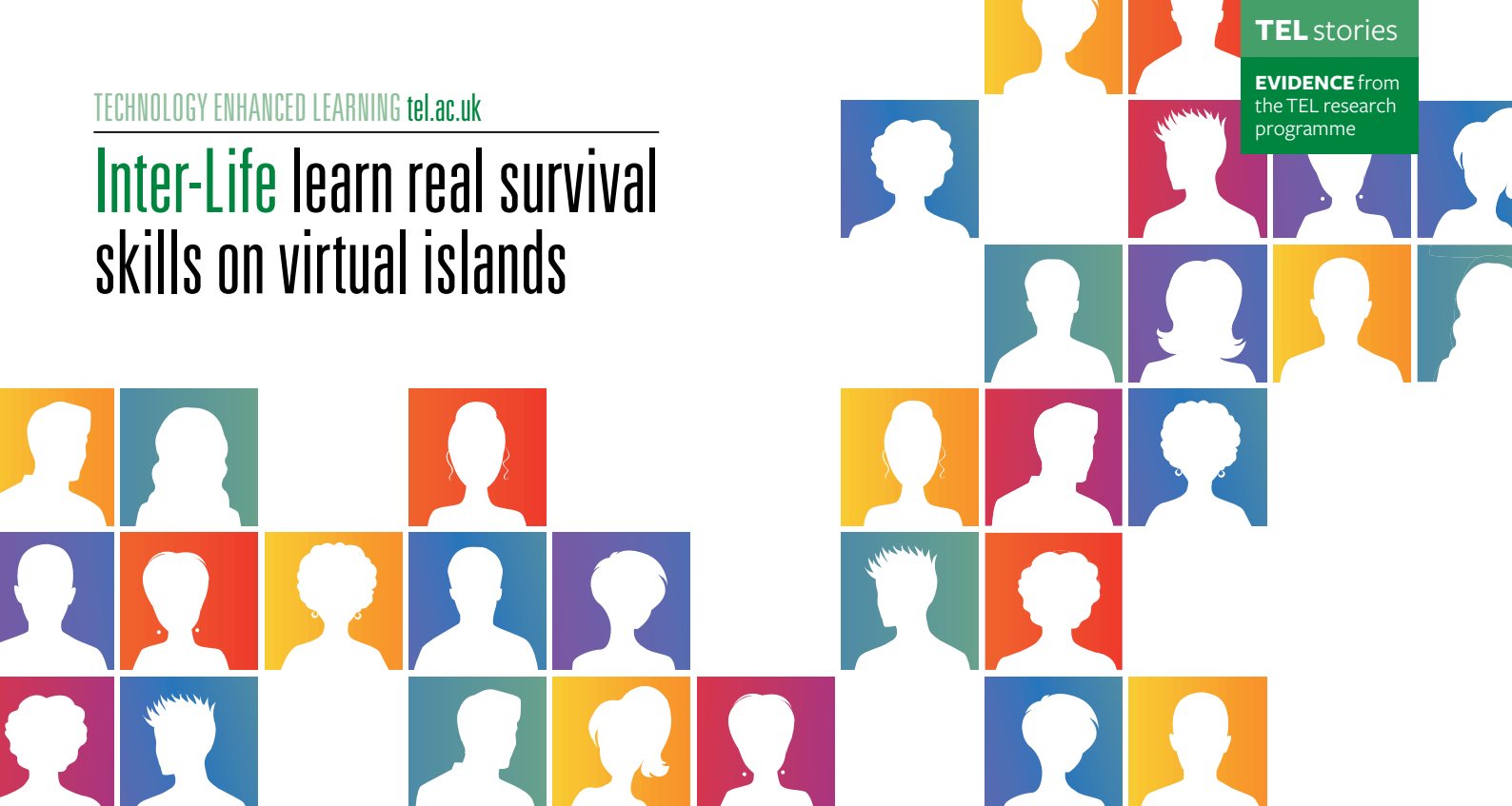
TECHNOLOGY ENHANCED LEARNING tel.ac.uk

# Inter-Life learn real survival skills on virtual islands

**TEL** stories

**EVIDENCE** from the TEL research programme



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The experiences on Inter-Life island helped provide young people with the insights and the conceptual and processing skills they need to meet some of life's key challenges. These findings open up possibilities for the use of virtual worlds in education.

Professor Victor Lally, principal investigator, Inter-Life project.

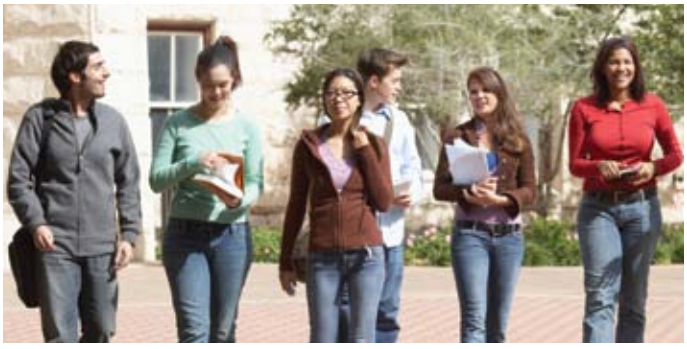
## Inter-Life... the challenge

'If at first you don't succeed, try, try, try again...' It's good advice, but young people aren't always able to take it. Sometimes they get just one chance – and if they fail, the consequences can be grave.

Too many children still fall back when they move from primary to secondary school. Looked-after teenagers struggle to make a success of independent life when they leave care at 18. Record numbers of students are dropping out of university in their first year. Life chances and money are wasted every time a young person stumbles over one of these tricky transitions.

The Inter-Life project arose from the belief that virtual worlds can help young people prepare for such rites of passage. In a safe and supportive virtual environment, they can learn to work together, to resolve conflict and to solve practical problems. In the process they can explore issues of identity, and build their confidence, resilience and motivation.

In 2008 the Inter-Life team, part of the Technology Enhanced Learning Research programme, began work. A mix of researchers from education, computer science, sociology and psychology, it set out to create virtual worlds where young people could acquire vital life-skills .



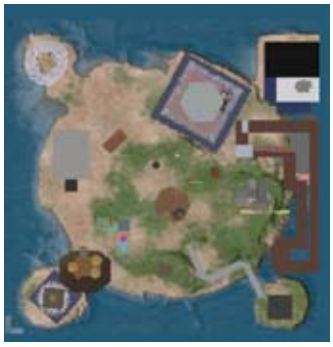
# Inter-Life...

The team created two virtual islands, private 3D spaces in the world of the popular Second Life online role-playing game.

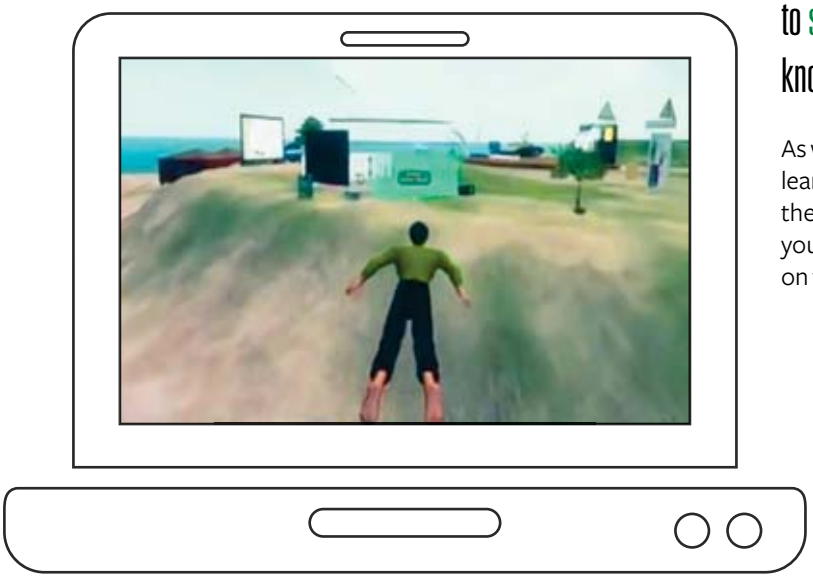
## Inter-Life... the technology

The Inter-Life team created two virtual islands, private 3D spaces in the world of the popular Second Life online role-playing game. They added monitoring and measuring tools, essentially setting up a virtual social research laboratory.

The system allowed them, for example, to monitor the location and content of messages sent by the young people on the island. Later they asked the participants to reflect on what had been going on when they sent the message. Combining all the data resulted in a rich picture of the complexity of human processes and interactions.



THE INTER-LIFE VIRTUAL ISLAND



In the spirit of island life, the researchers were keen not to be in charge, preferring to keep the leadership fluid and dynamic. Their aim was not so much to disseminate information, but to support the young people as they constructed their own knowledge, life-skills, and insights.

As well as minimising the boundaries between teaching and learning, the team was keen to minimise the boundaries between the virtual and real worlds. With this in mind they enabled the young people to be in constant and seamless touch with life on their islands through mobile phones and other devices.

# Inter-Life...

We started off with the assumption that you need a wide range of skills to cope with life's transitions.

## Inter-Life... in action

The team worked with three groups of young people, all self-selecting volunteers. There were looked-after teenagers, a group of youngsters who attended a fee-paying school, and 40 first-year students at Glasgow University.

Once on the Inter-Life islands, the volunteers found themselves in a space where they had power. Not only could they craft their own avatar, but they could set their own goals. They could customise the space and express themselves creatively through sculpture, fashion and film-making or through research-type activities.

'We tried not to create a campus, a school or a lecture theatre – but a space with potential,' says Professor Lally, Inter-Life's director. 'We didn't say, for example, here's a model CV, now go away and do your own. Rather, we started off with the assumption that you need a wide range of skills to cope with life's transitions, some more obvious than others. A key one is confidence.'

In collaboration with others, the young people ran the island. In meetings on a futuristic open-plan meeting platform of their own design, they discussed the rules for island life and the values that should underpin them. They learnt how to resolve conflict and talk about sensitive issues such as bullying. (One group of teenagers even agreed to keep the island tidy.)

The experience gave them 'the benefit of being in a network of people who weren't simply being told what to do or what to learn,' says Lally. 'It's a parallel space where they can try things out without fear of being judged, assessed or tested' - and yet they can learn many things as well.

'We were working with some quite reflective youngsters, who were aware of the impact Inter-Life had on their own aspirations. For example, one young person said he wanted to study computer science at university. He had never talked about career aspirations before, never talked about university, never used that vocabulary before,' says Lally.

'You can see an interaction between the way young people are developing real-world skills and what they're doing in Inter-Life.'

Analysis reveals that the Inter-Life experience encouraged young people to:

- explore issues of individual identity;
- build communities;
- emotionally engage in creative and research-type activities;
- develop a more positive self-image;
- develop problem-solving skills;
- transfer the skills and lessons learnt in the virtual world into the real one.

## Inter-Life... find out more

More information about Inter-Life, including its final report, is available at **www.tel.ac.uk**. The project is part of the Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) Research programme. This is...

- a £12m programme funded by the UK ESRC and EPSRC from 2007-2012;
- designing and evaluating systems to advance our understanding of learning and teaching in a technological context;
- supporting eight large interdisciplinary projects;
- working to achieve impact for emerging research results;
- mapping progress on key themes.

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