

## TESSERACT SCHOOL INTEGRATES VIRTUAL-LEARNING ENVIRONMENT INTO MIDDLE SCHOOL CURRICULUM

PHOENIX, ARIZONA—March 24, 2010—Students today were born in the midst of the Digital Revolution. They start school—even at the youngest of ages—as digital natives. It was the awareness of this that led Randy Thomas, Tesseract School’s IT specialist, along with Tesseract’s librarian, middle school history and middle school English educators, to create a virtual environment called Salem.

Based off the 17<sup>th</sup> century New England town and the book, “The Crucible,” Thomas and the educators at Tesseract recognized the Salem project as yet another opportunity to integrate technology into the middle school curriculum.

“We recognized this as the amazing teaching tool it continues to be,” stated Thomas. “By using virtual environments, we are utilizing an environment that students are already familiar with through multiplayer games, so I made the suggestion that we build our own virtual environment here at Tesseract to help engage the students in learning by using technology in the classroom in a different way.”

Prior to the introduction of Salem, Tesseract students worked in a virtual environment—which continues to be utilized—through the River City Project, an interactive computer simulation for students in sixth through ninth-grade science class that was developed by Harvard University and Arizona State University with funding from the National Science Foundation. Through River City students learn scientific inquiry by traveling back in time, utilizing technology and skills from the 21st century to address 19th century problems. The concept for creating Tesseract’s virtual environment, Salem, came to Thomas after seeing the effects the River City Project had on students’ learning.

Tesseract’s seventh-grade students have been utilizing the Salem environment in their writing lab, history and English classes since the program was introduced with the start of the 2007-2008 school year. The premise for the unit is that the students have been hired by the National Museum of American History to travel back in time and study Salem during the times of the witch trials in order to create a new Salem museum. While there, they are tasked with studying Salem’s economy, religion, geography, government and society from the perspective of Salem residents to aid in accurately rebuilding the museum.

“This has been an incredibly successful part of our middle school curriculum,” said Thomas. “Salem started out as a new and unusual way for us to connect with the students and capture their attention. However, there are other powerful advantages to utilizing virtual environments—students are doing much more than reading about history, they are *experiencing* history, conducting research and reading information that requires them to come to conclusions. This is not a simple thing for seventh-graders, yet they are doing this without many of the

typical frustrations. They aren't stressed about the amount of questions they have to answer, and they enjoy the search process."

Thomas's original proposal for the virtual environment was shared with schools worldwide when he was invited to present it to educators at the 2008 Association for Educational Communications and Technology's (AECT) International Convention. Thomas was also selected by the Arizona Board of Education to participate on the State Technology Plan to review IT within Arizona schools.

In addition to the Salem project, Tesseract incorporates technology into student's everyday lives via its wireless campuses and high school laptop program as well as through classrooms outfitted with interactive SMART Tablets, projectors, video capabilities, desktop computers and laptop carts. Technology is integrated into Tesseract's student-centered, innovative curriculum in many ways including Google Sketch-Up for architecture and graphic design projects; Skype for communicating with peers nationally and internationally; blogs for research projects and information sharing; PowerPoint for presentations; and computers for a variety of additional day-to-day tasks and projects.

"The Salem project is a great lead-in to the virtual-learning environment that our ninth-graders experience," said Chris LaBonte, Tesseract's director of middle and high school. "In our high school curriculum we extend upon the middle school foundation by using the newest technologies to connect our students to students around the globe, expanding their perspectives and enhancing their foreign language learning experiences. By integrating technology into our daily curriculum, students are able to acquire the skills they need to thrive in a rapidly changing, highly technological society."

About Tesseract: A leader in education in the Valley, Tesseract School prepares students to excel in college and beyond, lead lives of purpose, and become ethical and compassionate citizens with a global perspective. Tesseract's innovative educational approach engages students in learning, enabling them to master the basics and become critical thinkers. As a non-profit, independent private school for students in preschool through grade 12, resources are directed to recruit and retain outstanding educators and continually enhance the school's two campuses in Phoenix and Paradise Valley. For information visit [www.tesseractschool.org](http://www.tesseractschool.org) or call 480.991.1770.

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