Role-Play It Again, Sam

Interactivity, involvement, and interest are much sought-after attributes in almost every e-learning product. However, it is doubtful if the traditional CBTs and WBTs—revolutionary in their time—can sufficiently stoke the imagination of today's learner. Are there new approaches to engage people in the e-learning domain? This article explores one such approach.

Do you remember the last time you role-played? The chances are that you have done it with your children, during a self-development workshop, when you were preparing for a job interview or when you were hooked to your favourite video game. Did you enjoy it? Was it useful? Would you want to do it again?

What is role-playing?

Role-playing is a technique that has long been used in learning, therapy, and entertainment, where the participants assume the "role" of different characters in different situational settings. A role-play combines context and characterization and puts the participant in a unique experiential position. Interacting with different characters has different consequences, which may motivate different actions. The multiplicity of characters in a role-play ensures that the interactivity is not only sustained but is also less predictable, thus enriching the experience. And it's good business too—the Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) industry is rumored to be worth about $450–675 million.

However, before we get ahead of ourselves, let's revisit role-playing with a simple example.

Imagine that you are role-playing a character called Tom. Tom has some character attributes —he is twenty-three years old, an MBA who comes from a rich family with links to royalty. Tom also has a personality—he is a confident, fearless person who has the determination to see things through, and who is driven by certain motivations. Tom is determined to prove that he can succeed on his own and step out of the shadow of his father, a shipping tycoon. His motivation drives him to set certain goals. Launching his entrepreneurial venture in the next year is one of them. Taking the venture

public within five years is another. Tom may have some resources with him—a $900,000 inheritance from an aunt who passed away recently.

In a typical role-play, Tom will interact with different characters, played by the other participants. Therefore, along with Tom, there may be Dick and Harry. Dick could be a 60-year-old venture capitalist, who sees in Tom the son he never had, and wants to mold him into a successful businessman. Harry might be Tom's younger brother whose sibling rivalry with Tom leads him to launch an entrepreneurial venture of his own to compete with Tom's.

Depending on the application—learning, therapy, or entertainment—and its objectives, the role-play can take different forms from here on. A class on entrepreneurship could take turns being Tom, Dick, and Harry and learn the different aspects of launching a start-up. People having problems with either authority figures or siblings might play the role of a Tom or a Harry. A bereaved father might be Dick. Or, it could all be a game where Tom—assisted by Dick—needs to get the better of Harry in the marketplace.

The Learning Dimension

The learning industry has always been interested in using role-play. Apart from the unique advantages listed earlier, role-play builds on the fundamental and instinctive faculties by which human beings learn when they are young. Mimicking the behavior of the different elements in the environment, interacting with others and experimenting are facilitated by the medium of role-play.

Role-play also allows for the cost-effective simulation of complex scenarios and aids "trial-and-error" learning in a safe environment. A

learner is also able to assume different "roles" and gets the opportunity to examine different facets of a given situation.

Today, technology provides educators with more powerful means of delivery and even greater reach. One such opportunity is the use of role-play in an online environment.

Online Role-Play

Online role-play uses an online environment to link many participants to either a single or multiple scenarios. Participants may both role-play as individuals or as groups and assume the role of a character in the role-play. In contrast to offline role-play, where participation is synchronous, i.e. all participants role-play at the same time, online role-play may be played in an asynchronous environment as well, where participants role-play at different times. Once all characters have completed a round of role-playing, the scenario progresses to the next stage.

While reach is an oft-quoted advantage of the online medium, the anonymity that is provided by online role-plays can also be a great advantage. The risk-free exchange of opinions is a valuable by-product of anonymity that can greatly increase the value of the role-play.

Online Role-Play: Key Elements

• The Characters
Depending on the structure of the role-play, the learner may be able to assume the role of only one character or choose from different characters. Other characters in the role-play would have to be played by the other participants or by the system. Each character gets a brief in terms of their attributes and their specific goals.

• The Resources
Resources help a character achieve a goal or make a decision work. Different characters may have different resources, e.g., in a management role-play the resources could include:

- Powers—an HR Manager would have the authority to hire or fire people.
- Area of authority—a Sales Manager could have 15 salespeople reporting to him/her.
- Physical resources—an Inventory Manager may have 10 forklifts available in the central warehouse.
- Monetary resources—a CFO might have $4 million for the plant upgrade.

• Goals
A role-play needs to have goals, which the learner must attain at the end. These goals may be the same for all the participants or different for each. These "role-play goals" are distinct from the "instructional goals." For instance, getting the unions to accept a wage cut of 20 percent could

be a role-play goal for the learner, while the instructional goal would be to apply negotiation strategies.

Depending on the way a role-play is structured, the goals may promote competition or collaboration.

• The Moderator
Every role-play has a moderator. This could either be a person or the system itself, though existing software has been shown to be severely limited in their response to stochastic events. The job of a moderator in an online role-play is to ensure the following:

- The participants role-play according to their characters and maintain fidelity to the brief.
- New information is provided at appropriate times to add to the learning experience from the role-play.
- Situations are explained to the participants as required.

It must be mentioned here that a role-play can branch into many more directions than a conventional e-learning product because of the high degree of interactivity and independence that it provides. The challenge for the moderator is, therefore, great, and the moderator's own performance can make all the difference.

• Rules and Constraints
Every role-play requires a framework of rules within which the participants operate. The rules may be related to time, the relationships between the different characters, or the replenishment and allocation of resources. The constraints are designed to prevent the participants from taking certain actions. The moderator is expected to have a thorough knowledge of these rules and constraints.

• Assessment Criteria
In a typical role-play, more than one route can lead to the attainment of the goal. Therefore, while a simplistic assessment based on goal-attainment can be used, the emphasis should be on the learning experience of individual participants. The path to the goal is as important as the attainment of the goal itself.

Online Role-Play versus Simulations

There are many similarities between online role-play and simulation in terms of their structure. Simulations too place the learner in a fictitious context where he or she plays the role of a decision maker. The learner interacts with system-controlled characters who provide input relevant to the decision-making process. These characters have backgrounds, personalities, motivations, resources, and goals. However, while a simulation incorporates elements of role-playing, it would be incorrect to assume that there is just a semantic difference between the two. There are some fundamental differences between online role-play and simulations.

Parameter	Online Role-play	Simulations
Learning model	Team-based, collaborative	Predominantly individual-centric
Number of roles learner can choose from	Multiple	Single/Fixed
Learner's identity	Learner plays a pre-defined character in the role-play situation.	Learner plays him/herself. A few character attributes are detailed.
Moderator	Required	Not required
Logical model	Open	Closed/discrete
Content generation	Pre-defined base content and dynamic auto-generated content	Pre-defined and static content
Learning coverage	360°	Partial
Time horizon	Both synchronous/asynchronous and single/multi-session	Synchronous/single session
Fidelity-to-concept	High	High
Fidelity-to-reality	High	Moderate

Online role-play could get a good initial response with their promise of greater interest and effectiveness. Will the learners, however, come back for more? Given the more sophisticated nature of the solution, the two principal actors in any solution development—the client and the solution provider—need to work more closely and commit greater resources to realize this promise. On their ability to play their parts well rests the applause of the learners out there.