



Multicultural software brings different dynamic to industry

by Andrew Brooks

At the sixth summit of La Francophonie in Benin last November, French president Jacques Chirac lamented the lack of multilingual – specifically French – access to the information highway. Canadian PM Jean Chrétien, also in attendance (and doubtless mindful of tensions back home), downplayed concerns, while Microsoft CEO Bill Gates chimed in later with the assurance that the Internet is open to all.

But does information technology go far enough to address cultural needs? It's trying.

Warren Salmon says that contrary to some software manufacturers, the Net does reflect the needs and aspirations of many ethnic groups.

Salmon is founder and president of Toronto-based Blackboard International, one

of a still-small number of pioneering firms offering software targeted at specific ethnic groups – in this case, Americans and Canadians of African descent.

"My first offering was a bulletin board service," he recalls. "It came out of an idea I had at a black youth conference at the University of British Columbia in the mid-'80s. Delegates felt the lack of positive information; that there was need for a vehicle to help strengthen black organizations."

The bulletin board Salmon set up in order to continue the conference dialogue has expanded to include an on-line encyclopedia, business listings and discussion groups, among other services.

In 1993, Salmon introduced Afrocentric Software, a line of 10 interactive, educational multimedia programs which focus on the history and

achievements of Africans and the African Diaspora, in such fields as history, music and mathematics. The programs range in price from \$50 to \$70, with volume discounts available on multi-user purchases.

"The product is doing well. I've got over 1,000 school installations, and I'm also dealing with retailers one-on-one. I'd say about 80 per cent of my business is in the States."

Salmon explains that the usual 10:1 ratio by which the American population exceeds Canada's jumps to 50:1 when the black population is considered by itself – a pretty good incentive for this Canadian entrepreneur to look south.

Another incentive is the fact that multicultural software is just beginning to gain popularity. Internet access is far ahead of software, with products like Jerusalem-based Accent Software Interna-

tional's multilingual Web browser and HTML authoring tool, and services such as NetNoir, Indian Health Services, and Chicano/LatinoNet.

"Many of the costs of software development are up-front," says Andrew Clement, an associate professor in the Faculty of Information



Imo and the King, which shipped recently from Davidson & Associates, is a multimedia exploration of an African folk tale.

But there are signs that the software market is developing.

One notable example is *Africa Trail*, produced by Minnesota Educational Computing Corp. (MECC), of Minneapolis. Based on an actual 1,200-mile bicycle trek from Tunis to South Africa, the package gives users an intimate, face-to-face look at today's African culture.

"The usual impression we seem to get of Africa is that it's a violent, war-torn place," says Susan Schilling,

senior vice-president of development at MECC. "And we're always seeing the good old shots of big animals or the Serengeti. *Africa Trail* covers the wildlife and scenery, too, but we take users through actual towns, and give them video clips of the people who live there."

Schilling reports that *Africa Trail* has done well since it was introduced last October, in both the home and school markets.

Davidson and Associates Inc., of Torrance, Calif., publishes *Magic Tales*, a series of multimedia folk tales from around the world. The three titles published so far are *Imo and the King*, *Baba Yaga and the Magic Geese* and *The Little Samurai*, which are folk tales from Africa, Russia and Japan, respectively. More titles are in the works.

Studies at the University of Toronto.

"The bias towards the big players means that minority developers will be critically short. ... You're looking at a niche market."

Schilling agrees that multicultural software is a niche market. But she adds that products such as *Africa Trail* can give African-Americans a

feel for their own roots while at the same time providing an innovative, non-stereotypical view of Africa for anyone who

"The market (for multicultural software) is growing. ... A lot of it will depend on educating the consumer."

is interested.

Salmon is working with Toronto's Dome Productions on a new product, called *Camp Artimas*. He describes it as an edutainment package, Afrocentric in content, which focuses on a group of kids at summer camp who become involved in various adventures and, in the process, learn about mostly historical topics.

"The company's growing," Salmon says. "The market's growing, and there's room for various companies. A lot of it will depend on educating the consumer."

(For more information about Blackboard International, call 1-800-565-6228.)

MECC's Schilling sums up what she sees as the social value in this kind of work. "It's one Earth and we have to learn to live together."

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