

Towards the development of a Holistic Malaysian Indian Cyber Community

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INTER WEB NETWORK

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Abstract

This paper explains the effort made by a group of social workers towards the development of a Holistic Malaysian Indian Cyber community. The goals and objectives are explained, where we are, where we intend to reach, what we have accomplished and the problems faced in meeting our objectives.

Introduction

The vision of the organization is to develop an Holistic Malaysian Indian Cyber Community which uses Information Technology (IT) as a leverage for continuous learning. Learning here refers to the use of Information Technology, particularly the World Wide Web (WWW), resources and tools as a "cognitive tool" for teaching and learning.

The role of IT is also to develop knowledge workers so as to contribute to the knowledge economy which is widely considered to be the third wave sweeping across the country; to provide general awareness to the Indian community on the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the realization of the seven flagships in the Multimedia Super Corridor. The role of the seven flagships is to transform this nation to an information rich society with ICT as a catalyst to bring about the change.

To use ICT as a repository and as a platform for creation, manipulation and discrimination of information related to Indian culture, Language, Philosophy and religion. Towards this end, the organisation will focus itself on the following modes:

- Digital information portals through WWW to all matters relating to Indian culture. Indian Philosophy and language. Web is an environment of collaboration, sharing and for information dissemination.
- To use the World Wide Web to attract people to widen their knowledge on Hinduism through the electronic medium, as the ancient doctrine are mainly available in books and the development of this system will preserve this

valuable heritage through electronic medium. Generally, the system is targeted on Hindus and Tamil literates who are doing studies on Kurunthokai, and Thirumatiran. It will also be useful to Hindu associations from all over the world and to educate their members on the philosophical texts.

- News in contrast to traditional bulletin boards allows the structure and search functions which allow a much more focused and direct search for the user.
- CD ROMs for multimedia interactive contents.

General Information technology awareness

Various IT programmes some with collaboration with the Indian Studies department, University Malaya were arranged with physical and logistic support derived from the Faculty of Computer Science & Information Technology. The courses are mainly practical in nature with hands on experience with a computer/lecturer ratio of 1:1.

- The hand on courses organized are mainly word and spread sheet processing skills.
- Use of Internet for access of resources
- Use of email facilities
- Use of Tamil word processors and fonts.

General awareness of Information Technology and the various applications with live demonstrations and examples were explained during lecture sessions.

Multimedia Technology

The multimedia convergence i.e. the convergence of computers, communication and contents, marks a new era of social and economic growth. Multimedia technologies, the integration of text, graphic, audio, video and animation, will be the new enablers in the creation of Knowledge workers (K-workers). The following technologies that will have an impact have been imparted to the participants in various degrees:

- Hypermedia, Hypertext & Multimedia
- Visualization : Information is not necessarily spatial. But our perception is, so that it is easier to convey information if it is spatially mapped.
- Virtual Reality : Interfacing of computer and user to provide the user with a sense of total immersion. Perceptions is through sensors (e.g. gloves) and output devices such as head mounted displays. Application in flight simulation, virtual manufacturing, and surgical simulations.

Besides, providing an awareness of multimedia technology, two seminars one in year 2000 and another in year 2001 were organized to explain the various flagships in the Multimedia Super Corridor.

Multimedia Super Corridor

Selected speakers who are involved in teaching, research and development of the various flagships were invited to speak on the different flagships for an audience of 400 participants. The speakers are from Multimedia Corporation (MDC), Universities, Industries and Research Institutions. Their current research and development work were demonstrated online, projected in multimedia on a big screen.

Constraints and Problems

For physical resources, we depend on the computer and internet facilities of the Faculty of Computer Science & Information Technology. The human resources were mainly derived from the undergraduate and postgraduate Indian students from the Faculty of Computer Science & Information Technology. Since we are using the faculty resources, we have to schedule the sources either after working hours or during the university semester holidays.

Some of the participants of the various programmers were not familiar with computers. They did not know each other enough to work together in groups. The instructors answered the questions only for those students who asked him. Those not asking questions did not get the additional information. The reaction of the students were feelings of frustration, and feeling lost. Some asked their peers, who very often are as lost as they are.

Computer anxiety

It was found that the older group above 40 years of age suffered from computer anxiety in measurable and multiple dimensions. Computer anxiety is a complex psychological construct which cannot be fully described by a single measure. The computer anxiety can be described along two fundamental dimensions, namely, computer equipment anxiety and computer learning anxiety. Computing equipment anxiety involves the fear of handling new machines and equipment before actually using them. Computer learning anxiety involves the fear when interacting with the computer and learning how to use a computer.

Indian Philosophy and Literature in Multimedia

Efforts were made with collaboration from Indian Studies Department of placing "Kurunthokai" in a multimedia CD and also to have a server version accessible through the internet.

Kurunthokai

This project was developed as web-based and as a CD system that will serve to preserve and distribute widely, ancient literary works around the globe through the means of the internet. The electronic versions of printed texts of ancient literacy work will be an important

educational and scholarly resource. Stored in easily accessible archives, literary works allow quick search for phrases, words and combinations of words.

The text files are converted to HTML files and put up on the World Wide Web servers so that anyone located anywhere may download a copy for personal use or read as published on the internet.

Problems with Tamil fonts

We have implemented two pilot projects - Kurunthokai and Thirumanthiram. Kurunthokai songs were classified under the title of the song, season, time of the day, author, place and song number. For ease of retrieval the Tamil text of the song and the song number was placed in an Access database. Murasu Internet fonts which uses the Romanised keyboard was used to type the songs in the Murasu Editor. The font used was "Inaikathir" which can be downloaded from the Murasu site and loaded in Microsoft word. The Microsoft word intrinsically does not support Murasu fonts but one can cut and paste the Tamil text which can be viewed but cannot be edited using the Microsoft Word editor. For editing the text, the Murasu Editor was used.

Tamil fonts can be viewed easily using the Web pages provided by the Murasu fonts and can be preloaded and minimised. However, the fonts cannot be directly viewed by displaying the Access database table. The text as seen directly through the various fields of the tables are in binary and cannot be directly edited. Editing was done laboriously by first typing the text, using the Murasu Editor and is cut and paste into the Access database. When the database was queried the retrieved information is displayed in readable Tamil fonts on the web.

Another problem faced is in the sorting of the fields in the database according to alphabetical order. The database is unable to recognize the alphabetical order of Tamil characters. In order to sort the Tamil words, it is necessary to assign pseudo numbers to represent the first Tamil character and to sort the numbers in increasing order. The value of the number assigned is based on increasing order of the first Tamil character

Recording of songs

Each song was recorded and stored as a wave file. The wave file was kept as a flat file in the hard disk, and an appropriate pointer was placed in a file, so as to select the voice file when the relevant song was accessed. The song is streamed through the internet and routed to the appropriate client.

Conclusion and Discussion

The kurunthogai project is nearing completion, except for some minor details like checking for spelling errors and will be launched soon. There are two versions of kurunthogai, a web based and a CD version. Both versions are identical in content and the latter version the CD, could be utilized when the internet facility is either absent or too slow.

Another ongoing project is the Thirumanthiram project and it is partially completed. Efforts will be made in the near future to complete the above projects. Attempts will also be made to place contents of religions and cultural in nature, in the web. It is hoped that this change of media will attract members of the international community, especially the younger generation, to widen their knowledge on Tamil language, culture and religion.