Thirteen Going on 3-D: Omar Diallo’s Filmmaking Adventure
By Felipe Tewes | April 8, 2009

"And this is where I kill the lava monster, before I fight the giant squid," Omar Diallo points out. All I could see on screen was this 13-year-old’s impressive display of Tae-Kwon-Do with nothing but green screen behind him. But his enthusiasm makes no concession to that fact. Once the graphics are completed and inserted, we will all be able to see The Adventures of Sharky Lo in 3-D, Omar’s first-ever short film. The crew? Three lean-as-you-go volunteers. The budget? However much store-bought fangs and a can of sardines—don’t ask—will run you. And the location? A small room on 150th Street and Fredrick Douglass Blvd in Northern Harlem.

Soft-spoken Diallo is one of the dozens of 10-to-16-year-old students taking advantage of the HCCI (Harlem Congregations for Community Improvement, Inc.) Computer Clubhouse. The multimedia design environment is part of a network of almost 100 clubs across over 20 countries, originally founded by MIT and Intel but now operating on a franchise basis, with local non-profits awarded licenses and the top-notch equipment necessary. The clubs provide local youth in under-served areas with the technology and a space in which to devote a regular block of time exclusively to the process of producing and of being creative. There is no Facebook or Youtube surfing allowed here beyond a short break—even homework must be left for another time and place. The members must make something. Stocked with professional-level design/graphics software (Adobe CS, Bryce, Poser), the clubs push students to aim as high or as whimsical as they desire as long as they are creating, or at the very least aiming to, at all times. What they produce and how they do it is in their hands.

Like others, Omar began with recording clips to post online and Photoshopping pictures. The walls are covered with printouts of the teenage members alongside repeat photo companions 50 Cent and Beyoncé. Omar wanted to go further. Multiple viewings of his favorite films, which are all 3-D, inspired him to try the director’s (and writer’s) chair. My question of “why 3-D?” elicited a puzzled look. Why would you not have things “coming at you”? (Jeffrey Katzenberg would be proud.) Employing an Adobe Premiere 3-D conversion plug-in, Omar and the staff at the club devised a system to create a 3-D effect. Using a consumer-grade digital video camera, the young filmmakers manipulated a single camera feed by duplicating it and separating it in time by one frame of action. The result will be an exciting tale of a young, shape-shifting boy in foster care who must battle a variety of enemies (from ice monsters to child zombies) in order to rescue his parents. The story was fully conceived by Omar, who, upon toying with the green screen, became increasingly excited by the idea of seeing himself “somewhere else.”

Whether it be an ambitious 12-minute adventure story or a retouched image, the clubhouse members have found creating—and in the age of Twitter, sharing something that is their own—a craving hard to resist. Omar certainly faced the challenges of filmmaking, as editing and post-production have proven particularly lengthy. But what continues to excite him is that, when all is said and done, he will have produced something with his own two hands (and legs for those back kicks) and “have something to show for it.” When asked for his long-term plans, he’s understandably unsure. He just turned thirteen, after all. But in that moment of hesitation you could see many wheels turning, mulling over the numerous possibilities for the future.