



Technology and Nature Form Dynamic Duo at Rory Meyers Children's Adventure Garden

Nature and technology don't often make for good bedfellows, but find the right balance and the combination can be powerful. It can even lead to what is already being labeled "an outdoor laboratory unlike any other in the world."

The Rory Meyers Children's Adventure Garden at the Dallas Arboretum, set to open September 21, 2013, is an 8-acre educational attraction comprised of more than 150 interactive exhibits, 17 outdoor learning galleries, and some of the most cutting-edge technology available, all designed to address alarming deficiencies in life and earth sciences standardized test scores in Texas schools.

Travis McElroy, owner of The Old State House of Design and Development, was a lead technology consultant on the project. After building a new website for the Arboretum, McElroy was engaged to deliver games and videos to the 120 LCD panels sprinkled throughout the Garden.

"It's hard to grab and keep kids' attention these days, so we're hitting them with a 1-2 punch of pretty amazing elements," McElroy says. "The screens really are attention-grabbers for these kids who are used to digital media more so than ever."

These 120 screens are the most of any outdoor learning facility of its kind, and are military-grade quality to lessen the effects of the Dallas climate. "They're brighter than your typical display so they can be in direct sunlight," McElroy explains. "Most technology simply just melts or the sun bleaches them out."

The screens are also durable, resistant to damage and containing built-in heating and cooling systems. "You can basically punch them and they won't break," says McElroy. (But don't tell that to the kids.)

The touch screens will feature everything from educational videos to games, keeping children engaged and entertained while also tapping into their innate curiosity. "This technology takes it to the next level in regards to how the children learn and retain," says Steve Burke, an audiovisual consultant for the Garden. "It's all there to see and feel, but the education part is enhanced by the technology."

And the interaction. Children and teachers will be invited to incorporate their own tablets and smartphones into their Garden visits: if a touch screen is in use, a teacher or child with a tablet or

smartphone can access that exhibit or game through an app. In this way, visitors can work through games or videos at their own pace, rather than feel rushed in order to accommodate others.

The screens also offer a Teacher Mode through which educators are able to take over a panel in a gallery and use it to deliver a particular lesson plan. “That works like a remote control, basically,” McElroy explains. “From a tablet, they can pull up the app on the screen and show different curriculum or games.”

The Exploration Center houses some of the most advanced, innovative technology at the Garden, including: the five-foot-tall OmniGlobe (one of only 50 in the world), which is a spherical display projection system that shows animations of weather patterns, plate tectonics, ocean currents, climate change and much more; spin browsers that allow children to get a rare glimpse at rapid-moving insects and animals like bumblebees and hummingbirds; a 3-D mini-theater which will offer a rotating selection of educational videos; and Smart Tables where children can play a wide variety of educational games, including a CSI mystery in which they guess which animal is the culprit. Games can be set to different levels, easy, medium and difficult, and kids can play by themselves, against friends and classmates, or even against other schools.

“Technology is a way to hook kids who might be otherwise reluctant to explore outdoors,” says Andy Roller, Prime Consultant at Van Sickle & Roller, the Garden’s exhibit designer and lead designer for the project. “Technology changes so quickly, and [if you don’t keep up] there’s a good chance that kids will come in with equipment in their back pocket that’s more powerful than what you have.”

McElroy, Burke and the rest of the technology crew do indeed plan to keep up. Next on the list? Installing a 15-by-8-foot LED panel at the Garden’s admissions gate, what McElroy calls “an HD kind of scoreboard or video wall.” This panel will show looping video of some of the Garden’s highlights, as well as local time, local weather, and social media information.

“We’ve made a ton of progress,” says Burke, “and I’m happy with what we’ve got, but we’re not done yet.”

When they are done, McElroy believes that the Children’s Garden will have not just the most LCD panels of any outdoor educational venue, but perhaps the most of *any* outdoor venue in the nation. “I believe Disney World and TopGolf are neck-and-neck,” McElroy says, “but once we’re done with our final phases, I think the Arboretum will be number one.”

Maria Conroy, Vice President of Education for the Arboretum, feels that the combination of cutting-edge technology and nature education will provide the desired boost to test scores, and open up more children to the idea of devoting their lives to the sciences. “I honestly believe that if children are interested and engaged, they can learn anything,” Conroy says. “Just for a day, we want to minimize the reading and maximize what they think of as adventure and excitement.”

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