# Should we teach an old game new tricks?

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The Middle East Politics Simulation (MEPS) is a simulation of diplomacy and political tension in the Middle East. This online role-play exercise is aimed at providing students with an improved level of understanding of the political dimensions of the region. Having been run since 1993, the MEPS has not had any major updates to its platform in all those years. However, as such a mature online entity there is the question of whether the MEPS will continue to engage students as their expectations of what constitutes an online role-playing environment became steadily raised by their familiarity with more graphically immersive platforms. The reliance on social media tools for students and political figures to use as conduits for communication is also unrepresented in the MEPS and the subject of some student dissatisfaction in previous years.

This research assesses student attitudes towards the MEPS with an eye to balancing the demands of technology, functionality, equity of experience, security and, most importantly, learning outcomes.

Keywords: Role-play, social media, simulation, student engagement, politics, Middle East

## Background

In deepening student engagement the use of role playing simulations is well established and known to offer positive outcomes in the teaching of Politics and International Relations subjects (Asal, 2005; Boyer, Trumbore, & Frick, 2006; Chasek, 2005; Hintjens, 2008; Sasley, 2010; Simpson & Kaussler, 2009). The Middle East Politics Simulation (MEPS) is a successful example of such a role play. A simulation of diplomacy and political tension in the Middle East, the MEPS is an online role-play exercise aimed at providing students with an improved level of understanding of the political dimensions of the region. The students take the roles of various political actors concerned with the Middle East and their lecturers perform the function of "Controllers", generating initial story lines, adjudicating and facilitating the simulation.

The intended purpose of using this form of role-playing exercise in delivering Middle East Studies subjects is to demonstrate the complexity of political dialogue the practical challenges and compromises that face the actors in this part of the world. Throughout its history, the developers and convenors of the MEPS have believed that this large collaborative exercise offers a deeper and broader comprehension of these realities in comparison to the more theoretical understandings that may be gleaned from a traditional assessment task such as an essay (Vincent & Shepherd 1998). By using an online platform to deliver the MEPS, the exercise can run 24 hours, thus deepening the immersion level further, as well as allowing the participation of off-campus students and those from other universities.

The MEPS has been running since 1993 and is currently administered by Deakin University, although other universities regularly participate. A text-based environment, the MEPS is viewed on a web browser over the public Internet and the site is accessed by a login/password barrier. Still operating through a low-bandwidth, simple HTML interface, the current MEPS system has had no significant upgrades since its original roll-out, the platform having been built as part of an Honours project by a computer science student at UNSW.

With such longevity, the MEPS has survived many trends in technology, e-learning and distance education in Australian universities. Literature describing the MEPS has consistently indicated the high level of student engagement and learning outcomes (Dracup, 2009; Hardy & Totman, 2011 (forthcoming); Ramsden & Watson, 2003; Vincent & Shepherd, 1998). Moreover, it has served as an exemplar for a subsequent generation of role play tools utilised in Australian tertiary teaching (Wills & McDougall, 2009).

The utility of the MEPS as a learning tool therefore seems apparent and its continued use desirable. However, as such a mature online entity, the convenors wondered whether the challenge of engaging students might increase as their expectations of what constitutes an online role-playing environment became steadily raised by their experiences with more slick and graphically driven tools. Even the very term 'simulation' occasionally causes confusion because in the popular mind a simulation is something more visual, for example a flight or driving program. Likewise, the phrase 'online role play' also conjures impressions of more immersive visual environments along the lines of World of Warcraft or Second Life.

Another omission from the MEPS platform is the sort of micro-blogging or file sharing tools associated with social media or Web 2.0 trends. At the time the MEPS was created, such functionality was unknown to the majority of the population, as indeed was the World Wide Web itself. Today though these tools are ubiquitous and to some extent *de rigueur* for inclusion in any web-based environment, particularly one that is principally concerned with communication.

So given these real and supposed short-comings, is it time to update the MEPS or is it a case of not needing to fix something that isn't broken?

## The Status quo

The MEPS site is extremely serviceable but lacks some of the visual polish and functionality that the current generation of university students might expect. It is fundamentally an email emulator with some extra functions attached, such as an area to view news, a section for posting role profiles of the different teams, a diary/sandbox for intra-team communication and a live chat tool.

The core function of email emulation is fully serviceable and does not tend to cause any major complaints or problems. There are some slight visual issues caused by students pasting material out of Word documents, causing 16-bit characters like curled apostrophes to display as strings of symbols, but this cannot be classified as a serious impediment to functionality. Nor are there any consistent problems with other text publishing functions of the site, such as the diary or role profile tools.
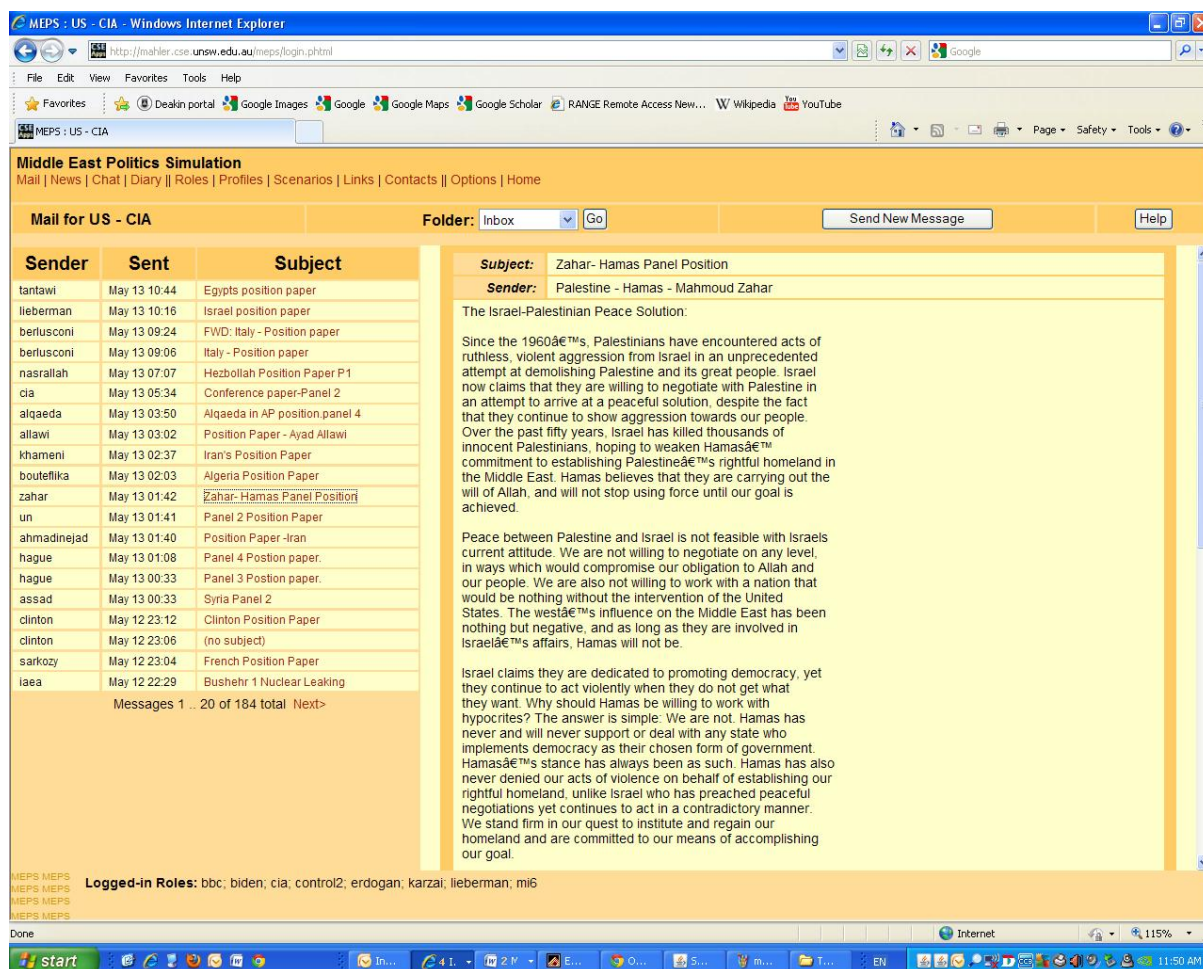
**Figure 1: Screen view of a team Inbox in the MEPS**

There are however two issues that do cause some annoyance each time the MEPS is run. The first of these is a steadily increasing incompatibility with each advancing version of Internet Explorer. This causes some areas of the site not to display properly, depending on the user's IE version and operating system. Naturally this can be completely avoided by encouraging the use of alternative browsers such as Firefox, but not all students have the skills for installing such software, nor is it necessarily an option for those using shared or public computers.

The second area of concern is the chat function. The chat tool pre-dates most commercially available instant messaging clients and therefore lacks many of the benefits of what would today be conventional wisdom. The three chief grievances with the MEPS chat tool are (a) that users must refresh the frame manually to see new messages/replies; (b) anyone in the MEPS can enter a chat session so there is no way of guaranteeing confidentiality between teams; and (c) navigating away from the chat window breaks one's session. Users who return to the chat window will then be re-logged as a new user identity, differentiated by a number. For example, obama1, obama2, obama3. Confusingly, the old user identity still remains visible in the session participant list, even though it is now inaccessible.

This is extremely problematic because participants in a chat do not have the option to check back to their emails or refer to other material without breaking their session. In a large chat session, the window quickly becomes full of notifications of duplicate user identities entering and leaving. Occasionally it can become so unstable that the entire session crashes.

**Figure 2: MEPS chat window showing broken session**

There have also been some regular expressions of yearning to add Web 2.0 functions such as micro-blogging or Facebook-style updates and file sharing to the MEPS. Partially this stems from an assumption that students use these things in their private lives and therefore might expect their inclusion or that the availability of these things will make the MEPS more enjoyable for them. However, it increasingly needs to be considered that in a world where senior politicians and even terror groups make full use of the Internet to post their opinions or Tweet, such social media tools are now actually a legitimate aspect of simulating political discourse.

On the other hand, increased functionality and its demands can alienate those students who are not as comfortable with using such tools or have no desire to use them in their studies. Given the growing weight of evidence disputing the Digital Native hypothesis (Cameron, 2005; G. Kennedy, et al., 2007; Kvavik & Caruso, 2005) the provision of extra functions within the MEPS may generate inequalities between users and raise levels of anxiety about what is already quite a daunting exercise.

The purpose of this research is to therefore to assess student attitudes towards the MEPS, both in terms of the experience they have with the current system and with what they believe should be added in future iterations. The core concerns of our research is the need to balance the demands of technology, functionality, equity of experience, security and, most importantly, learning outcomes.

## Specific challenges

Any overhaul of the MEPS will face the generic challenges involved in the development of any online learning tool. These would include the pedagogical questions surrounding learning experience, scaffolding and instructional design, as well as the technological issues of platform, stability, access and of course, budget. Since these factors are so ubiquitous and applicable to any new implementation, it is not worthwhile dwelling on them within this paper. However, there are some specific obstacles that the MEPS gives rise to through the nature of its content and game mechanics. These do need to be considered since they are fundamental to both the long-running success of the simulation, as well as any future re-versioning.

The first difficulty that the MEPS faces with any design or upgrade is the nature of its content. The plotting of

terrorist acts, violent responses to them and anti-Western (or anti-Semitic) rhetoric is an everyday occurrence within the simulation. Students are playing the roles of terror groups, intelligence agencies and state representatives and communication 'in character' is the whole point of the exercise.

Such content needs to be carefully quarantined from the outside world lest it be taken out of context. The Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) is informed when a MEPS session is running so that if their electronic intelligence gathering is alerted by the simulation's traffic, an explanation is available. Participants are also asked to sign a pledge not to discuss the simulation's 'events' through any channel outside the MEPS site, except between their university domain email addresses. This legal proviso was instituted in 2009 after an incident where a student text messaged her team-mate regarding their plans for a bombing attack on a mosque. Regrettably she used the wrong number and the message was sent to a member of the public who then alerted anti-terror authorities. The matter was cleared up though not without the student and one of the convenors facing some unsympathetic interrogation from the police and the university's legal department.

This incident provides a salient lesson on the need for keeping the MEPS secluded from public channels. This includes being cautious about mixing the MEPS with the university's LMS and/or email system. At present it is impossible for a MEPS email to travel outside the interface, even accidentally, since with the bespoke email emulator there is no such connectivity for this data.

Secondly, the team assessment nature of the MEPS requires provision to be made for joint account access. At present team-mates share a username and password to access their account. This is another barrier to utilising the university's LMS, since it would require the creation and sharing of accounts not associated with real individuals. Moreover, because the MEPS regularly involves students from other institutions, this would require them having access in the same manner. Such obstacles are not insurmountable, though it can be imagined that organising this through the multiple stakeholders in a university IT system would generate some degree of extra administration. (Conversely, the fact that the MEPS has sat within an obscure UNSW domain server for all its life is perhaps responsible for its lack of evolution, in that it has not been necessary to adapt across the two or three different LMS versions that most universities have been through over the last 15 years.)

Thirdly, the mechanics and assessment of the MEPS require that the controllers be able to see all emails sent or received by the teams. This is for purposes of grading their role-playing. At present this privilege does not require extra log-ins for the controllers, but is achieved through a dropdown menu. Again this poses a technical challenge to using some off-the-rack solutions or an LMS.

Lastly, the size of the MEPS in terms of teams and participants is large and varies from session to session in terms of exact team numbers and team identities. Since the simulation is used across different units of the Middle East Studies major sequence at Deakin, there are different emphases in different sessions. For example, in the second trimester of every year, one of the units (The Politics of Terrorism) has a much greater stress on terrorist groups and this entails creating team roles that are not present in trimester 1. Moreover, the identities of the team roles can change as politicians and groups come and go in the real world. Lastly, the number of users, teams and members per team needs to adapt to cohort enrolments, students opting to undertake the MEPs as their main assessment task and other variables. In the last five years student numbers in any MEPS exercise have ranged from 120 to well over 200 in a trimester.

All of these potential variations mean that any MEPS platform has to be scalable and flexible enough to adapt to what is essentially a unique run for every session.

These four main concerns form the context in which any potential upgrade to the MEPS system needs to be examined within.

## Question and methodology

Given that there are some known technical issues with the MEPS an upgrade does seem desirable. However some of the other reasons for considering an upgrade are based upon supposition, such as an assumed student desire for social media type tools. With this in mind, it was decided to survey students as to their experience with the MEPS and their thoughts about what features they thought would improve the simulation.

A questionnaire comprising open- and closed-ended responses was utilised for canvassing student opinion on the MEPS. This method was employed as it provided the best opportunity to sample large numbers of students.

Gathering a large number of responses was deemed desirable because the complexity of the role play (100+ students, 60+ teams) offers such a range of individual experiences that a smaller sample (such as a focus group type-approach) would have been much less representative and/or to complex to make representative. Additionally, given that the MEPS requires over two weeks of effort by the students, requesting more of their time to participate in follow-up research would seem unreasonable.

Deakin students who had completed the first trimester 2011 run of the MEPS (2 – 13 May 2011) were asked to complete a written questionnaire. This posed a variety of questions about the quality of their experience in a mixture of closed and open-ended questions. They were asked open-ended questions about what features they would like to see added to the MEPS and on their likes and dislikes about the simulation. There were 58 completed responses from 64 students who were given the survey.

By gathering this data, the researchers hoped to ensure that any decisions they made about changing the MEPS system had some supporting evidence behind them.

### Limitations

The questionnaires were handed out during the final part of the MEPS exercise, which is a face-to-face role-playing conference. This sample therefore excluded some students who had participated in the longer online part of the exercise but could not attend the conference. Some of these were off-campus students or those who had other commitments. Around 30 students were excluded in this way.

As the final part of the assessment, this sample group also excludes anyone who had such a negative experience of the MEPS that they had abandoned their participation in it at an earlier point. This would include approximately five students.

The questionnaire was not given to the 16 or so students from Charles Sturt University (CSU) who had also participated in this iteration of the MEPS, filling the roles of newspaper journalists. The reason for excluding the CSU students was because their participation in the exercise was under fundamentally different assessment criteria, with different expected learning outcomes and under the direction of teaching staff not otherwise linked to the MEPS. For example, the CSU students participated in larger teams and were being assessed by their tutor on their journalistic and print production abilities. The central aim of their participation was to hone their skills as journalists rather than deepen their understanding of the Middle East.

## Results and discussion

The results of the questionnaire illustrate three main trends:

1. Student experience with and attitude toward the MEPS is overwhelmingly positive.
2. The current interface is deemed simple and suitable, though a majority of users see room for improvement
3. Most users would like to see some social media (or Web 2.0) tools included in the interface, with an improvement in the chat function being the most common desire.

### Student experience

Amongst the 58 respondents to the questionnaire 57 nominated their overall experience with the MEPS as being positive. (The single respondent not counted in this majority was one who did not answer the question.) Every respondent described their learning experience in this exercise as 'Excellent' or 'Good', with all but two (who did not answer) rating the MEPS as offering a 'Much Better' or 'Better' learning experience than traditional forms of assignments they had encountered. Over 90% felt that their understanding of the Middle East and their engagement with the subject had been increased by their participation in the MEPS.

Such results are consistent with previous research on student experience with the MEPS. Dracup (2009) found a similarly high level of student experience and satisfaction. Over 95% of respondents in that study expressed the opinion that they had "a better understanding of the facts of Middle East politics" as a result of undertaking the MEPS. That research also suggested that students felt they had seen an improvement in more generic academic skills such as creative thinking, communicating, team work and problem solving.

One contrary, though not necessarily negative viewpoint that was expressed in our questionnaire was the volume of time that the students felt they had put into the MEPS. Many noted the time demands of the MEPS as being considerably greater than they would normally devote to a university assignment. This has been noted in prior studies too, with a figure of about 3.5 hours per day being recorded as a typical student input whilst the MEPS runs. (Vincent & Shepherd, 1998)

It should be noted that the nature of the comments made in the questionnaire about time demands did not always indicate deep resentment or negativity, with many of them being along the lines of "I want my life back" or "My brain is dead!". Evidence that the time requirements were not begrudged is offered by the fact that 50 out of the 58 respondents indicated that they would participate in another MEPS if they had the chance.

### The interface

Questionnaire responses were mixed regarding the need to change or upgrade the MEPS interface. Fifty-one respondents (88%) felt that the current interface was 'Suitable for its purpose'. However, this is contrasted with the lower rate of 67% in another question who felt that the current interface was 'adequate for the task', with several making informal notations in the margin in the vein of "Adequate, but could be better". This was also indicated in the response to the question regarding whether the interface needed to be improved, where 40 participants (69%) wanted to see improvements, with another 6 (10%) being undecided.

Visual appeal was not deemed important by the participants in the survey, with only 39% being in favour of making the interface 'more attractive'.

In terms of usability, the interface's simplicity was widely acknowledged by students. The majority (90%) agreed with the statement "The interface is simple". In free comment spaces of the questionnaire though, a few respondents noted specific functions or elements that they felt were complex or unintuitive. The email inbox and filing system was mentioned by nine respondents in this regard. The convenors would note however that some teams had a disorganised approach to their email inbox and failed to make any use of the folder creation functions that the emulator offers, which are very similar to those found on commercial mail clients.

### Web 2.0 tools

One question in the survey asked students to agree, disagree or indicate indecision to the statement "Social media tools need to be added to the interface". The specific types of social media tools were not nominated by the questionnaire. To this question, 37 (64%) respondents indicated that they felt such tools did need to be included. Only 13 (22%) disagreed with the statement, with the rest being undecided or failing to answer the question. It is important to remark that amongst those stating a desire to see more social media incorporated, six respondents indicated in margin notes next to this question that it was solely the need for a better chat function that they were referring to. (See discussion below.)

The results from this question seem to indicate that a desire for greater social media presence is not automatic amongst students, even those sitting quite firmly in the demographic usually associated with such platforms. In the case of the MEPS, this may be because they recognised the unsuitability of social media elements to the task or perhaps because they thought it would add to the workload. Regardless of the reasoning, this question in our survey was the least clear cut in its response and would seem to accord with much of the research refuting the Digital Native hypothesis and the desire for social media presence in classroom activities. (G. Kennedy, et al., 2007; G. E. Kennedy, Judd, Churchward, Gray, & Krause, 2008; Kvavik & Caruso, 2005)

Criticism of the chat function of the MEPS was the most prevalent negative comment garnered by the questionnaire. This was expressed in various free form comment boxes as well as informal marginalia. Students were frustrated by the unreliability of the chat interface, its inability to be kept open when referring back to other site elements and the need to refresh the window in order to see replies. Some respondents also lamented the unavailability of an 'out-of-character' chat function, particularly so that team-mates could communicate synchronously.

This last wish may have been made more imperative in the last two years given the ban on students communicating via other channels, such as text message. Currently the only way team-mates can communicate with each other in anything approaching synchronicity is to arrange to be online simultaneously and then send emails to themselves or leave notes in the team's diary and constantly refresh the page. Both of these options

seem rather awkward, especially given the ubiquity of chat functions in so many other online environments.

Another desire expressed by some students was an ability to attach files to emails within the simulation or at least some other ability to share files between team-mates or with other teams. This warrants consideration, but the question arises as to what sort of files might be exchanged and how this might be affected by institutional policies on appropriate ICT use and the need for security of material generated by the MEPS. For example, a seemingly benign use of such file attachments might be for a team to create their own letterhead for the issuing of press releases and thus send them as an attachment to teams playing media roles. However this gives rise to the issue of terror-related material 'leaking' from the MEPS as discrete files when created on one student's computer and potentially downloaded onto another's, where it could then be forwarded on outside the context of the MEPS. Likewise it would be possible (or even likely) that some students might send graphic or inappropriate image files to each other, particularly regarding terrorist actions. Whilst this can likely be covered by instituting rules or policies, the potential for mishap needs to be weighed carefully against the need for such file sharing functionality in the first place.

A further disincentive for instituting file sharing or enhancements beyond the text-based nature of the MEPS is in providing equality amongst participants. Currently the interface and entirely online nature of the task means that all students participate equally, regardless of their location, bandwidth, computer equipment or study mode.(Hardy & Totman, 2011 (forthcoming)) Allowing students to create and attach files might give a perceived advantage to those with the skills, equipment and inclination to do something beyond the scope of the average participant. Naturally this may be seen as a meritorious endeavour, but with the focus of the MEPS being on understanding the politics and diplomacy of the Middle East, the creation of additional media objects by students is not a target outcome.

## Conclusion

It is obviously important to take notice of the expressed need for a workable chat function in the MEPS. The simulation cannot continue running with this element so badly broken, or at least not without it affecting levels of engagement. This will either entail a complete re-write of the chat function within the existing system or else a move to a new platform.

These results on the whole though suggest that a major upgrade of the MEPS interface is not imperative and that in any subsequent version care must be taken to preserve the simplicity of the system. Developers of online role play tools would do well to bear in mind this trade-off between simplicity and feature provision as it seems that students appreciate usability and 'fitness for purpose' over complex and 'well-appointed' interfaces. Naturally they would prefer to have both outcomes, though the nature of educational design and development rarely affords such unrestricted possibilities. The implication is that when designing something like an email system, it is not necessary to be concerned that the tool does not completely emulate the features and functions of a commercial email client. As long as the tool is adequate for the job, students understand that 'bells and whistles' are superfluous and their level of engagement is not affected.

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