



Entry into Valhalla: Transforming traditional legal ethics curricula through cost effective multimedia

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Traditional approaches to teaching legal ethics which focus primarily on the content of the professional rules lack the essential problem solving aspect essential to a proper appreciation of professional responsibility in practice. They are also non responsive to the needs and expectations of modern students. This presentation showcases the *Entry into Valhalla* multimedia program, which utilises cost effective technology, including *Second Life* machinima, to transform traditional legal ethics curricula. It contextualises otherwise abstract principles and facilitates a problem solving approach based on real world-type contexts that closely resemble the kinds of dilemmas that students may encounter when they enter legal practice.

Key words: machinima, Second Life, cognitive apprenticeship, legal ethics

Ethics training in Australian law schools

An appreciation of legal ethics and professional responsibility is an indispensable part of legal practice. Nevertheless the track record of ethics training in Australian legal education has been described as generally less than impressive (Robertson, 2004). A 2003 study found that the commitment to ethics learning in Australian law schools was far from uniform (Johnstone & Redmond, 2003). It has been suggested that the immediate reason is not difficult to identify (Robertson, 2004). The prescribed areas of study for legal practice (the 'Priestley 11') refer only to the teaching of the formal rules of professional responsibility. This obligation is easily discharged by traditional lectures focusing on the content of these rules, like any other area of substantive law like Contract Law or Criminal Law.

However, there are many deficiencies in such an approach. A proper appreciation of ethics and professional responsibility requires a process or problem solving approach. Large scale lectures are an inappropriate pedagogical vehicle and lecture halls are an inappropriate venue for the exercise (NSWLRC 1993, para 5.24). Ideally ethics training should be done in a clinical setting. However, by its nature clinical education can only be offered to a small number of students (Castles 2001). A problem solving approach of a kind capable of scaling up to cater for the needs of the study body as a whole is indicated.

Further, traditional approaches like large group lectures no longer meet the expectations or needs of modern students. Students today are of a generation surrounded by ubiquitous information and merged technology, dealing with blurred boundaries between their work, study and social lives (Nelson et al, 2005). These students generally want the flexibility of accessing their study materials in their own time and in their own way (see e.g. McGarr, 2009). This flexibility also enables them to juggle the competing time commitments that are a common experience for many or most modern students (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006).

Multimedia as a cost effective alternative means of instruction

It is now widely acknowledged that technology can provide an alternative to real-life settings such as clinical exercises, without sacrificing the critical authentic context (Herrington & Oliver, 2000). An authentic context can be achieved through either an actual work setting, a highly realistic or 'virtual' surrogate of the actual work environment, or an anchoring context such as a video or multimedia program (McLellan, 1994). Multimedia involving the use of virtual characters to present tasks and critical information in a simulated environment can be a useful strategy in the creation of more authentic learning environments online (Agostinho, 2006). Nevertheless, for many academics a significant obstacle to introducing multimedia innovations into their curricula is the prohibitive cost of computer software programming that is often required (Dunning, 2004).

By contrast, it has been recognised that 'machinima', or computer graphics imagery created without the cost of professional software or professional programming, can be a cost effective means of creating effective learning environments (Muldoon et al, 2008). Machinima involves 'real world filmmaking techniques being applied within an interactive virtual space where characters and events can be either controlled by humans, scripts or artificial intelligence' (Dellario & Marino, 2005). As such it offers a cost effective means of creating engaging narrative-centred environments that can facilitate an effective problem solving approach to an examination of legal ethics and professional responsibility. One vehicle for the creation of such machinima is the *Second Life* virtual environment. *Second Life* is a multi-user virtual environment which has emerged as holding great potential as an education platform (Butler & White, 2008).

Entry into Valhalla: transforming traditional legal ethics curricula

The presentation will showcase *Entry into Valhalla*, a five module multimedia program that utilises *Second Life* machinima, and the other cost effective multimedia used in its creation. The program is the product of an Australian Learning and Teaching Council Teaching Fellowship. *Entry into Valhalla* adopts elements of a 'cognitive apprenticeship' approach to learning including modelling, coaching, scaffolding, reflection, and exploration (Collins, Brown & Newman, 1989). Each of the five modules covers a different area of legal ethics, such as Client Confidentiality and Conflicts of Interest, the Duty to the Administration of Justice and Discipline. Modules comprise an introductory video in which an academic provides an overview of the area, prescribed readings, short problem-based quizzes with formative feedback, machinima scenarios and further readings. Each machinima scenario follows the format of a legal practitioner in a fictional law firm approaching the male and female senior partners for advice concerning an ethical dilemma which the practitioner is confronting in the course of his or her work and which is portrayed in flashback. In this way legal ethics are placed in a rich, multi-layered real-world context. The modules are packaged using the Xerte eLearning system and accessed by students at their convenience via a learning management system such as Blackboard prior to discussion in small group classes.

Entry into Valhalla is an innovative use of cost effective technology designed to transform traditional approaches to teaching legal ethics. The program facilitates a problem solving approach based on real world-type contexts that closely resemble the kinds of ethical dilemmas that students may encounter when they enter legal practice. Moreover, while *Entry into Valhalla* is focused on legal ethics curricula, the approach taken and the resources utilised in its creation are readily adaptable to other disciplines.

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Des Butler is a Professor of Law at the Faculty of Law, Queensland University of Technology. In 2006 he was awarded a Carrick Australia (now Australian Learning and Teaching Council) Award for Teaching Excellence in the Law, Economics, Business and Related Fields category and in 2009 was awarded an ALTC Teaching Fellowship for a programme involving the development of the *Entry into Valhalla* program for teaching professional ethics and the transfer of the knowledge of producing cost-effective multimedia to other academics. He has received numerous other awards for his teaching innovations. Instruction on the use of cost-effective multimedia may be found at: <http://www.altcexchange.edu.au/book/using-cost-effective-multimedia-create-engaging-learning-experiences-0>

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