A Practitioner Researcher perspective on facilitating an open, infinite, chaordic simulation.

Learning to Engage with Theory
while
Putting Myself Into Practice

A thesis submitted in fulfilment
Of the requirements
For the Degree of
Doctor of Education

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by
Elyssebeth Leigh

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Dedication

As I began writing this dissertation my husband, Mick Leigh, died. In 32 years of life together he supported me through 4 tertiary study programs, while not having a high opinion of it as a way of building knowledge, preferring (if only I had known its name) to grow his 'working knowledge'. Our discussions about the merits of all forms of learning influenced the final shape of this dissertation. I miss him and still learn from him.

Acknowledgements

While completing this dissertation I re-learned two vital skills—asking for help, and saying 'thank you'. The final document must be—and is—mine alone, but completing it has been a joint enterprise. It was sometimes difficult to ask for help—despite needing it badly, and at times not recognising it when offered. To everyone who has helped me so freely and generously, my deepest thanks.

Roger Putzel introduced me to the 'world of XB' and nothing has ever been quite the same for me as an educator. Mark Tennant became supervisor of an incomplete and inchoate research project after it had survived a number of false starts and provided support, time and ideas generously—including the reference, which gave me the title and a central theme for this work.

My sons Michael and Glenn have lived through my study adventures and remain friends and supporters for whom I have a depth of gratitude beyond words. Thank you both so much. My parents, Nita and Vincent Morrisey helped me begin this journey—I cannot ever fully repay their faith in me, and this is one more step along a path they knew I could 'make by walking'. My sisters, sisters-in-law, and brothers and brothers-in-law encouraged me to finish this task through to the end!

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The participants in XB teach and learn their way through their own experience helping each other—and me—gain personal insights. The support of the first Australian XB was especially vital in forming ideas and practices recorded here.

And finally, most recently, Janet Prentice took a document that 'had potential' and helped me make it something I enjoyed working with. To each person named, and all those who have been beside me through this time, thank you so very much.

Abstract

This thesis investigates two intertwined themes. The first concerns the development of a framework for understanding, and making appropriate use of, simulations and games as tools for learning. The second concerns the utilisation of the term PratitionerResearcher to reflect the unity of practice and research activity in creating 'working knowledge' (Symes 2000).

These themes are intertwined in the sense that the route I take to understanding simulations and games is through the stance of a PractitionerResearcher. Conversely the thesis aims to draw out what it means to be a PractitionerResearcher through my engagement as a facilitator of simulations and games.

I argue that the knowledge I generate as a PractitionerResearcher is utilitarian and pragmatic. Grounded in my practice as an adult educator it utilises theoretical perspectives chosen for immediate relevance rather than because of any claims to 'truth' or permanence. Understanding how this shapes and influences my practice was a complex, difficult process. Using an auto-ethnographic approach, Chapter 1 outlines the development of my 'working knowledge' as a PractitinerResearcher. It draws on selected personal experiences in my work as an adult educator using simulations and games for teaching and learning.

While curiosity about historical facts initiated the research reported in Chapter 2, the chapter focuses on uses of historical precedent for generating greater understanding, and acceptance by participants, of simulations and games as teaching/learning strategies. It identifies a range of contributions—from war games, religious games, and children's play—to the structuring of modern educational simulations and games.

Chapter 3 explores approaches to classifying simulations and games. Its development brought a gradual realisation of the futility of trying to establish a single definitive categorisation system for all simulations and games. Understanding how they can be arranged in a variety of different relationships provides a better insight into their general features and helps in making decisions

about when and how to use specific activities. One outcome of the work for this chapter was the realisation of some simulations as 'open and infinite' in nature, and that XB—a simulation of importance in my practice—is such a simulation.

Chapter 4 uses concepts developed in the field of chaos theory to illustrate how certain simulations create messy but 'chaordic' (Hock 2002) rather than dis-orderly learning contexts. 'Chaos/chaotic' once meant only dis-order, 'messiness' and unpredictability. Twentieth century scientific discoveries illustrate that order is concealed within 'chaos' producing richly complex patterns when viewed from the right perspective. I argue that 'chaos' concepts can be usefully applied to open and infinite simulations to demonstrate how they are similarly 'chaordic'.

XB (for e**X**perience **B**ased learning) is an open, infinite chaordic simulation, and has been a driving force in my practice for six years. The case study in Chapter 5 introduces the *'world according to XB'* and takes the reader 'inside' participants' experiences as the unfolding nature of their learning is revealed in the way they apply theories of organisational behaviour to immediate behaviours.

Chapter 6 reflects on my experiences of facilitating XB, via a review of interactions with some past XB participants. The influence of such a learning process on my practice is analysed. The emotional impact of these interactions has brought a better understanding of my own practice, and the chapter considers the concept of 'dispassionate reflexivity' as an aid for the facilitator in such contexts.

Chapter 7 examines the evolution and distinctive features of the PractitionerResearcher in more detail. As an educator, a consistent focus of my work has been simultaneously 'to know more' and 'to be able to do better' – and it is the interdependence of these that lies at the heart of what it means to be a PractitionerResearcher.

It is my hope that this thesis offers a solution for practitioners wanting to combine 'research' and 'practice' into a practical and scientifically rigorous 'whole'. For such professionals the PractitionerResearcher model offers an integrated approach, combining and validating 'learning *in* action' and 'learning *for* action'.

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List of Acronyms

AAACE	Australian Association for Adult and Continuing Education
ABSEL	Association for Business Simulation and Experiential Learning
ALARPM	Action Learning, Action Research and Process Management
AITD	Australian Institute for Training and Development
ICEL	International Consortium on Experiential Education
ISAGA	International Simulation and Gaming Association
NASAGA	North American Simulation and Gaming Association
SAGSET	Society for the Advancement of Games and Simulations in Education and Training
SIAA	Simulation Industry Association of Australia
SimTect	Simulations Industry Technology Conference
SoL	Society for Organisational Learning
TAFE	Technical and Further Education – the government-based bodies which are providers of posts-secondary skills and trade training in Australia
UTS	University of Technology, Sydney