

Not Your Grandma's Dollhouse

By Jennett Meriden Russell

Dollhouses have been around for at least 400 years, typically delighting little girls who dream of owning and decorating a home of their own one day. The tiny buildings have seen their share of innovations over the past few centuries, and now they have gone digital.

When they were first created as toys for wealthy young ladies, dollhouses were oftentimes ornate, stately mansions made of wood. Today, most of the mass-produced houses are made of cheaper plastic and cardboard. But thanks to the innovative computer design mind of Jesyca Durchin, computer savvy kids can now play house online with Digital Dollhouse, a game that allows them to create three-dimensional houses of their dreams.

Ms. Durchin, founder and CEO of Nena Media, Inc., a developer and producer of interactive and filmed entertainment for girls since 2000, has also created and produced girl-friendly games and films for Walt Disney and Mattel. She said her latest creation, Digital Dollhouse, is an interactive online toy.

"It's a site where girls and their moms can decorate and create rooms over and over again," Ms. Durchin said. "It's in beautiful 3-D, highly realistic images that include furniture, wallpaper, accessories... And it's literally re-creating the dollhouse collector experience, but on your computer."

Ms. Durchin said Digital Dollhouse has been on the market for just under one year and has already attracted nearly 50,000 users. And recently, the company introduced the Campion Platt Hampton Beach House—a nine-room home overlooking the ocean, designed by the world-renowned architect. Additionally, the site features a Victorian home, a chateau, a New York City loft and a castle are also in the works.

Members can paint, furnish and decorate their own virtual dream houses complete with plants, pets and dolls, and even purchase and re-gift items in a virtual economy. The site is membership-based and subscriptions start at \$4.95 a month, which includes a Victorian dollhouse and 1,000 Digital Dollhouse coins with which to purchase furniture and other items.

For an upgraded \$9.95 a month subscription, members get 2,500 Digital Dollhouse coins, along with personal design tips and tricks professional designers use.

So far, Mr. Platt—who is well known for his works on custom residential, hotel, and commercial spaces throughout the world—is the first architect to actually add a design to Digital Dollhouse, but more big design names are to come, according to Ms. Durchin.

Mr. Platt pioneered the boutique hotel concept as co-developer of Chateau Marmont Hotel in Hollywood and the Mercer Hotel in Manhattan. He recently completed the Times Square world headquarters of Instinet (the oldest electronic trading company in the world) in the Reuters Building in Manhattan.

Ms. Durchin said her company approached Mr. Platt because he is known for his ability to embody luxury and innovation while maintaining an eco-friendly consciousness.

During a recent telephone interview, Mr. Platt said he approached the virtual project of creating a stylish, modern and sustainable beachfront dream home with the same process that he and his team would have used for a full-sized brick and mortar house. He noted, however, that young Digital Dollhouse users bring a new element of imagination

that amazes even a seasoned designer like him.

"One of the examples of this is one child had taken this porch we had designed and took colorful plates from the kitchen and mounted them upside down on the ceiling as kind of a light fixtures," Mr. Platt said. "It's something I would probably never have thought of."

Mr. Platt added he wanted to make rooms interchangeable in his beach house design so that users could decide where they wanted bedrooms, living rooms, kitchens and bathrooms to be.



Designer Campion Platt.

COURTESY OF DIGITAL DOLLHOUSE

Dozens of his actual furniture designs have also been scanned and can be incorporated into the house.

The architect noted that the Digital Dollhouse provides a unique business opportunity for him as well as an interesting design challenge. He said that girls who play with the program might one day want to purchase a real version of the virtual furniture they played with in their youth.

"Of course, I'll be in my 70s by the time the 9- and 10-year-olds are old enough to buy my work," he noted.

Ms. Durchin said she was inspired to create Digital Dollhouse after she learned about Narcissa Niblack Thorne, an Indiana native who in the 1930s created extremely precise miniature rooms, many of which are exact replicas of existing houses in the United States and Europe. Ms. Niblack Thorne's exacting miniature rooms depict the architecture

and interior design of various periods and countries. She created nearly 100 rooms, 68 of which can now be seen at The Art Institute of Chicago, and throughout museums in Phoenix, Knoxville, Indianapolis

and Los Angeles.

"They were originally created to capture and preserve how interior design was done around the world," Ms. Durchin said adding that her goal was to share the world of design within the digital realm. "Ms. Thorne wanted to make these rooms accessible to people in the United States, they were house museums, and that's why we're making an outreach to real designers and real furniture."

Ms. Durchin pointed out that young girls are not the only ones gravitating to Digital Dollhouse. She said that many of the mothers of the children are also engaging in the virtual activity. She added that more than 170,000 people visited the site in the last month.

Donna Lussier, a 63-year-old Tuxedo, New York, resident admitted that it wasn't her grandchildren or even adult daughter who was playing with the Digital Dollhouse.

"I'm the one using it," she chuckled, noting she has loved playing with dollhouses since she was a child. "My parents didn't have the means to get me a nice dollhouse, so I made my first dollhouse out of gift boxes and it just evolved into a love for interior design."

Ms. Lussier, who touts herself as an interior designer for friends and family, said the Digital Dollhouse is a far cry from the cardboard version she had as a child. She noted that the virtual dollhouse is fun for both children and adults because it provides high quality graphics that re-create actual interior designs and furniture.

Mr. Platt noted that there are virtual interior design platforms currently



One of the digital dollhouse designs by Campion Platt.

COURTESY OF DIGITAL DOLLHOUSE

available on the internet, but pointed out that they do not have the extreme graphic features that Digital Dollhouse provides.

Ms. Lussier agreed. She added that she has visited other virtual dollhouses over the years, but said that the graphics were typically flat and overly colorful.

"Digital Dollhouse is such a nice, quality dollhouse," she said. "I also started Beta-testing the new beach house, and it's just a lot of fun, a real tension reliever that I can get lost in."

When asked if it was strange to find fascination with rooms and objects that are not real, Ms. Lussier pointed out

several advantages that Digital Dollhouse provides that would flatten any real dollhouse.

"It's a lot less expensive and takes up less space than the real thing," she said. "It's true that these are not real items that you can touch, but you don't have to clean them either."