New Approaches to Role-Play in the Communication Classroom

Abstract

The role-plays employed in language teaching enable students to practice situations from outside the classroom, but tend towards mundane, work-oriented topics. Insights from psychology and recreational role-playing games, on the other hand, suggest that the cultivation of immersion has potential. Where pedagogic role-plays have been sparse, practical, and low-input, this paper proposes more imaginative, high-input activities to increase student involvement and motivation. These can involve rules, instructor intervention and even physical acting out of events. They also require more attention to narrative concerns and imaginative expression. Examples of role-plays demonstrating some of these characteristics are given.

Introduction

As an activity, role-play has an extraordinarily wide range of applications. If correctly implemented, role-playing activities can be a highly effective means of motivating and enabling students to use language creatively and authentically. Nevertheless, role-play has acquired a complex maze of definitions and focuses. A majority of writers on role-play understandably limit themselves to role-play as it pertains to their own field, and this has both limited potential for cross-fertilization and pulled the activity in different directions.

The present study hopes to take a wider view of the activity in an attempt to revitalize the use of role-play in language education through in-
sights from other applications: particularly therapeutic and recreational (henceforth referred to as ‘role-playing games’).

**Why Use Role-Plays?**

A classroom is an ‘artificial’ environment. By this I mean that language learning is presumed to entail the acquisition of language suited to all environments that the students might reasonably encounter: not just classrooms. Thus much of the language acquisition that takes place is based on hypothetical situations (see the discussion, below, of ‘primary as-if’).

Role-plays take this to a further level. Much communicative language teaching involves the use of free conversation both to practise fluency, and as a means of identifying areas requiring instruction. The problem is that if it is not to be artificial, such practice is limited to the sorts of conversations that students might reasonably be expected to have with each other in a classroom. Thus it can build confidence, but it is likely to be rather narrow when considered in terms of the need to practice more extended vocabulary, structures and functions. Role-plays use the imagination to overcome the constraints of the artificial classroom. In a sense, they embrace the artificiality, and make it work for the learner.

Livingstone (1983) describes how role-plays enable students to work with formality, register, function, attitude, paralinguistic and extra-linguistic features, and acceptability and appropriateness. Jones (1982) mentions such specific linguistic features, but when giving reasons for using simulations (i.e. role-plays), lists motivation, icebreaking, realism, and opportunities for monitoring language use. Larsson (2004) goes further, arguing that role-plays affect the whole classroom dynamic, leading to ‘more relaxed relations between teacher and pupils’ (p. 245). Ladousse (1987) describes role-plays as ‘low input-high output’, but this is contradicted both by research, and my own experience. More importantly, she writes ‘role play … is fun’ (p. 7); it is
refreshing to see a writer on language education recognize that fun does not automatically lead to inferior learning.

There has been some research on the contribution role-plays make to second language learning, as reported by Scarcella and Crookall (1990). They refer to Krashen’s theories of language acquisition and note how role-plays contribute to large quantities of comprehensible input, active involvement, and positive affect. Those who have some scepticism about Krashen’s theories (see, for example, McLaughlin, 1987) may nevertheless be mollified, as Scarcella and Crookall go on to cite other researchers such as Hymes and Long. If the Chomsky-derived tradition is the sticking point, one might turn to Cook (2000), who considers play ‘a use of language in which form, meaning, and function are in dynamic and mutually-determining interaction’ (p. 175). The ‘scaffolding’ offered by the rules and structure of role-play sit comfortably within Vygotskian learning theory.

There are those who oppose the use of role-plays for a number of reasons. Curiously, Jones himself is relentlessly opposed to the use of the words ‘role’, ‘play’ and ‘game’ to describe the activities he writes about. He takes his aversion to almost comical extremes with a list of words which are considered suitable (e.g. ‘simulation’, ‘mechanics’, ‘situation’) and those which are unsuitable (e.g. ‘drama, role play, game, exercise’, ‘rules’, ‘scene’).

Jones’s concerns are shared by many who oppose the whole activity. An important reason seems to be the word ‘play’. This becomes even more intense when the word ‘game’ is introduced. The dislike of these words is an interesting and revealing phenomenon in its own right. Evidently a rigid separation between ‘work’ and ‘play’ is dogmatically adhered to by many in the field of education: education belongs to the field of work, and any ‘play’ must therefore be rigorously excised or controlled if standards are to be maintained. But this attitude seems to have more to do with establishing the status and importance of the educator than it does with efficacy of instruction. Cook (2000) has critically examined the relationship between work,
play and learning, and one of his first findings is that the boundaries are less clear than many imagine. Moreover, by examining how first-language acquisition really happens, he notes the importance of play – and related non-work activities such as games and stories – in learning. Among his conclusions is: ‘...the ability to engage successfully in actual, everyday social interaction is largely developed through interaction with fictional characters in games and stories’ (p. 152). He is not advocating the wholesale adoption of play as a means of second-language instruction. Nevertheless, his findings contradict the arguments of those who object to ‘non-serious’ activities such as role-plays.

One of the arguments to be presented in this paper is that because of the prevailing aversion to ‘play’ (perceived as a non-serious, trivial activity), role-plays have tended to focus on rather prosaic, uninvolving topics; their usefulness could be expanded by allowing more imagination, more freedom, more play.

Theoretical Considerations

In order to maintain an open mind regarding other applications of role-play, a relaxed definition is required (Appendix 1 notes some of the controversies in this area). Yardley-Matwiejczuk (1997) has a wide view, perhaps because she is writing about role-play in clinical and experimental, as well as pedagogic, contexts. ‘Role play as a term describes a range of activities characterized by involving participants in “as if” or “simulated” actions and circumstances’ (p. 1).

This paper will follow Yardley-Matwiejczuk’s definition, in order to avoid excluding possibilities simply because they fall outside an arbitrary definition. She identifies two levels of ‘as-if’: the primary and the secondary. The primary level of ‘as-if’ entails the separation of the activity from the outside world. But this primary level is not unique to role-play. Indeed, the over-
whelming majority of language tasks undertaken in a classroom operate in a circumstance that can be described as ‘as-if’. It establishes a discontinuity between the speech and actions undertaken in the class for learning purposes, and ‘real’ speech and actions. When one student, practising a transformational exercise to familiarize herself with a structure, says, ‘Could you tell me the way to the bank, please?’ this operates at the level of primary as-if, because we know that she doesn’t ‘really’ want to go to the bank. The student is making an utterance ‘as-if’ she did, for the purposes of practice.

What distinguishes a role-play is a secondary level of ‘as-if’. Unlike the primary level, this is an explicit assumption of an imaginary situation. The secondary level of ‘as-if’ consists of conditions such as ‘You are a travel agent,’ ‘This room is a space ship’ and the like. It is here that role-play makes imaginative demands on its participants, and it is here that the pedagogic use of role-play can benefit from contact with insights derived from other applications.

One important point which distinguishes role-plays from drama in the classroom is that role-plays do not include ‘the prepared sketches or improvisations that are acted out for the rest of the class’ (Ladousse, 1987, p. 5). Role-plays are improvisations, certainly, but they are not performances for others. Mackay (2001) may argue that role-playing games are ‘a new performance art’ (emphasis mine), yet in role-plays the only audience is the participants (and, perhaps, a monitoring instructor).

This paper argues that the concept of immersion is crucial, and has been inadequately considered in previous work. The term immersion used here is known by other names: ‘involvement’ is widely used in the psychological literature, such as that of Goffman (1974), though Yardley-Matwiejcuk (1997) refers to ‘engagement’; Fine (1983) writes of ‘engrossment’ (used also by Goffman); one might even see the term as analogous to Csikszentmihalyi’s ‘flow’ (1990). Nevertheless ‘immersion’ is used here, as in the field of recreational role-play, to deliberately make an analogy with the use of the term in
language education, where it refers to a subject being placed in a communicative environment conducted wholly in the target language.

**New Perspectives**

Jones (1982) writes of the ‘reality of function’. By this he means that a role-play must cover ‘not only what the participants say and do, but also what they think.’ In other words, participants in a role-play should stop thinking of themselves as students in a classroom, and accept their assigned identity as ‘real’. Obviously it is not reasonable to expect students to believe this to be ‘true’. But it is certainly possible to demand of them ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ (Coleridge, 1817).

One of the most famous examples of role-play in psychological research is the Prison Experiment conducted at Stanford University in 1971 (Haney et al, cited in Yardley-Matwiejczuk, 1997; see also Zimbardo). In the experiment, volunteers were arbitrarily divided into warders and inmates in a simulated prison. While it has been rather strongly criticized as a piece of psychological research, one aspect that cannot fail to strike anyone who has seen some of the footage of the experiment, or even read what transpired, is the intensity of the experience for the participants. Those taking part, both inmates and warders, adopted their assigned roles to a frightening extent. The secondary ‘as-if’ of the experiment became a form of reality. The participants were fully immersed in the experience.

The evidence from numerous fields is that people in this state of mind are both better motivated, and more receptive. Immersion entails a heightened sense of concentration, sometimes to the extent that self-consciousness utterly disappears (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). But immersion typically requires time. Only a practised method actor can ‘switch on’ immersion in a role for a brief period.

Role-plays used therapeutically are predominantly short, and are de-
scribed as ‘minimalist’ (Yardley-Matwiejczuk, 1997, p. 44). But she reports on examples of extended role-plays, and on role-plays in which the context setting was described in detail (referred to as ‘enrichment’, p. 46), noting that these were more naturalistic, and superior.

In looking for superior, naturalistic role-plays, we might take a diversion to consider the advice of Constantin Stanislavski, whose dramatic technique inspired what is known as ‘Method Acting’. Although it must be kept in mind that role-plays are not drama performances, Stanislavski still has much to offer. Some points of relevance to us are:

1. ‘Natural’ behaviour comes both from reflection on the past and awareness of the present.
2. ‘Natural’ behaviour requires motivation, especially goals and some future possibilities.
3. ‘Involvement’ in a role comes from a specific situation, not from general goals.
4. You cannot deliberately be spontaneous; you can only allow it to happen by focussing on specific details. (Yardley-Matwiejczuk, 1997, p. 57)

Despite the obvious desire for naturalistic environments, the role-plays used in language instruction are usually minimalist. Not, perhaps, as minimal as single stimulus-response therapeutic role-plays, but nevertheless brief compared to other, more immersive, forms of role-play. In Ladousse’s (1987) book of role-plays for language instruction in the classroom, the time allocated ranges from 10 to 45 minutes. Moreover, the language used to set up the role-play is also minimalist. Description is spare; detail and background largely absent.

Contrast this with recreational role-playing games. A typical session of a role-playing game will last between 2 and 6 hours. But even this understates the duration. The majority of role-playing games involve a narrative continuity akin to a television serial. Thus each session is implicitly connected both to its predecessor and to its successor. Moreover, the level of detail can
be staggering. Roles are specified both in terms of the imagined society, and the rules employed, with specifications often taking up multiple pages. Description of what can be seen and experienced is often rich, resembling storytelling.

It may be argued that language students are simply not capable of processing such a large quantity of information. But is this really true? It seems more likely that instructors are merely reluctant to scaffold role-plays with extensive detailed input because of a pedagogic attachment to highly utilitarian, ‘meaning-driven’ conversation. And sure enough, a large proportion of role-plays described in the literature are essentially discussions. But believers in the Krashen doctrine should certainly not shy away from providing learners with rich input. And those who are dubious about Krashen may nevertheless take heart from the motivating effect of such input in this context. Indeed, role-playing games frequently involve shared authorship of the game environment, and this aspect lends itself particularly aptly to a multi-skill English classroom.

The goal of immersion, therefore, can be better achieved by increasing the level of detail in a role-play, and by extending the duration of role-plays. While it is often not practical in a class to have such activities last an hour or more, the idea of a continuing narrative can be used to good effect. This has another potentially useful impact.

One characteristic of role-playing games is that immersion in the game experience frequently spills over into the time between sessions. Players who have an emotional investment in their roles ‘daydream’ about the events of the role-play. They ‘re-enact’ particularly interesting sequences, and they speculate on what may happen next, perhaps planning their characters’ actions. What language instructor would turn down the opportunity to have learners spontaneously reflecting on English-language experiences in spare moments outside the classroom?

To achieve such an effect, however, the time and detail must be deployed
in such a way as to stimulate the imagination of the students. One problem with many pedagogic role-plays is, to put it bluntly, that they are boring. Because of the focus on ‘meaning-driven’ encounters, role-plays often entail rather utilitarian discussions or arguments. Unless the subjects of these discussions or arguments are of some genuine interest to the students, the role-plays are unlikely to be emotionally engaging, and thus an opportunity for motivation is missed.

It is no coincidence that role-playing games often involve narratives of discovery. These appeal directly to what Mugglestone (1976) calls the ‘primary curiosity motive’. She argues that ‘projects appeal to the curiosity motive if their content is interesting to the learner and if the learner is allowed to develop the project in his own way’ (p. 115). ‘Discovery’ covers a multitude of possibilities, but all involve the satisfaction of curiosity.

Furthermore, engaging narratives often involve some form of catharsis. This is certainly the goal of the psychodramas advocated by Moreno (described in Yardley-Matwiejczuk, 1997). These therapeutic role-plays are highly structured in terms of modes of address and establishing of clear boundaries. Nevertheless ‘Moreno’s central concept was that of “spontaneity”’ (Yardley-Matwiejczuk, 1997, p. 52). It is possible to have a resolution to a role-play narrative without sacrificing freedom and spontaneity. In crude early role-playing games, a session would typically end with the protagonists emerging from an underground labyrinth, having defeated monsters and acquired treasure. While easy to parody, the message is clear that much satisfaction derives from a resolution to a story (and as the points from Stanislavski should make clear, this fuels involvement and naturalistic behaviour). Too many pedagogic role-play narratives consist only of ‘jaw-jaw’. What resolution there is often takes the form of a decision about something which will be of no consequence once the role-play is over, and more importantly, which is not an interesting end to a story. An interesting narrative is one that participants want to talk about once the role-play is over.
In order to open up role-plays to these more interesting narratives, however, there are some challenges to be overcome. Another reason why pedagogic role-plays have tended to focus on ‘talking heads’ is that they are logistically easier to organize. Interesting narratives usually include action as well as dialogue, and it is unclear how action can be managed in the classroom.

This is a topic which has been addressed with some clarity by role-playing games. They use game mechanics (ultimately derived from wargames and related simulations) to determine the results of actions undertaken by participants. Instructors may worry that the use of game mechanics will interfere with the immersion which is the goal of the activity. The message from role-playing games, however, is precisely the reverse. If this seems counter-intuitive, perhaps the solution is to be found in Erving Goffman’s frame analysis. He describes how a basic human reaction to a situation – a ‘primary framework’ – may be transformed into a new frame: he refers to this as ‘keying’ (Goffman, 1974, p. 44). Fine (1983), in a sociological study of role-playing games, describes how this frame-switching occurs rapidly, and with surprisingly little confusion, or interference with the immersion in the role-play’s imaginary primary framework.

Thus the scope of a classroom role-play can be greatly expanded by allowing participants to do things, and determining outcomes in accordance with simple, previously agreed rules (see appendix 2, below). The rules also offer intrinsic interest and motivation, and some of the structure that the writers previously cited identify as supporting immersion.

In order to use rules effectively, however, the role of the instructor must change. Typically, during a pedagogic role-play an instructor monitors. The learner-centred nature of the activity is one of the things many identify as a positive aspect of role-plays. But it is possible for an instructor to intervene more actively without interfering with immersion. The instructor can become the ‘Controller’ (Jones, 1982) or ‘referee’. The referee arbitrates in any disputes that may arise between participants, where those disputes relate
to action. The referee may also intervene in the role-play by adopting a role. This makes it possible to introduce narrative possibilities, mysteries, opposition and the like. Such arbitration does require a little skill on the part of the instructor, so it is best to start with relatively unambitious intervention and see how it works out.

Note that intervention in a role-play by the controller, or by agents of the controller, is an established feature not only of role-playing games, but also of therapeutic role-plays.

There are alternatives to the rules/referee method of adjudicating actions. One derives from improvisational drama, and requires some maturity on the part of the participants. In short, it consists of the principle that participants may not block another participant’s statement. In this context, a block is to refuse to accept something as true within the role-play, or to react in such a way that it is more difficult for another participant to proceed. Johnstone (1979) describes the process:

I call anything an actor does an “offer”. Each offer can be accepted, or blocked . . . A block is anything that prevents the action from developing, or that wipes out your partner’s premise. If it develops the action it isn’t a block. (p. 97)

Such an approach pulls our role-plays into dramatic territory and requires participants to be more sympathetic to a dramatic approach than is strictly necessary for a role-play.

Still another way of dealing with the problem is to physically enact events. Role-playing gamers refer to this approach as LARP (“Live Action Role-Playing”). It has been taken to some remarkable extremes, as when a large group of participants spent three days engaged in a role-play based on Hamlet, the whole time living their roles in an old underground fire-engine garage in Stockholm (Koljonen, 2004). But it can be used in the classroom, so long as the environment is modified accordingly, and there are some sim-
ple ground rules agreed. This takes role-play into an unusual variant on Total Physical Response, and may be overwhelming for many students.

The last idea to be presented in this paper relates to the nature of the interaction in a role-play. Since a role-play is not a dramatic presentation, there are actually far more possibilities available than might at first be thought. This makes using role-plays in the large classrooms often experienced in Japanese universities less problematic. Many instructors make use of a task for a whole class of students in which they must mill around, interviewing other students, hoping to complete a questionnaire or perhaps find a student who meets certain criteria. This structure lends itself to a role-play, which makes the activity more realistic. For example, the scene is a palace, and the participants are nobles attending a ball. Each has been supplied with a background, and each has an agenda of some kind. If student awareness of such a situation is lacking, a scene from a period movie can easily be shown as part of the preparation.

In such a mass role-play, it is obviously impractical for the instructor to take a very active ’referee’ role, but because of the limited environment, and the social restrictions on the attendees, action can be made possible with pre-agreed rules. One solution is to supply students with signed slips which describe an action which will succeed if certain conditions are met. Participants are then told that when presented with such a slip, they must accept the action described on it as having occurred. This might allow, for example, a highly accomplished pickpocket to steal a rich noble’s jewellery.

It is also possible to divide a class into small groups. With a relatively structured role-play, one can have multiple instances being conducted simultaneously. If the role-play is constructed in such a way as to support interesting narratives, then the role-play can be followed up with participants from different groups comparing the different outcomes of the same situation.

While conventional wisdom is that the instructor should remain outside
the role-play, monitoring, there is much value to be had from participation. This can be in the form of the controller/referee role noted earlier, including the possibility of ‘bit parts’ and ‘opponents’. Equally it can be in a single role akin to the roles of student participants. This gives the students an opportunity to interact with the instructor in a different way, a different context. Many students comment that interaction with the instructor is important to them; this approach allows them to do so in a different register.

**Practical Experiences**

There is often a gap between activities as described in scholarly papers, and the reality of the class. The possibilities of role-play given above may seem overly ambitious to many instructors. But the principles can be applied at many levels, and have been applied. Here are a number of examples of what can be achieved.

Phillips (2004) describes his experiences of using role-playing games in language classes at the National Chengchi University, Taiwan. He started off with a simple structured adventure, with himself in the referee role. Once the students had grasped the idea, he divided them into groups and nominated one to be the referee. The referee was supplied with materials (descriptions of locations and opponents) making it possible for a student to perform the role of referee successfully. The final stage was for students to take over the whole process, and develop their own scenarios.

In teaching a business case discussion class at Nanzan University School of Business Administration, I reflected on my own experience of case study work: studying a case from the ‘outside’ is an activity which lacks a sense of engagement for all but highly motivated students. I recalled a business simulation run for high school students by the University of Aston, and constructed my own ‘Sprogs’ business game. Although this was nominally a rather mechanical decision-making game, based on an algorithm implement-
ed using an Excel spreadsheet, students took on roles within companies. Their goal was to maximise their personal benefit, and so there was a tension between the necessity for cooperation, and the necessity for competition. The simulation was also refereed, and participants were therefore able to develop new products, try ambitious promotional programmes, and head-hunt workers from other companies. Students reported that the simulation gave them a far better feeling for business decision-making and negotiation than the case studies we examined.

At Nanzan Junior College, all first-year students take part in an ‘international travel bazaar’ as part of their oral communication course. The activity was originally designed by Suzanne Meyer and conceived as being akin to a poster session at an academic conference, bringing together students from different classes (Meyer, 2001). It was subsequently refined into a more explicit role-play, with a very high input level in the form of extended preparation. Students make groups of four or five, and each group is assigned a country. Over a few weeks, the students research their countries, and prepare a poster and brochure. For the actual role-play, two large rooms are used, with the countries being divided between them. Each country has a table on which to display its poster, and the group is divided into two. Half of each team takes the role of ‘travel agent’ while the other half are ‘tourists’. The tourists go to the other room – the one which does not include their own country. For a whole class, the tourists visit the country tables, and ask the ‘travel agents’ for information to help them decide which country they would like to visit. The subsequent week sees the roles reversed. The trick here is that it is essentially a two-role role-play with multiple iterations, so students develop increasing familiarity and confidence with the roles without losing interest. It is highly structured, but students have a relatively high degree of freedom within the structure – they choose which countries to visit, and may choose to end their conversations and move on whenever they want. It has a number of positive results, the most obvious being that at the
end of it students realize they have spent two whole lessons talking only in English. Students report that it is a highly immersive experience in which they have learned a lot. The detailed preparation is extremely important.

At Kinjo University, some English-major classes in speaking are based entirely on role-plays, using the text *We Can Work It Out*, written by Kinjo professors (Taylor & Kluge, 2001). Here, much input is provided to students in the form of vocabulary and expression lists, listening and pronunciation exercises etc. But at the heart of the course are short improvised conversations by pairs of students, based on the patterns described in the book. These conversations are everyday situations, involving some form of goal conflict. The problem is that such role-plays can be unsatisfying because of the lack of catharsis. As a once-a-term evaluation, however, students have the opportunity to create their own role-plays. It is noticeable that given the opportunity, students choose both more imaginative settings, and more fulfilling narratives. They are also more likely to introduce some form of resolution to the improvised narrative.

I experimented with role-plays in the advanced oral communication class at Nanzan Junior College. This class, with only 13 students, was ideal for highly involving role-plays. To introduce the idea of role-plays, I used posters (King & Thomson, 2000) designed to assist young first language learners in writing original compositions. Each poster depicted a situation, and on its reverse isolated elements of the picture, described them, and posed questions. I asked students, in two groups, to choose a poster, analyse the contents, and choose characters to identify with. They could then proceed to ‘resolve’ the story. I asked one student to be a ‘referee’, both to describe events and places, and to manage the interaction between characters. One poster chosen involved aliens and their flying saucer; another, a classic storybook medieval castle. These highly imaginative backgrounds gave students the freedom to improvise stories without having to worry about realism. This led to a relaxed attitude on the part of the students, and they enjoyed
seeing where their imaginations would lead, and playing with language. In both groups, students were stimulated to research vocabulary to use in the stories. The role-plays were conducted over the course of two lessons, as roughly half of each lesson.

I then proceeded to introduce student-designed role-plays. Here I asked the students to consider settings for role-plays that would continue, with an episodic format. The two settings chosen were an all-woman office in a company making diet products, and a small clinic. Students developed their own characters, including strengths and weaknesses. Play was conducted in episodes across a number of weeks. The ‘director’ role was taken by the instructor: while one group was role-playing, the other would be working on a video project that was running in parallel. The clinic group immediately set up a narrative involving a patient who had been misdiagnosed by one of the doctors at the clinic, and improvised a role-play involving deceit, diplomacy, overhearing and misunderstanding. In the course of the role-play some relatively complex medical language was researched and used. The office group was less clear about its narrative goals, though the students had agreed that the office was somehow pitted against the company as a whole. The instructor set up two threads to follow: one involved a child of the company president, and the other a male ‘consultant’ arriving in the office to assess efficiency (actually to spy). Quite a complex set of narrative arcs emerged which could not be resolved in the time available.

These examples demonstrate that it is certainly possible to employ highly imaginative, freeform role-plays in the class, with a positive impact on motivation, vocabulary acquisition, and practice in a variety of registers. The students in the latter examples were highly able, and of course employing such role-plays with lower levels would require considerably more scaffolding. But with further work this can yield great rewards.
Notes

1 Wallis (1995) claims that Moreno actually coined the term ‘role-play’.
2 Such as arranging a marriage, stealing a prized diamond (while impersonating a noble), fomenting discord between rivals and so on.

Appendix 1: Definitions of Role-Play

Some writers are at pains to differentiate role-plays from simulations. Livingstone (1983) presents an intuitive distinction in which both role-plays and simulations are recreations of real situations external to the classroom, but while the latter involve the participants reacting freely ‘as themselves’, role-play involves some element of restriction, whether in the form of specified behaviour, or the pretence of being a different person. While Jones (1982) makes much of the ‘reality of function’ he seems to tie himself in knots by insisting on the term ‘simulation’, apparently through a mere aversion to the word ‘play’. ‘This automatically rules out play-acting, or playing games …Then, it would stop being a simulation’ (p. 4). Ladousse (1987) has other concerns, and presents a position at odds with Jones:

When students assume a ‘role’, they play a part . . . in a specific situation. ‘Play’ means that the role is taken on in a safe environment in which students are as inventive and playful as possible. (p. 5)

The term ‘role-play’ does, as Maley comments, seem to take on ‘different meanings for different people’ (p. 3). While an admirable sentiment, it is hard to reconcile Ladousse’s equation of the term ‘play’ with the word ‘safe’.

An important terminological distinction made in this paper is that between ‘role-play’, a broad term encompassing any activity which invokes the level of secondary ‘as-if’, and ‘role-playing game’. The latter refers to a recreational social role-play, a form of role-play which has some unusual char-
acteristics in its own right (see, for example, Fine, 1983, Mackay, 2001, and Mason, 2004), marrying game mechanics to Tolkienian subcreation. The term (or its abbreviation RPG) was hijacked by computer game designers thirty years ago, when the popularity of the social game made this commercially useful; now it is associated almost exclusively with the computer form. Computer RPGs have several different characteristics which merit investigation in their own right; however, since this paper is dealing with role-play as a direct interactive form between people, computer games should be understood as being excluded when the term role-playing game is used.

Appendix 2: Role-playing Rules

Rules for use in classroom role-plays do not have to approach the detail of recreational role-playing games. An example appears below:

For the purposes of the rules, in addition to descriptive details, roles are given broad areas of competence, rated numerically from 0 (utterly incompetent) to 6 (infallible). In order to determine the result of a proposed action, a participant rolls an ordinary die. If the number on the die is equal to or less than the participant’s role’s competence related to that action, the action is successfully completed. Otherwise, a problem occurs, as described by the referee.

This can be elaborated upon, and more sophisticated levels of interpretation added, but it nevertheless reveals the principle in operation. By combining chance with a clear representation of roles’ competence, it allows participants to weigh the odds, take risks, and enjoy the frisson of chance in operation.
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