

Learning to log on and take off



From making films to producing CDs, young people are getting a chance to stretch their creative wings at Computer Clubhouse in Dublin, writes Róisín Ingle

Walking down the Spar/To buy a chocolate bar/With a tingle in my belly/My legs turn to jelly/There are druggies everywhere

It's easy to get lost in the warren of streets around the site of the original Guinness brewery in the heart of Dublin's Liberties area. The Computer Clubhouse, when you find it, is a nondescript office block with a bland exterior that suggests nothing of the dynamic projects being worked on by the children inside. Danielle (11) has just made a short film about bullying and is shyly screening the results on one of the club computers. Sean (12) is trying to figure out a solution to the technical problem he encountered while designing a 3D computer game. A group of surly looking teenagers are bent over computer screens, editing the movie they've just shot, starred in and written the soundtrack for. "Nah, we need to cut that bit out," observes one budding Tarantino, casting a critical eye over the action-packed bank robbery scene.

The lines at the beginning of this article come from a poem written by one of the 90 participants in the Computer Clubhouse, which is run by the South West Inner City Network (SWICN), an umbrella community development organisation and funded by Intel. The manager and only member of staff is young French woman Elise Leclerc. She does everything from making encouraging suggestions to her young charges – who come from disadvantaged areas locally – to handing out brain food in the form of chocolate bourbon biscuits. "They have to be chocolate bourbons, I tried custard creams once and there was a mini-rebellion," she laughs. The other facilitators and mentors are all volunteers, some of them from Media Lab Europe, where the Clubhouse is

based, or the nearby National College of Art and Design, who come to share their expertise with the young people there.

In the Clubhouse, which is celebrating its first birthday, the atmosphere is light and studios at the same time. Members must sign in and everywhere there are slanted hand-written sentences on posters saying things like "Don't Mess", "Talk to Each Other", "No Cursing", "Don't Put Drinks Beside Computers", "Don't Be Smart". Still, these young people are becoming smart in the most modern way possible, learning new skills, honing their creativity through the use of cutting-edge technology, state-of-the-art computers, animation packages, a recording studio and even robot-making equipment.

"The main rule," says Leclerc, "is that you must be doing something creative. Whether that is making T-shirts, or robots, or doing music, or video projects. They are only allowed to go on the Internet for 15 minutes, or play games for 10 minutes and only as a kind of break. They enjoy it so much that it can sometimes be hard to get them to focus, they want to move onto the next thing, but we encourage them to see things through until the end."

Some follow, some look/We hide our jewellery so it won't be took/It's terrible to say, but that's the way

Shannon (11) and Tiffany (11) are both from School Street flats where they say there are rats and they have to walk past people taking drugs and drinking. In the Clubhouse, they wrote their own song *School's Out* and they created a CD of their work. "Our friends are jealous of us," says Tiffany. "We learn games and make our own com-



puter pictures, and we do music and singing".

"You get to do things you couldn't really do, that you wouldn't know about," says Shannon. "And it's great craic".

They both feature in their friend Danielle's film, which was inspired by her brother's experience of being bullied. *The Bullies* is a dramatised account, featuring Clubhouse members, of one girl's torment at the hands of her classmates. "It took me a month to make. I never thought I could make a film," she says. "My mam saw it and said she was proud of me." Sean, meanwhile, has spent a couple of months making a computer game in which he and his friend Ross (12) star. "We took digital pictures of ourselves posing and made ourselves the two characters in the game. I fire rockets and Ross fires blades," he explains. "The problem now is that the rockets and blades are going right through the characters instead of bouncing off them so we have to look in a book and find out how to fix it."

Open to young people from the ages of eight to 18, the Clubhouse offers an introduction to creative technology to groups that would not normally get to use this type of equipment, worth about €100,000. But the resource, which has been used

All his own work: Sean Doolin with a computer-generated image of himself as a soccer star in the Clubhouse at the Old Guinness Hop Store, Dublin. Photograph: Cyril Byrne

by homeless people in association with Focus Ireland and adult groups such as single parents, is also a place of escape.

"In the flats we get blamed for things we didn't do, like robbing cars or dealing drugs," says Alan (16) who is directing a film about a Mafia-led bank robbery which was filmed in the car park outside the Clubhouse. "If we are in here we can't get blamed."

Here's a few words to help you on your way/Use your brain, not your vein/Because once you pop, you can't stop

Like the Clubhouse in Blanchardstown, Dublin, the SWICN Clubhouse is funded by the Intel Foundation in the US and is one of about 100 similar ventures set up in association with the computer giant worldwide. To be eligible to join, the children must first become members of their local youth club. Alan Walsh, youth services manager of SWICN, says that the clubhouse is not suitable for everyone. "Some of the kids who come never want to do anything more than print out an image of Eminem." However, the majority become deeply involved in the activities.

"It shows them that there is another way," he says. "It's not just about taking them from their environment for a couple of hours. It shows them life is not just about hanging around or unemployment or drugs. They see that they can consider the things they do here as a future career, it fires their imagination, builds their confidence and empowers them."

He says that funding, as always, is a major issue. In the first year, Media Lab Europe supported the construction of the Clubhouse while Intel provided the necessary operational finance. Intel will reduce this funding over the next few years and SWICN is looking for alternatives. "We will have to get money from whatever sources possible," says Walsh. "This is a major resource for the local community not just for the young people but also adults. The long-term benefits for the area are substantial and if the resource couldn't be sustained due to lack of funding it would be a huge loss to the young people of this community."

♦ For more information on the SWICN Computer Clubhouse contact 01-4536674 or www.mle.ie/computerclubhouse/



Making music: Tiffany Dempsey (left) and Shannon Burke at the Clubhouse. Photograph: Cyril Byrne