

Avatars develop real world skills

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New research suggests that far from disengaging young people from real life, virtual worlds can provide unique environments that can help them learn and negotiate new situations.

Academics on the Inter-Life project, which was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), developed 3D 'Virtual Worlds' (private islands) to act as informal communities that allow [young people](#) to interact in shared activities using avatars. The avatars are three-dimensional characters controlled by the participants. Virtual Worlds offer the possibility of realistic, interactive environments that can go beyond the formal curriculum. They can enable young people to develop skills which are used in real world settings, such as organisational and [cognitive skills](#).

The project involved young people undertaking creative activities like film-making and photography, and encouraged them to undertake project activities with the virtual environments. The students had to learn to cope with many scenarios in their island, as well as participate in the online communities over several months. Throughout the project, the researchers encouraged new forms of communication, including those used in online gaming.

The project's lead researcher, Professor Victor Lally, said: "We demonstrated that you can plan activities with kids and get them working in 3D worlds with commitment, energy and emotional involvement, over a significant period of time."

"It's a highly engaging medium that could have a major impact in extending education and training beyond geographical locations," Professor Lally added. "3D worlds seem to do this in a much more powerful way than many other social tools currently available on the internet. When appropriately configured, this [virtual environment](#) can offer safe spaces to experience new learning opportunities that seemed unfeasible only 15 years ago."

The findings represent an early opportunity to assess the social and [emotional impact](#) of 3D virtual worlds. So far, there has been little in depth research into how emotions, social activities and thinking processes in this area can work together to help young people learn.

The Inter-Life project is part of the Technology Enhanced Learning research programme and aims to narrow the gap between young people's experience of learning and the dominance of technologies in their everyday lives.

"The applications are enormous" said Professor Lally. "You can now create multiple science simulations or field trip locations, for example, using 3D world 'hyper-grids' that allow participants to 'teleport' between a range of experiments or activities. This enables the students to share their learning through recording their activities, presenting graphs about their results, and use voting technologies to judge attitudes and opinions from others. It can offer new possibilities for designing exciting and engaging learning spaces."

"This kind of 3D technology has many potential applications wherever young people and adults wish to work together on intensive tasks," he added. "It could be used to simulate training environments, retail contexts and interview situations - among many other possibilities. These virtual worlds have potential uses in education, and also a wide range of other social and academic applications."

Provided by Economic & Social Research Council

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