Origins of the Project

Faculty members around the world attend conferences for a variety of reasons. Some go for a teaching renewal, some to keep current in their disciplines, some go to establish collaborative connections, and others go to present new research. The 1998 Digital Resource in the Humanities annual conference at the University of Glasgow was an occasion where scholars gathered to discuss ideas related to new and innovative research aimed at bridging the gap between the Humanities and technology. (To read the rest of this text click here)

Among the many in attendance at this conference were two scholars from the University of Sorbonne-Paris IV (http://www.paris4.sorbonne.fr/fr/), Dr. Marie-Madeleine Martinet and Dr. Liliane Gallet-Blanchard, co-directors of the research center CATI (http://www.cati.paris4.sorbonne.fr/) (Cultures Anglophones et Technologies de l'Information). Their research and creation of an accompanying CD-ROM on Georgian England was groundbreaking for the Sorbonne. Also in attendance was Dr. Bryan Carter, who was then a graduate student at the University of Missouri-Columbia. His research was on the use of Virtual Reality in teaching African American literature, particularly that of the Harlem Renaissance. Each attended the other's session and sought one another out after their respective presentations. Dr. Carter to congratulate the scholars from Paris who practiced multimedia integration by developing new approaches to teach eighteenth-century culture. Dr. Martinet and Dr. Gallet-Blanchard wished to inquire whether Bryan would be willing to present his research at the Sorbonne. An almost instant friendship was established and the scholars kept in touch with one another in preparation for the Sorbonne presentation. In 1998, apart from the two computers of the research center CATI, there was no computer lab more generally opened to researchers in English at the University of Paris-Sorbonne-Paris IV and Dr. Martinet and Dr. Gallet-Blanchard hoped that by bringing Dr. Carter and a team of researchers from the University of Missouri-Columbia's Advanced Technology Center, the purchase of several

computers to form a lab would be considered. In the spring of 1999, Dr. Bill Plummer, Jacqui Sweet, Blake Lewis, Thaddeus Parkinson and Bryan Carter were invited to present their cutting edge research in Virtual Reality at the University of Paris IV-Sorbonne. This presentation required a Silicon Graphic desk-side computer that was shipped from Switzerland, and several program applications that were brought from Missouri to install for the presentation. In attendance at this conference were also Steve Dixon from Salford University in England and Marilyn Deegan also from Great Britain. After this conference, funding was granted for the construction of a computer lab at the Sorbonne and early discussions were begun for a virtual reality project similar to the Virtual Harlem (http://www.evl.uic.edu/cavern/harlem/) project.

The Virtual Harlem project presented by Bryan Carter was constructed at the University of Missouri-Columbia and is reminiscent of a portion of Harlem, New York, as it existed during the early part of the 20th century. This project, a work in progress, focuses on the literary and artistic movement commonly referred to as the Harlem Renaissance. Parallel activities with relationship to music, art, literature and other forms of artistic expression were occurring all over the world, including Montmartre, located in the 18th arrondissement in Paris.   Drs. Martinet, Gallet-Blanchard and Carter immediately thought that to create a similar project at the Sorbonne as was created for Virtual Harlem would be a positive move toward the digital age for the University of Paris IV. A lead artist was selected, Tim Portlock, who was then finishing his Masters of Fine Arts at the University of Illinois-Chicago and was full time professor and faculty coordinator at the Columbia College, and project director, Dr. Bryan Carter, a professor of literature at Central Missouri State University.

To introduce the technology as well as the concept to students and faculty of the Sorbonne, a smaller project was conceived and created called Virtual Sorbonne (http://www.paris4.sorbonne.fr/fr/article.php3?id_article=1016). This is a reconstruction of the courtyard and great hall of the Sorbonne building.

Currently located on the Sorbonne's web site, this reconstruction is also a work in progress and will be updated regularly. The results of this collaborative project were selected by the university as an example of its innovative developments ate the "Journées des Universités Parisiennes" in December 2002, together with 3D mapping by the Geography Department and a presentation on virtual reality in architectural reconstruction by the University of Bath (http://www.bath.ac.uk/). This event took place in the Chapelle de la Sorbonne and was opened to the public as a showcase for innovative trends of research in the humanities.

Work began on Virtual Montmartre during the summer of 2003 with a visit to Paris by the lead artist and project director. Tim Portlock and Bryan Carter made subsequent visits to Paris throughout the summer and fall. The first version of Virtual Montmartre should be completed by early spring 2004, focusing primarily on a reconstruction of a cabaret called the Lapin Agile. Dr. Carter was awarded the position of "Professeur Invité" by the Department of English at the University of Paris IV and will be in place at the Sorbonne throughout the spring of 2004. This presence will facilitate the completion of the first and second versions of the 3D environment. The first version includes the Lapin Agile and the second version includes the web-based version of the fully navigable Lapin environment. The objective here is to use the prototype environment to seek more extensive funding for a full recreation of the portion of Montmartre where Jazz was introduced to Paris.

Within the Virtual Montmartre environment will be relevant content related to artistic, historic, geographical, musical and literary activities occurring in Montmartre during the early part of the 20th century. The project team has formed relationships with the Mayor of the "Commune Libre de Montmartre", Madame Turpaud, the Museum of Montmartre and several disciplinary departments at the Sorbonne. Additionally, several students have expressed interest in participating in the construction of the environment. It is our hope that this environment will be of use to those studying the period or specific artists, historic, musical or literary figures who lived or played in Montmartre.