INTRODUCTION

Service encounters, defined as the moment of interaction between the customer and the firm, (Bitner, Brown, & Meuter, 2000) are critical in all industries, including government services that have not been traditionally defined as service industries. The significance becomes even more evident when considering that every citizen or business should interact with government. Many e-government initiatives and research focus on improving (online) service delivery (Chen, 2002; Kliewink & Janssen, 2009; Layne & Lee, 2001). However, these initiatives take an organizational perspective, whereas service encounters emphasize the client perspective. In many cases a central element of e-government improvement programs is the modernization of services through process redevelopment and
the adoption of new information technologies and systems (Daniel & Ward, 2006). In addition, governments are looking for new business models to improve their service provisioning (Janssen, Kuk, & Wagenaar, 2008). As such, autonomous agencies are cooperating with each other to provide a single point of contact. In addition, they are creating new service delivery channels to serve their clients. Customers can nowadays use a variety of channels to communicate with the government and they are able to select their preferred channel given their needs and actual circumstances. For example, clients can first request a governmental service using a website, while obtaining status information via the telephone later. In this way Integrated Service Delivery (ISD) or “joined-up services” is created in order to remedy “the fragmented landscape of public administration” (Phythian & Taylor, 2001, p. 579). Here, ISD refers to the bundling of services into a whole and the personalized delivery of services by employing a variety of service delivery channels. While multiple, often technical, solutions such as citizens shops (De Araújo, 2001) and portals (Daniel & Ward, 2006) have been suggested for facilitating ISD, there is a dearth of research on guiding service encounters. Not only is there a lack of principles for guiding service encounters, literature is also silent on research approaches for deriving such principles.

One possible approach to improve service encounters could be to model and detail all possible interactions between customer and service professional and optimize these interactions from a customer perspective. For relatively straightforward encounters, this could be possible, however, in case there are many processes having many variations and exceptions this would not be a realistic option. An opposing approach is to use service delivery principles that can guide the behavior and activities of the service professionals. Instead of detailing all interactions and processes, the relatively simple principles can guide service encounters. Professionals can then use these principles as a basis to execute their business processes and customer interactions. There is however a lack of readily available and validated principles for many governmental organizations. Moreover, while the use of principles for addressing complex problems is not uncommon in literature, previous contributions have been silent on suitable methods for deriving principles. Design research methods for deriving principles, without involving local knowledge and gaining commitment from professionals, might not result in the desired adaption and acceptance of the principles. As such, we propose an innovative design research method based on participative role-playing.

The objective of the paper is to derive service encounters principles in a participative matter based on a design science method. A participative role-playing game is employed to involve professionals and ensure that they can freely think, hence employing their in-depth knowledge of service delivery processes for the development of service delivery principles. Furthermore, this participative design approach enables researchers to employ the derived principles as an input during the game in order to determine its implications and gain the commitment of service professionals. As part of our design science method, we developed the role-playing game and tested the game with students and academic staff in three rounds. After successfully passing the pre-test, a large governmental agency in the Netherlands hosted the game. This agency is concerned with financing education for Dutch citizens and managing the related information.

This paper proceeds as follows. First, we review literature on integrated service delivery and service delivery principles and on the concept of role-playing games. Next, this paper provides an overview on the design process of the role-playing game. Then, we discuss the results of the session at the public agency. This paper concludes with several conclusions and recommendations for further research.
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