and skills as well as those listed.
II. Several dozen of our officers associated with military training needed 1) an upbrief on numerous training issues, and 2) a chance to brainstorm topics for the next statewide training meeting. The sessions are very structured with planned facilitation to ensure the fullest participation possible. Resources permitting, a technical support person and facilitator would be at each site (five sites the last time). Typically an individual or individuals who would be at the session as participants are asked to fill the support roles.

III. The role play is structured only to the degree necessary to ensure competency at the end of the session. Each role player is allowed to exercise their own personality and is given the support necessary to become competent and confident enough to reassume the role at a future date.

IV. They are played in real time 1) to ensure learning as well as instruction takes place, 2) the individuals are in their comfort zones for maximum learning, 3) we can estimate the degree of reinforcement needed and time needed to prepare for the actual future event, and 4) we can estimate times needed for future role plays and the required limitations on the expected outcomes given the time available for the play.”

Dennis relates that he can “foresee the day when universal access will make skill and ability sets available everywhere 24/7. People can't be pushed into this, they must be helped to discover the joy of it.”

Deirdre Bonycastle commented on Albert Ip’s comments on the difficulty in creating role-plays if students couldn't get together in private groups for real time simulation or discussion. Dierdre highlights the importance of instructors selecting students for specific “breakout groups.” She stresses that instructors can provide vital management functions by using “the two systems we use allows the instructor to pick who goes into which groups and for how long. The instructor can pop into a group at any time or stay out.

Dierdre observes that “Goal-Based Scenarios that allow an individual to take on the role of someone else but don't require interaction with real people (very expensive to develop but inexpensive to deliver).

2. Group Role Plays that allow a group of people to interact in the same scenario (moderately/inexpensive to develop and expensive to deliver.” Currently, Dierdre is planning to use role-plays in an on-line health profession course that she is developing.

February 14, 2001

Charles Adamson discussed how he utilizes role play as a nursing teacher at Miyagi University in Japan. He relates that his role play instructional plans differ from Michael Cantor’s methodology. During the learning phase, instead of individual student preparation, the class utilizes group work that departs from Michael’s instructional plans. Charles creates three groups of students: nurses, patients and doctors who each create their own distinctive dialog “to explore the interactions that take place between a nurse, the patient and the doctor.” Charles shares how students are randomly selected from each group to role play. As the teacher, Charles operates as a filter to help clarify ideas and provide appropriate feedback to students. Additionally, Charles relates that “evaluation could consist of any or all of Cenker's categories but would begin during the student preparation stage and continue through the role play and the feedback sessions. While I have never done this using computers in a network, there is no reason that I can see that would prohibit it.”

Charles related a brief account of a teacher who used role playing with a class on machine language computer programming. It was a relevant illustration of how role playing can be used in a variety of academic settings.

February 16, 2001

Ian Coward related a concern about the future of traditional in light of the advances in online learning. Ian states that “after reading the response from Lucia Cucciarelli, from the department of lifelong learning, I was given to wondering whether the advent of on-line learning could possibly spell the end of traditional education establishments.”

Ian noted that the British government has started an Internet based program called “LearnDirect.” He believes the program can help governmental departments have the opportunity to save money by dramatically scaling down their departments by providing the public Internet access to their resources.
February 18, 2001

**Norma Benesdra** responded to Ian Coward’s remarks about online education could mean the end of traditional education. Norma has a concern that “doing away with traditional learning institutions would be both a waste of precious human interaction and information and also a deviation from life as was given unto us by Nature/God.”

Norma believes that traditional educational institutions should effectively utilize technology. Norma hopes that school will change their perspective on the student and teacher relationship by fostering interaction based on mutual respect, freedom and personal responsibility. Norma poses a relevant question “why not consult the very students to see how they feel about the whole issue? I mean consult, not decide, how we, as adults, are going to change learning conditions. We might get some interesting surprises if we establish a truthful dialogue and let our students speak their mind to us.”

February 19, 2001

**Chris O’Hagen** argues that the 21st century university will have at least five faculties (Business, CIT, Education, Health & other academic disciplines). Chris is concerned that our colleges are not training enough engineers who are needed to provide technical support for our computers.

**Jennie Swann** discusses the role of technology in learning and that “we need to recognize the need for technical and pedagogical assistance. After all are we not involved in caring business?” Jeannie believes that online teaching and learning will require an assortment of technical and pedagogical support for students and training for teachers. Jeannie notes, “learning is both participation and acquiring knowledge. To participate actively and to acquire important knowledge we need a guide till we are able to make sense…Resource allocation for training and emerging computing problems are still small. Under this condition unless we want to import MIS problems to schools and colleges it is difficult to imagine the death of traditional education.”

**Errol Thompson** observes that autonomous learning is very difficult concept to teach because people are not prepared for it. Errol states that “my experience in distance learning and with self-paced resources is that many people do not have an adequate approach to learning to handle autonomous learning. As well, there are some subjects which I believe require interaction in order to generate the required learning.”

Errol is concerned that educators do not effectively use technology in preparing people for a career. He states that “we need a balance of resources. Some learning will occur autonomously, others in a collaborative environment, and some in the apprentice model. The combination used appropriately should enhance the learning. This is what I would like to aim for in my environment.”

**Anita Pincas** responded to Ian Coward’s comments about the “end of traditional education establishments.” Anita notes, “there are already good stirrings among educationists at all levels to be flexible and adapt to new needs, even in the tricky area of assessment.” Anita recommends reading the paper Philip C. Candy “Reaffirming a proud tradition: universities and lifelong learning.” Active Learning in Higher Education, December 2000, Vol.1 No.2. It is published by Paul Chapman for Sage, [http://www.sagepubl.co.uk](http://www.sagepubl.co.uk)

Anita believes the emphasis on autonomous learning is seductive and “the business providers would like to follow - will not work. Anyone who has been in education for some time knows that.” Additionally, Anita believes that the possibility of success for “sustained* learning – as opposed to quick, just-in-time information collection - without either well-structured collaborative learning among peers or some teaching (online or otherwise) and preferably both.”

**Nicole Harris** is not too concerned about online learning replacing traditional classes. Instead, Nicole thinks that electronic resources, role-playing and teaching online offer different educational options to reach students. Nicole notes, “we all learn differently, after all, so surely the more learning options available - the better?”

**Chris O’Hagan** responds to Ian Coward’s comments on saving money in British governments “LearnDirect” initiative that utilizes online technology. Yet, he believes that the government should be looking for creative ways to offer affordable mass education and training. Chris relates, “if we are to expand access to education at
all levels, surely it needs to done as efficiently as possible, whether the 'customer' pays or not. In terms of public services, there are many other calls on government funding - should education have preference over medical services, or pre-school facilities? In both of which the UK lags behind most of the developed world.”

Chris stresses the need to help provide a quality education for more individuals. It will require making changes in universities that will enhance learning opportunities with corporations playing a larger role in their development. Chris observes, “academics would engender more respect and understanding from society if they acted less like Luddites, defending their patch, and showed more vision. No wonder it is left to others to lead!”

February 20, 2001

Norma Benesdra favors responsible autonomous learning that is daring built upon teachers asking more questions while offering fewer answers to students. Norma relates that “maybe this small change will, following Socrates, enable students and teachers to know themselves better, find their own learning and teaching strategies and thus learn better.”

Cameron Nichol reflected on the impact on of online learning on traditional education and makes some an observation on the future of distance education. “What is more likely are Hybrid classroom / online courses. These are becoming more ideologically acceptable as many educators (particularly in the training field) now have enough information to evaluate the relative strengths of the newer learning strategies. For many areas hybrid courses potentially offer a sensible (and defensible) middle way which offers cost benefits while maintaining a strong (and in many cases stronger) focus on learning.”

Marshal Anderson discusses how the phrase “autonomous learning” can be viewed differently by business and government leaders. Marshal notes that “the idea that someone can be empowered to develop their own learning, that they become their own personal constructivists and ‘own’ their own learning seems to be a good thing. In any formal course students will still need guidance, course content still needs to be constantly re-developed and there is still a ‘teaching’ role - but the more autonomous students are the more they will be able to get what they (rather than governments and employers) want out of the courses they take.”

Ted Panitz believes that people need to start addressing the question about who controls computer technology. Ted relates that students are controlling the system and “they will continue to demand human contact in the form of a professor, in a class, where they can interact with their peers and the professor. A few students will use distance learning for its convenience. I have observed that they come to the conclusion that in class, human interactions cannot be replicated over the Internet and thus the value of pure Internet delivery as an equal to classroom interaction is overrated. They then return to the classroom environment.”

Ted observes that college teachers tend to rely too much on lectures and it will limit student interaction. In fact, he stresses that computer instruction has similarities to the formal lecture setting. Ted shares his paper written on this subject at the following web site:

http://www.capecod.net/~tpanitz/ tedspage/ tedsarticles/teaching.htm

Bill Klemm discusses his agreement with Chris O’Hagan’s comments about the need for teachers to reach more students. Yet, educational institutions that expect to increase the number of students taught per teacher must increase their teacher resources (e.g. technical staff). Bill states that “teachers and their technical consultants must find ways to automate more completely the logistical requirements of D.E., ranging from registration, monitoring of group work, and grading of assignments and tests.”

Margaret Martinez argues that most school systems do not support autonomous learning. Unfortunately, teachers are often the ones who control the learning climate. Margaret asserts that “we are not teaching learners the skills (goal-setting, progress monitoring, reflection, etc.) for autonomous learning so why are we surprised that learners are not self-directed, self-motivated, independent learners when they go online.”

Margaret shares a website that addresses the issue of autonomous learning,

http://www.trainingplace.com/source/research/learningorientations.htm
Bob Leamnson shares the term “preposterism” that comes from the author Jacques Barzun. The term highlights those in education who try to reach their goals without using adequate methodology. Bob is concerned that the discussion postings have shown a tendency to a comprehensive view of autonomous learning. Often, people will place too much emphasis on the end result and forget that it is a distance goal. Bob challenges veteran educators to ask themselves the question, how did you become an autonomous learner?

Bob states that “autonomous learning is not a simple skill one picks up, it's a habit of mind that develops gradually and with practice. If autonomous learning were something "picked up" by one-trial learning, a single course called "autonomous learning" would eliminate the need for all this brickwork. Autonomous learners don't need teachers.

Stephen Downes is concerned that Errol Thompson’s view of autonomous online learning is too narrow and stresses a distorted picture of distance education. Stephen believes that self-directed online learning consists of three major elements:

1. An online knowledge base of resource materials, FAQs, examples, background information, and more.
2. A learning environment, a place to practice skills without causing damage, simulations, problems, question sets, and more.
3. An online community of practice, often centered around a discussion list (like this one), but also supported by collaborative development environments.

The three elements can be captured in the slogan “Knowledge, Learning & Community.” Stephen believes that traditional online college courses tend to error in one or more of these areas. Naturally, an error in any one of these areas creates problems and creates a distorted educational setting.

Stephen argues that “the critics of autonomous online learning need to move beyond their conception of online learning as computerized versions of university classes. Though it is true that much work in the field has been dedicated toward emulating the classroom environment, the classroom environment is itself sterile, a weakness magnified in an online setting. Critics of autonomous learning need to study instances of learning which really happen online, they need to look at the many sectoral communities that have sprung up over the last few years, and they need to analyze the interactions and the learning that takes place in these settings.”

February 21, 2001
Forte discusses in depth the value of concept maps to help promote the development of self-directed learning in students. Forte offers a list ten advantages that students experience when first using conceptual knowledge bases:

1. Evidences the more important concepts and maybe those of secondary importance, with a clear and direct representation of what is important and what is secondary or complementary.
2. Evidences relations among concepts that are never unidirectional.
3. Stimulates him to analyze the analytical network that constitutes the conceptual nucleus of a topic, in order to infer even non explicit, sometimes transitive, but always important relations...he reasons, besides snapping the scheme, without which building our knowledge is impossible.
4. Enables him to connect to precedent experience.
5. Enables him, moreover, to see new relations and to create new relations considered relevant to personal learning, to transform the original platform in his own personal learning/development platform, easing memorization (a must, anyway) of relations among more important concepts.
6. Encourages reaching a deeper insight in concepts beyond relations, strengthening understanding with texts, images, video, audio, that directly influence the creation of meaningful knowledge, an audiovisual explanation of facts, procedures, evolutions, reference to huge or important information and knowledge references, directly linked to concepts.
7. The text becomes a complementary discursive illustration, collateral, (important, but not fundamental).
8. Enables semantic searching (through relations among concepts), expressing conceptual structure through questions and answers.
9. Enables text searching, in concept descriptive texts, deepening and recognizing secondary concepts, acquiring, together with conceptual knowledge, holistic knowledge.
10. Encourages adapting the map aspect to his own conception, to his personal cognitive needs.
Norma Benesdra responds to Stephen Downes’ comments on knowledge, learning and community. Norma observes that online learning will “demand a responsible involvement of the student and the teacher in each other's territories. Also with this view you encourage students to question, criticize and take over, which is very motivating. In fact, if students could bring into the classroom what they have seen, heard, read or discussed outside in the various sources of "community” learning, it would round off nicely their education.”

Deirdre Bonnycastle seeks to help the discussion focus more on instructional design. Deirdre’s preference is a student-centered approach that raises three questions:

1. What do you want the student to leave the course knowing?
2. What characteristics do my potential students have?
3. How do we move students with these characteristics from Point A in their learning to Points B-Z?

Deirdre makes a strong case for listening to students and paying attention to the need to set learning goals. “Too often I see faculty focused on what they want to teach and learning is something that happens out there in the nebulous world of good and bad students. That approach tends to result in the “I talk, you listen” model. The other mistake I see is people who start by picking the delivery method first without looking at objectives/goals.”

Dennis Nelson talks about the importance of having a mentor, partner or friend to help foster individual learning. Dennis notes that genuine learning takes time and others help played a key role in his development. “The individual who helped me transform the data, information, and knowledge to applied wisdom, and element five, a value system driving my introspection and seeking for knowledge, learning, community and ‘significant others.” Dennis saw his role models as providing an example of individuals who pursued the truth and cared for others during their educational journeys. Also, he stressed that “difficulties” of life provided a basis for realistic learning that fostered empathy for others.

Gavin Nettleton discusses the importance of meeting the need human needs of our learners by wisely using our technology. This is a challenging task because you must try to reduce costs to increase online participation. Also, Gavin points out that a good online learning model promotes both individual and group learning. Gavin observes that “there has been a lot of constructivist talk but in the end they have the interpersonal high ground in offering models of learning which are person centred not technically pushed.”

Gavin stresses the need to seek a balanced and relevant online educational philosophy that recognizes that learners have their job related expectations that require direct attention. Yet, it is vital not to neglect the “socially desirable need to produce concerned citizens capable of challenging the prevailing orthodoxy and questioning for whom a system is working or more poetically ‘for whom the bell tolls’.”

Chris O’Hagan shares that he agrees with Bob Leamson on the value of having goals in autonomous learning. Chris believes that work experience provides real life encounters but the individual still needs feedback and the quality of educational experiences. Also, individuals need to continue to develop knowledge skills to use prior knowledge and to know when you need additional information.

Chris believes that the current dialog has failed to pay enough attention to cultural factors that influence student learning. “As a mature student I did a work-based learning, distance PG course. There was no face-to-face. This did not trouble me - in fact the lack of a fixed schedule was great. But I would have found that difficult as a teenager. One gets the impression that other cultures can cope better at a younger age than in the over-indulged West.”

Paul Whittaker talks about the role of the teacher (mentor/facilitator) creating a student centered online climate. Paul relates that the key elements to a learning rich environment seem to be good learning resources (digital and paper), a well-structured course, and a peer group interested in learning the same things. Students certainly seem to happier to come to their own conclusions rather than be told the conclusion by a lecturer.” Paul does have questions about how students conduct research in their online classes.
Kristinka Ovesni shared two articles with discussion group on new technologies in adult education. Kristinka provided a web site for one of the articles:
http://www.spark-online.com/january00/trends/articles/ovesni_samurovic.html

Errol Thompson stresses that he is not against autonomous learning. He does oppose the idea that learners can work completely independently without any need for assistance. Errol believes students need to develop skills that help them manage new information and he advocates responsible change. “I am a very strong advocate for change but not a change that leaves another group disadvantaged or that throws out some critical areas of learning. A move to on-line learning must continue to promote good pedagogy and learning theory.” Errol has not been impressed the instructional quality of the online courses that he has seen that appear very similar to reading a textbook.

Errol relates his teaching experiences involve using “a combination of techniques aimed at the level of learning skills of the learner and the subject matter understudy to work within the time constraints and the cost constraints.” Errol hopes that “I will never blindly chase a technology or particular teaching approach but will always consider the impact on the learner and how it enhances their ability to learn whether autonomously or collaboratively.”

February 22, 2001
Larisa Enriquez affirms her agreement with Norma Benesdra for the need to make effective technological changes that help students. Larisa talks about the distance education program at the National University of Mexico that utilizes different technologies. “The students get their courses by video, also they receive a manual and an exercising book. For the accreditation there is a site with an on-line tutorial, an on-line tutor, a FAQ section, links to another sites and information about the exam.”

Larisa highlighted the fact that the program had to become more flexible to meet student needs by enhancing communication within the classes. Also, many of the students did not like not knowing their teacher. The program has added two traditional classes for students who wanted to talk face-to-face with their instructors. The changes have improved student motivation and participation. Larisa closes by noting that “it is still a long process before students feel comfortable with new educational proposals and we cannot ignore this issue.”

February 24, 2001
Souley Dounda relates a strong concern for developing countries that have many individuals with limited access to the Internet. Souley states that “very few people do access to email accounts or research on line. For instance, most of the faculties in my country, Niger are not connected to Internet and keep on making use of the traditional way of sharing information. It's hard to imagine the gap that exists between the developed countries and the developing ones. It's just huge and growing up higher and higher every day; this is why I strongly believe that a plea should be undertaken in this sense in order to stop or break this gap.”

Gao Shuting offers a different set of perspectives to autonomous learning. Gao states that “some people in this world have to learning autonomously since they live in the sparsely populated area or poorly net-lished area, such as in very north of the Nordic countries. Gao does acknowledge that the truly solitary learning requires personal discipline and clear learning objectives. Also, today’s distance learning materials do not promote autonomous learning. The barriers to cultivating more self-directed learners involve such factors student maturity and studying for specific tests. Gao shares that in the Eastern culture “students have formed the habit to be 'fed in' the learning materials for the purposes of passing the exam.”