

Harlem in Harlem: The Use of Virtual Harlem in Present-Day Harlem's Community Technology Centers

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When I first heard of the Virtual Harlem Project, I realized immediately that it was an ideal type of content for Harlem Renaissance 2001 project (HR2K1) on which I was working. I contacted Bryan Carter, who was in the English Department at the University of Missouri – Columbia at the time. In cooperation with Bill Plummer and the staff at the Advanced Technology Center there, Bryan had developed a virtual reality model of Harlem, New York, in the 20s as the basis for his courses in the Harlem Renaissance. Recognizing the compatibilities between our projects, we eagerly joined forces.

Harlem, at the advent of the 21st Century, is undergoing a socio-economic transformation. However, a great many of the citizens of Harlem are currently unable to take advantage of the new economy uptown because they do not have access to the new technologies that are driving this transformation. To insure that the citizens of Harlem have access to the educational, cultural, civic and socio-economic opportunities that the new technologies will make possible, Abyssinian Development Corporation (ADC) has organized the Harlem Renaissance 2001 or the HR2K1 Project. ADC has joined with Rheedlen Centers for Children and Families, Studio Museum in Harlem, Harlem School of the Arts, Harlem YMCA, Frederick Douglass Creative Arts Center, Dance Theater of Harlem, National Black Theater, Playing To Win, Institute for Learning Technologies, University of Missouri at Columbia Advanced Technology Center, Horizon Live Distance Learning, the Employment Channel, Manhattan Neighborhood Network and Cablevision to form the HR2K1 consortium. When Bryan met Jim Sosnoski and linked his project to the Electronic Visualization Lab at the University of Illinois at Chicago, I followed suit. At some point in time, we hope to link the work ongoing at UIC's Great Cities Institute, in particular their Neighborhoods Initiative with its emphasis on bringing technology into low income areas in Chicago to our work here in New York. This is the reason Jim invited me to describe what we are doing in the Harlem Renaissance 2001 project in this volume on the Virtual Harlem project.

WORKS AND DAYS 37/38, Vol.19, Nos. 1&2, 2001

The Harlem Renaissance 2001 Project

The first step of HR2K1's three-step strategy to increase access to technology for Harlem residents entails the development of six state-of-the-art public access technology centers. Five of these centers will be established at existing community-based organizations. These centers are:

Rheedlen's Employment and Technology Center,
118th Street and Lenox Avenue

Harlem School of the Arts, 141st Street and St.
Nicholas Avenue

Harlem YMCA, 135th Street and 7th Avenue

Frederick Douglass Creative Arts Center, 96th
Street and West End Avenue

Playing to Win's Harlem Community
Computing Center, 111th Street and 5th Avenue.

The sixth center will be a large community technology center, which will serve the entire Upper Manhattan Empowerment Zone. Manhattan Neighborhood Networks in conjunction with ADC's real estate development group will collaborate on the establishment of a public access community technology center/Internet Service Provider (ISP) that will be sited in Central Harlem accessible by foot or public transportation.

The second step entails the development of a distance-learning network that will be deployed in collaboration with Horizon Live Distance Learning throughout the public access technology centers. Besides basic access to e-mail, office productivity software, the World Wide Web and desktop video-conferencing, the user will have at the desktop access to an integrated multimedia distance learning system which is mediated via the Internet. Classes, seminars, training sessions led by remote instructors and companion materials and resources will be accessible simultaneously over this environment.

The HR2K1 will pilot two programs using the Horizon Live Distance Learning Environment: Virtual Harlem and the Employment Channel. Virtual Harlem will give users the experience of going back in time to the heyday of the Harlem Renaissance in 1927. For the purposes of the HR2K1, this virtual reality environment will be the basis for a web-enabled Internet-based curriculum which Professor Carter will teach on-line at the technology centers. (The Employment Channel is a public access content provider who produces the Employment Channel television program and maintains the Employment Channel job seekers site on the Internet.) Each user will have access to these both of these resources at the desktop.

The third step entails the organization, funding and administration of a computer loan program at the Manhattan Neighborhood Networks public access technology center, placing computers in the homes of people who frequent the center and who live in the local housing projects.

H2Yk1 and the Digital Divide

The significance of the HR2K1 methodology is that it makes use of a number of breakthrough technologies, which in combination create a new way in which under-served community members can connect to meaningful learning in the areas of education, cultural enrichment and employment. Beyond providing high speed access to the Internet, the HR2K1 provides an all-in-one solution so that the person who is gaining first time access to a computer and the Internet is also immediately connected to relevant and useful educational, cultural, and employment content resources which can assist the user in their acquisition of skills. The HR2K1 employs a web-enabled virtual reality immersive learning environment, a realtime Java-based distance learning environment which uses a simple browser interface over the HR2K1 intranet giving the user both synchronous and asynchronous access to courses and classes and these resources are available as standard applications across the network consortium. The user need not spend time "learning" particular applications but instead the user can immediately engage the instructional environment seamlessly.

The HR2K1 will develop a high speed Internet/Intranet that will connect the six technology centers. Wide area connectivity will be provided via T-1 lines or SDSL connections. Local area network connectivity will be provided via gigabit speed Ethernet. All of the sites will be standardized around the use of the Horizon Live Distance Learning system, an Internet-based real-time learning environment. The Virtual Harlem application is a virtual reality environment that allows the user to engage in a semi-immersive surrogate travel experience through the world of the Harlem Renaissance circa 1927 and this will provide the source materials for a web-based curricular application.

This configuration allows the HR2K1 to get at the issue of connecting learners with the appropriate resources and tools. It also is cost effective in that the price of connectivity whether using T-1 lines or SDSL due to the decrease in the cost of these high-speed services, is now affordable and no longer represents the lions share of a technology diffusion project. The fiscal and technical resources can now go to meeting the needs of the end users through the system as a delivery mechanism for real-time education, cultural enrichment and employment services. As it relates to scalability, the system is compatible with low end or high-end applications because the network is based on a high bandwidth model. So as the demands of the users increase the system can handle the traffic.

It's Not Just Technology

Virtual Harlem at HR2K1 is one part of a web of arts centers that include the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Harlem School of the Arts, and the Frederick Douglass Creative Arts Center. The Studio Museum in Harlem in an initiative funded by Bell Atlantic is digitizing its collections to make them available to students, artists, museum collectors and other interested parties over the World Wide Web. The Harlem School of the Arts, also funded by Bell Atlantic, has undertaken a project called HarlemNet, which is a collaboration with the Mott Hall School, the Harlem Educational Activities Fund and the Interactive Telecommunications Program at NYU for the purpose of exposing students to the arts-in-technology. The Frederick Douglass Creative Arts Center has recently implemented a computer based desktop publishing program, which will grow into a web development program. Virtual Harlem at the public access technology centers of HR2K1 is one more culturally enriching arts project for the people of Harlem.

The end users of HR2K1 are the citizens of Harlem. A great many of the citizens of Harlem have inadequate educational backgrounds, which prevent them from being competitive in the labor market. The HR2K1 in recognizing this felt it was necessary to create a way to serve this population by accelerating the time spent learning how to use a computer. The Horizon Live Distance Learning system, featuring Virtual Harlem as a pilot program, provides the solution to this obstacle by supplying users with immediate connection to educational and cultural information resources at the desktop of their workstations.

Historically, Harlem has been plagued by a combination of social ills: economic privation, lack of educational opportunities, jobs and adequate health services which give rise to such dysfunctions as crime, drug use, family dissolution and community instability. By making accessible the technologies that are driving Harlem's current socio-economic transformation, Harlem Renaissance 2001, featuring Virtual Harlem, will make that transformation a reality to every citizen of Harlem. The result will be a stronger, more stable community with every citizen participating in the best that Harlem has to offer.