Building a Community of History

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ABSTRACT
This paper describes a virtual community tentatively entitled American Timewarp, which aims to bring kids and seniors together, both online and in person, to create shared historical artifacts. The beginnings of the project and future directions are discussed.

Keywords
Senior citizens, children, oral history, virtual community, computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL)

INTRODUCTION
Senior citizens have a wealth of historical knowledge built up over a lifetime of experiences. In general, however, seniors do not get many opportunities to share their stories. We are working to create a virtual community, tentatively titled American Timewarp, where the stories of seniors are easily recorded, discussed, and shared. In this community, seniors, kids, teachers, and other volunteers will work together to create historical artifacts that are made available to the world.

WHAT IS AMERICAN TIMEWARP?
American Timewarp (AT) is a constructionist [2] environment for the creation and exploration of history by kids and seniors. Using the system, kids learn about history by building historical artifacts. Our hope is that kids who use the system will come away with a new understanding of history and its importance in their lives.

Participants
This project is centered around kids and seniors. Kids bring a knowledge of computing technology and a youthful energy. We hope they will take away an improved understanding of history and an appreciation for seniors.

Seniors bring a wealth of historical knowledge that they want to share. Through the telling of these stories, we hope they will find that their experience is important and can have a significant educational impact for kids.

Although the system will not exclude others from participating, kids and seniors were chosen because they are groups which are (1) typically undervalued in our society and (2) have a fair amount of free time.

Interaction Model
We will have participating seniors meet the kids (typically, a middle school class) they are working with once at the start of the project, perhaps coming together for an afternoon. Next, they would interact online for a period, creating artifacts together. At the end of the project, kids and seniors would come together in person again, maybe for a dinner, and discuss their progress.

One advantage of this model is that seniors need not commit to contributing a set amount of time up front. Instead, they can work with kids when they have time, and for as long as they feel comfortable.

Online Environment
The heart of AT – the software system to support online interaction and the creation of artifacts – is still very much in the planning stages. We clearly want to support the recording of stories about significant places, important people, and events of note. We also want to support kids interviewing seniors, question and answer sessions, peer review, and interaction with other classes, among others.

The artifacts themselves might be free form, allowing users to include all sorts of media, from period photos, to relevant music and sound clips, to video. Clearly, there are copyright issues to deal with here. One way to begin dealing with this is to only allow the inclusion of media the kids have created themselves – for instance, audio clips of seniors that they have interviewed.

An important feature of the system is that interaction will happen in a semi-synchronous manner. Essentially, this means that, while users can interact real-time (a la chat), the full text of those interactions will be available to others to view later. Creating this kind of discussion history is important as we want the stories told by seniors, public discussions had by kids, and the like to be available to all. For an early design of the system, see the AT web site [1].

FIRST YEAR
In the past year, we worked with a local public middle school, doing field work and a small-scale pilot study.

The School
The school is nearly 100% African-American and the majority of the kids live close by. It is a five-minute walk from the "Sweet Auburn" area of Atlanta, which was known as the "richest black street in the world" in the 1920's - 40's. The area is overflowing with history. It has the Martin Luther King, Jr. (MLK) center, the MLK birth home and Ebenezer Baptist Church where King preached, the first African-American owned radio station, the Royal Peacock (a famous concert hall), the list goes on and on.

Even with all this history in the immediate vicinity of their school and homes, however, almost none of the kids even know of its existence. This is especially unfortunate since the kids are generally from underprivileged families and are really in desperate need of role models.

Thus, we think this school in particular will benefit from a project like AT which engages them with their community. We feel that getting to know the rich history of their area through interactions with those who lived it will provide them with a deeper respect for their environment and, more importantly, a feeling of pride in themselves and where they come from.

Field Work
We have spent a great deal of time sitting in on classes to get a feel for our audience in addition to developing an understanding for what engages and excites kids. We have also gained an understanding of the current curriculum and how we might tie our project into it.

One thing that became especially clear in our work is that, although kids have short attention spans, they are capable of a great deal when creatively engaged. In particular, we were impressed to see how much projects that were particularly off the beaten path engaged kids who were not usually interested in schoolwork.

We have also done some initial interviews with seniors and have begun to understand how we must design for them, HCI issues and otherwise. One lesson learned is that, even though they are retired, seniors are still involved in many activities. Fitting our work into their schedules has proven a formidable task.

Getting Our Feet Wet
During the last part of the year, the kids read excerpts from *The Diary of Anne Frank*. To get a feel for how interactions might work between kids and seniors, we planned a small-scale e-mail interaction.

We found two World War II (WWII) veterans online. (In fact, many more veterans wanted to participate but we had to limit the number due to time constraints.) Kids spent an afternoon brainstorming questions for the seniors based on their readings and we e-mailed them to the veterans.

We were impressed by the results. Each veteran was meticulous in their response, answering every question in several paragraphs and many times including relevant stories to illustrate their points. One veteran in particular got very excited about the project. In addition to answering the questions, he scanned and sent relevant photos of himself in WWII situations, news clippings from period newspapers, and even a political cartoon.

This response encouraged us. It seems clear that there are a number of seniors who are more than willing to contribute to such a project. In addition, their participation seemed to fill a need in their own lives – the need to share their WWII stories with a generation that has grown up taking the outcome of that conflict for granted.

FUTURE WORK
During this school year, we are doing a more extensive pilot study and building the AT software.

Pilot Study
The pilot study will seek to get a classroom of students heavily involved in working with seniors in a government-subsidized housing project for the elderly. Under the guidance of their teacher, kids will interview the seniors, exchange e-mail with them, and build web pages that reflect what they've learned about the history of their area.

Software Development
During the study, kids will be given the chance to try out pieces of the AT software as they are developed. We plan to have some of the kids create online artifacts with early versions of this software and get their feedback on it.

In addition to kids, our work developing the AT software will take input from seniors, teachers, and volunteers involved in the pilot study and incorporate them into its design. This software will facilitate the creation of artifacts, interactions between kids and seniors, and the evaluation of kids' work by teachers, among other things.

CONCLUSION
American Timewarp is a virtual community designed to bring together kids and seniors and aid them in the creation of historical artifacts. The system is intended to leverage the respective skill sets of both groups and facilitate the creation of a community of learners.

In working with AT, we hope kids and seniors will learn from one another, while creating artifacts that tell important stories and can be shared with the world. In particular, though, we hope seniors are able to share some of the stories that they feel particular need to, and that kids learn that their own lives, no matter how small they feel, can be extraordinary.

REFERENCES
1. American Timewarp web site. URL http://www.cc.gatech.edu/elc/at/
2. Papert, S. "Introduction." *Constructionist Learning 1990*. MIT Press. Cambridge, MA. 1990.