

Currents & Arts

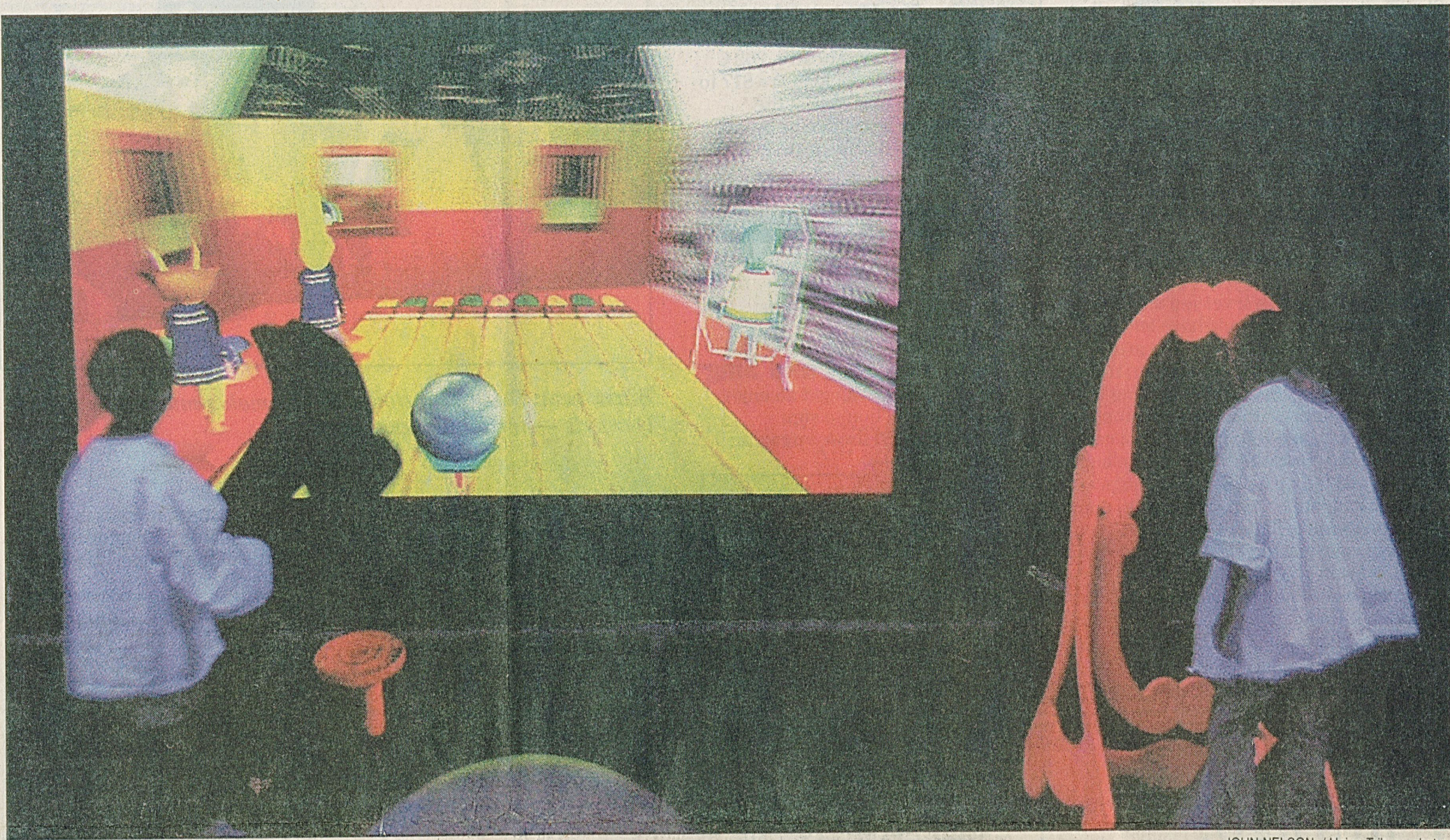
FAMILY TIES

SECTION E

Ann, Abby 2
Rated 'G' 2
Soap Summaries 10
Comics 11-12

THE SAN DIEGO UNION-TRIBUNE • SATURDAY, JANUARY 9, 1999

W E L C O M E T O T H E
F U N H O U S E



JOHN NELSON / Union-Tribune photos

High-tech awareness: *At a Children's Museum/Museo de los Niños exhibit, youngsters play in cyberspace and learn a subtle lesson.*

Computers take kids across borders to learn about each other—en ingles y español

By Gil Griffin
STAFF WRITER

Remember that magical place you went when you were a kid, where you kept only your favorite toys? Where you could get creative and be far away from the grown-up world?

Now imagine a 21st-century playhouse — one that's really hooked up — to some way cool, high-tech toys.

The Children's Museum/
Museo de los Niños has one. For real.

It's an exhibit called "Mi Casa es Tu Casa/My House is Your House," which the museum touts as an "interactive, virtual-reality playhouse."

Slip through the picket fence bordering the exhibit,



Dream homes: *In the low-tech part of the exhibit, kids build their visions of home.*

go inside its doors and, in the surrounding darkness, prepare to be amazed. You'll see 64-bit, 3-D graphics projected on a 16-by-8-foot video screen. Slip on a motion sensor-equipped vest, poke a hand through a mock mirror and — boom! — see yourself magically changed into a cartoon. Maybe you'll be an Aztec warrior, or a rabbit in a blue dress.

But believe it or not, the idea behind the exhibit — which will stay at the museum until at least May — is a pretty low-tech notion:

cross-cultural awareness.

"The exhibit is not about technology," said Robert Sain, museum's director. "It's about people and cultures."

See **PLAYHOUSE** on Page E-5

Playhouse

Kids in two countries can 'play' together

Continued from E-1

"It's not to learn about computers, it's to learn about each other."

Just slide over to where the gadgets are — a track ball, oversized foam rubber hammers, screwdrivers and wrenches. Roll 'em, tap 'em and twist 'em to make the images on the screen in front of you. One minute, you're exploring — a virtual you is walking around on an old map of Mexico; the next, you're stacking up furniture inside a house, or flying in a biplane over rolling hills and valleys.

Meantime, people in a Mexico City museum may be doing the same things at the same time — thanks to a real-time, computer modem hookup.

And even if children aren't quick to understand the exhibit's message, or are too young to get intercultural enlightenment, that's OK with Sain.

"When an 8-year-old comes in and sees this exhibit and says, 'Awesome!' " Sain said, "that's the bottom line."

The kids say that and more.

"Cool!" "Sweet!" "Rad!" they say, while playing.

And you can see their silent wonder when they see unfamiliar words and phrases appear, in both English and Spanish.

Most of all, you see them having fun.

"I like how you can be so creative in there," said Jennifer Apel, an 11-year-old sixth-grader who visited the museum recently with 10 of her Horizon Youth Program classmates.

"If I could talk to the kids in Mexico, I'd tell them they'd have a lot of fun playing. Especially if they like computers."

Kelvin Crosby, an 11-year-old Horizon fifth-grade student, said he didn't understand the Spanish words, or the significance of the Aztec costume in the exhibit.

"I liked using the tools," he said. "You get to pick things up and you see yourself walk around. I liked it in there."

That's enough for Sheldon Brown, the University of California San Diego professor and artist who designed "Mi Casa es Tu Casa/My House is Your House."

"The kids won't be old enough to come away stating a thesis," Brown said, "but the exhibit is subliminal."

Cool as it is, playing around in Mi Casa isn't the entire experience the

DATEBOOK

"Mi Casa es Tu Casa/My House is Your House"

Hours are Tuesday through Sunday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Admission is \$5 for adults and children over 2; \$3 for adults 65 and over. Museum members and children under 2 are admitted free. For more information, call (619) 233-KIDS (5437).

children have with the exhibit.

There is also a low-tech part at a nearby table, where instructor Annika Nelson, hands the kids cardboard, scissors, glue, corks, construction paper, masking tape, pens and crayons.

Nelson asks the kids to design dream houses, based on the favorite things in their own homes.

While they work on their dream homes, Nelson asks the kids about Mexico.

She asks how long it would take to walk from San Diego to Mexico City. No hands are raised. "One hundred and forty-seven days," Nelson says.

Then Nelson asks if any of the kids know what the phrase "Mi Casa es Tu Casa" means in English.

One girl raises her hand. "My house is your house "