

Virtual Harlem and Actual Teaching: Where Technology Meets Pedagogy in the Educational Experience

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In preparation for writing this article, I was invited to visit the Virtual Harlem project at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) during October 2001. I met with various members of the design and development team for the project and toured Virtual Harlem as it was meant to be experienced, in an immersion lab on the UIC campus, fondly called The CAVE. As a teacher-scholar of African American Literature and Culture at a state university, I was most interested in how this technology might impact classroom practices of its educational adopters and the learning experiences of student users. I must admit, I was also most impressed, both with the concept of adapting virtual reality for educational use as well as the scope of this particular project. I felt as if I had entered the 21st century in earnest, and I recalled the many movies that represent virtual reality scenarios: users with other-worldly goggles, experiencing other lives that are so seductive that they choose the fantasy over the reality of their existence. Although Virtual Harlem was not nearly so real or alive that I'd want to stay indefinitely, as an African American scholar, it was seductive. But then, Harlem has always had that magnetism.

Harlem in the 1920s. Vibrant. Alive. Black. Where the recognized artisans of high and low art drew inspiration from the vitality of living in everyday people. Where native New Yorkers and immigrants of the American South, the West Indies, the Caribbean, and Africa, created a multicultural community that seemed to embody the promise of America. Where White Americans danced side-by-side with Black Americans of all nationalities to African-inspired jazz beats and African American blues expressions. Where poverty kissed opportunity, and where freedom and oppor-

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tunity could just be seen in the shadows of racism and oppression.

Harlem—home of political visionaries and organizations looking to improve the lives of Black Americans throughout the country. Harlem was the residence and base of operation for Marcus Mosiah Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), which had the goal of unifying “all the Negro peoples of the world into one great body and to establish a country and government absolutely on their own” (Schomburg). A very active NAACP was also based in Harlem in the 1920s, sponsoring such publications as *The Crisis*, edited by W.E.B. DuBois, and *The Brownies’ Book*, the work of editor Jessie Redmon Fauset. Some even mark the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance on February 17, 1919, when “Harlem’s first pageant of celebration for its black heroes [the 369th Infantry Regiment] paved the way for the coming celebration of a different kind of Harlem hero...the cultural nationalist in the parlor” (Watson 15). This parade was overtly political in its goals and was sponsored by the whole of the Harlem community, including the NAACP.

The names of other Harlemites and Harlem sites are also legendary. The Lafayette Theatre at 132nd Street and 7th Avenue was one of the first theatres in New York to desegregate, paving the way for African American theatregoers to more fully participate as spectators in the cultural life of the city. Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway each played to adoring audiences in The Cotton Club at 42nd and Lenox Avenue, as did Josephine Baker before her expatriation to Paris in 1925, a move that catapulted her to international fame. And the Savoy Ballroom, also on Lenox Avenue, was best known for its contribution to the nightlife of Harlem—the weekly lindy hop dance contests it hosted on its 50’ x 250’ dance floor (Watson 138). Niggerati Manor provided free housing to writers while they practiced their craft, and A’Lelia Walker, daughter of Madame C.J. Walker, founded a salon named the Dark Tower, where “she envisioned music being played..., paintings and sculpture on view, and poetry [being] read” (Watson 142). Visual artists such as painters Aaron Douglas and Lois Mailou Jones also worked during the 1920s and 1930s, as did performers Paul Robeson, Ethel Waters, and Bessie Smith, among many others who drew inspiration from Harlem.

Writers and intellectuals, too, found home and inspiration in the Harlem Renaissance, from intellectual patriarchs James Weldon Johnson and W.E.B. DuBois to Alain Locke, who defined the spirit of African American intellectuals and artists during this period in his anthology, *The New Negro*. The list, of course, does not end there. Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay, Jean Toomer and Langston Hughes, to name but a few, all did their most prodigious work during the Harlem Renaissance, and it mattered little whether they lived in New York or not. Harlem was an idea. Harlem was a promise. Harlem was their muse.

Seventy years later, Harlem is perhaps performing that same function for a new generation of intellectuals, artists, dreamers and creators. The media are both familiar and strange: pictures,

plays, music, but now suspended in space rather than in the place. Virtual Harlem exists in chips and on disks, in refracted light and on computer screens, and in the minds of people who are diligently working to make it a reality. That team includes design and concept originator Bryan Carter of Central Missouri State University; James Sosnoski, technology director for the project at University of Chicago (UIC) where the majority of work is currently taking place; Jason Lee and Andy Johnson, graduate students working on Virtual Harlem in the Electronic Visualization Lab at UIC; Ifa Bayeza, artistic director for the Chernin Center for the Arts at the Duncan YMCA in Chicago, and a host of other local scholars, graduate students, and artists. Additionally, Carter and Sosnoski are actively seeking collaborations with other institutions that have virtual reality labs and Harlem Renaissance scholars throughout the United States while seeking funding sources and business partners that can help Virtual Harlem continue its visionary work.

And just what is that vision? At the Syllabus 1999 conference, Carter articulated his goals for the project in this way:

...[I]nstructors of literature...are sometimes faced with the challenge of assisting students with certain themes, ideas, periods, and/or concepts in which they have little or no background knowledge. Even the most dynamic and innovative instructors are constantly looking for ways to enhance the educational experience of their students. Instructors of literature often find it particularly challenging to engage students in discourse regarding remote and antiquated texts for which their students have no significant knowledge base upon which to build...There are several new technologies currently available to assist us with these complex tasks. At the forefront of many discussions is how the Internet may be used to further student understanding and research...Usually, however, when one thinks of the World Wide Web, or the Internet, one thinks in two-dimensional terms, which as we know is not the way the human brain perceives the world. There is currently an emerging technology that transforms flat, two-dimensional images into navigable three-dimensional landscapes in which a user may be either semi or totally immersed...Virtual Reality has arrived and when used correctly, may alter existing educational methodologies in ways never before imagined. (Carter)

Carter, an educator himself, believes that Virtual Harlem can help students engage with and understand literature from distant time periods and unfamiliar cultures. He designed this particular immersion program to supplement classroom educational experiences, to invigorate learning about the historically significant Harlem Renaissance.

The educational goals Carter outlines above can be, unfortunately, quite easily decentered when faced with the challenges of new technologies and the excitement of shaping of new frontiers. The UIC team may be discovering that difficulty as it finds itself overwhelmed with possibilities for developing Virtual Harlem. Sosnoski would like to focus on making Virtual Harlem more historically accurate, with buildings in their actual locations and performances and speeches being correctly dated and juxtaposed within the program. To address these inconsistencies, the team has discussed recreating Harlem in particular years during the Harlem Renaissance. The user could then select what year(s) they want to visit Harlem before starting the program, and would only be able to see people/performances that took place in that time period.

Another possibility, though, is to develop particular scenarios that would help visitors to understand the cultural expressions and daily life that defined Harlem in the 1920s and 1930s. So one might choose to load "political life in Harlem" where one might attend a rent party and overhear a conversation about a Marcus Garvey speech that happened elsewhere in the program. Or one might select "Dancing in the Savoy" only to find one's self in the lobby chatting with the bell-hop rather than being part of the gaily dressed crowd swarming in for Saturday night dance contests. Playwrights and other creative artists are imagining and designing these scenarios, with plans to have them performed by various performing groups in and around Chicago. Each of these approaches (entering the Virtual Harlem in a particular year and selecting a scenario as the way into the program) has the added advantage of potentially making Virtual Harlem a program that supports and encourages multiple visits.

There is also much work to do in texturing and detailing the cityscape of Harlem. Currently one walks down basically empty streets, passed by an occasional car or shuttled around on the local trolley. But much more "traffic" is planned. One may eventually be able to happen upon an eviction protest in front of an apartment building just as one can now stop and listen to Marcus Garvey outside of the UNIA headquarters. Or one may be able to pause and watch a piano being hoisted into a second floor apartment before viewing a newspaper headline at a nearby newsstand. If networked locations are using Virtual Harlem simultaneously, one might be able to see and speak to other users. So one might enter an African American church where other users are gathered to listen to the sermon before becoming one of the real congregants gathered outside to discuss the service.

The ability to manipulate perspectives, to allow visitors to "experience" a cultural moment now passed, to build into the program a complexity that requires multiple visitations...these are the design concerns and creative/educational possibilities being considered by the Virtual Harlem team. The educational value of the program, it seems, is self-evident. Build a better program and people will learn.

Or will they? At the very least, consideration needs to be given

to the pedagogies that will incorporate immersion programs into the educational environment. There is little doubt of the value of allowing students a “realistic” visit to Harlem in the 1920s and 1930s. This virtual reality program could help to bring to life the dynamic, energetic period in ways that are not as easily accomplished by reading, lecture, and discussion. Being able to “walk” the streets of Harlem, to see and hear various personalities that shaped the community, and to visit the places that made Harlem legendary, will certainly engage the visitor using Virtual Harlem. And for the vast majority of students without financial means to travel, who may not have experienced much life outside of their own communities, Virtual Harlem may provide an exciting opportunity to experience a New York community and be immersed in an African American cultural center, albeit seventy years in the past.

But who exactly is the audience for Virtual Harlem? Is it public education teachers or college instructors? Is it African American Studies scholars or those who would like to incorporate more multicultural subject matter into their already-existing classes? And how might usage of this program differ in secondary and post-secondary classrooms? How might an immersion program like Virtual Harlem be incorporated into an instructor’s plans for a semester or quarter or a couple of weeks in an academic year? Would the typical junior high or high school teacher have the time for multiple visits to Virtual Harlem with his/her students? Would the typical university instructor be any more likely to return with a class to Virtual Harlem, especially if s/he is teaching the Harlem Renaissance as part of a larger survey of African American or American literature? These questions should be at the center of the development plan for Virtual Harlem. If this is to be an educational tool, then the ways that educators might use this program should be the first matter of inquiry for the team.

Additionally, perhaps simultaneously, other questions about the access to technology and usability of the program should be considered. Carter suggested that the Internet has limitations that immersion programs do not. Specifically, the two-dimensionality of the Internet may make it less engaging than the technologies being employed in Virtual Harlem. But how likely is it that a public school teacher will have access to an immersion environment like The Cave, or for that matter, the scholars in the majority of colleges and universities? The Internet certainly has limitations, but it also has the advantage of being quite pervasive and familiar to both researchers and students. There would likely be less of a learning curve in using the Internet, and the “lessons” of Virtual Harlem might actually be more accessible if not mediated by the newness and the strangeness of the technology. For instance, one visitor to Virtual Harlem on the day that I was there experienced something akin to motion sickness while visiting The Cave, and I could only remain in the program for limited amounts of time before becoming unsettled myself. Younger visitors, it seems, have fewer and/or less severe physical reactions to the multiple stimuli of the immer-

sion program, but teachers and instructors might be unwilling to have their students use the program if they have not first reviewed the content. If early adopters have to become accustomed to the environment before they can experience the whole program, then widespread use of Virtual Harlem could be slow indeed.

Finally, questions that evaluate the usability of Virtual Harlem at its various stages of completion need to be developed and considered. How useful is Virtual Harlem in its present state? How much would it really supplement a class learning about the Harlem Renaissance and how much would it necessitate a change in the focus of an instructor who chose to use it? What would and should a student learn who used the program at its various stages of completion? What are the goals for Virtual Harlem and what development strategies would best help to meet those goals?

These are the types of questions that the Virtual Harlem team needs to consider seriously as it moves forward with development of the program. The answers to these queries should govern everything from the seeking of funding to the order of development of the various components of Virtual Harlem. These considerations should determine the ultimate design of the program, whether one would visit particular years during the Harlem Renaissance or enter specific scenarios of interest. Questions such as these should be the guiding principles for issues such as whether supplementary educational materials should be created, whether more effort should be expended to simultaneously develop a complete Virtual Harlem web site, and whether a "story" should be designed that would guide a user through the whole project (or stand in place of a complete tour should time be prohibitive). These concerns should also be an integral part of the research that is being conducted on the educational uses of immersion technologies. If this program is truly to "enhance the educational experience of ...students" (Carter), these are the questions that should be debated first and on a continuing basis throughout the Virtual Harlem project. Consideration of how students and instructors would use Virtual Harlem cannot be an afterthought if this experiment is to be successful.

For example, a specific educational question that needs to be considered is what mechanisms might be incorporated into Virtual Harlem to ensure that it is more than a voyeuristic jaunt into the African American past? Closely related to that issue is that of representation. How can Virtual Harlem, essentially a computer program, adequately illustrate and/or represent the complexity and humanity of African-descended people? One possible approach that addresses each of these concerns is to assign or prompt a visitor to choose a "persona" upon entering a particular scenario. A user might begin a scenario as a male bellhop at the Savoy Ballroom, being relatively invisible to the patrons entering the club and feeling marginalized from the energetic throbbing of the bands within. A bit further in the scenario, s/he might be allowed to switch to the perspective of a well-dressed, light-skinned, middle-class woman taking part in the nightlife of Harlem, or of a white

male patron. Supplementary instructional materials might ask students to evaluate the different experiences of these two or three characters based on their class, gender, and race. An exercise such as this would be even more powerful if more than one person participated in the scenario simultaneously, followed by a discussion of the scene based on their character's experience. The pigmentation of African Americans in the scene could be a teachable point, raising the issue of color discrimination within the Black community of Harlem during the Harlem Renaissance. And the presence of Caucasians could certainly be the subject of lively and interesting discussions about social and professional interactions between races during this period of time.

The incorporation of multiple perspectives and the creation of evaluative tools that would encourage reflection on the Virtual Harlem experience are two ways of supporting and encouraging learning. Incorporating material that would encourage further research and study would also broaden the usability and flexibility of Virtual Harlem for the classroom instructor. Other possibilities for heightening the educational possibilities exist, of course, and they need to be explored as material is envisioned and incorporated into the program.

Virtual Harlem: a trip into the past while looking to the future. In this new Harlem, you can see and hear those who infused Harlem with life. You can walk the streets and enter the places that made Harlem famous. You can be part of the technological wave, complete with tracking glasses, a hand control for easy maneuvering, and a sometimes-dizzying ability to move quickly through space and time. But David Jonassen, author of *Computers in the Classroom*, argues that "learning *from* computers and learning *about* computers should be replaced by learning *with* computers" (17). The challenge for the Virtual Harlem project is to keep this focus in mind when surveying the educational uses for immersion technologies and virtual reality. We would do well to learn the lessons of many years of working with computers in classrooms: learn *with* virtual reality, not from it. Technology should enable students to do what they couldn't do without it. It should help educators to teach skills that are transferable to other disciplines, and should encourage the ability to think deeply and critically about a subject. This is the real promise of Virtual Harlem if we do not become distracted by the newness of the technology, either as designers or users. The technology must be governed by sound educational and pedagogical considerations if Carter's vision is to be realized. Only then will Virtual Harlem become an integral part of real teaching and learning.

Works Cited

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