

Bronx Rhymes: An Urban Multimedia Project

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ABSTRACT Bronx Rhymes commemorates the early days of hip-hop and renews its cultural significance by inviting a new generation of lyricists to reinvigorate its rich history. An ongoing series of Bronx Rhymes posters are installed at iconic hip-hop landmarks throughout the South Bronx. Each poster describes the historical significance of that location in the form of a rhyme, and invites passersby to text their own rhymes in response. Submissions appear on the BronxRhymes.org website along with the original rhyme, generating a continually evolving community composition.

We designed Bronx Rhymes as a project that merged the physical, digital, and mobile worlds by taking into account the social dynamics of our intended audience—the younger residents of the South Bronx and their online counterparts. Demolition and gentrification have left few traces of hip-hop's early history in a borough very much in need of local heroes. We wanted to uncover and expose these lost or hidden facts by describing them in a form that is integral to hip-hop, the rhyme. In order to fully engage young people, we structured our design around texting, the most pervasive medium of communication among this group. We invite those who see the posters, or visit the website to respond by writing their own rhymes, thus contributing to a constantly expanding archive of shared insights and emotions. We hope the resulting collection will prove to be a testament to hip-hop's ability to engage and provoke, as well as a reflection of digital technology evolving beyond the boundaries of a single medium into a participatory and personalized act of remixing.

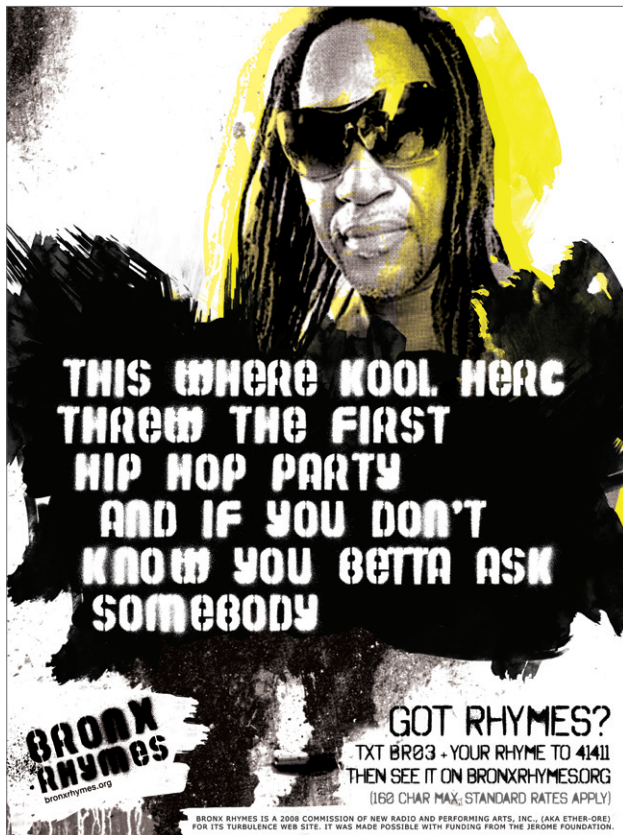
INTRODUCTION Over 25 years ago musical pioneers including Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaataa and Grandmaster Flash helped launch one of the most influential and empowering cultural movements of our time. Bronx Rhymes, a multi-media installation by digital artists Claudia Bennett and Maria Ioveva, celebrates hip-hop's innovative artistry, inspirational impact and community contributions. Using a guerrilla graphics campaign, Bronx Rhymes both commemorates the origins of hip-hop and renews its cultural significance through BronxRhymes.org, a site that invites a new generation of potential artists to reinvigorate hip-hop's rich history and join its evolution.

CONTEXT

By the mid-1970s, the Bronx had slipped into an economic decline marked by poverty and violence. Youth were a particularly vulnerable segment with unemployment reaching 60–80% and gang wars becoming commonplace. Hip-hop emerged from this brutal climate out of a need for self-expression and creativity, which used the most immediate tools at hand—a simple turntable, a mic, and a steady beat.

Because hip-hop originally flourished in impoverished communities very few historical artifacts have been preserved, and those that have survived are disappearing with increased gentrification. Many of the small bars and clubs that lined Boston Road are gone and some of the apartments MCs and DJs spent hours experimenting with their music have been converted into condominiums.

Bronx Rhymes aims to provide access points into the genre's early history by merging the physical, digital, and mobile worlds. We both relay historical information and present a game-like experience that invites participants to reflect on and contribute to an ever-growing conversation about hip-hop and its influence on popular culture and music.



PROCESS

We began by focusing on a small group of pioneers in the Bronx. We researched artists who got their start in the borough, and documented their histories. We then archived and mapped significant events in hip-hop history related to those artists.

As part of our research, we contacted Professor Mark D. Naison, a Professor of African American Studies and History from Fordham University. Professor Naison then introduced us to local music and hip-hop communities. We became familiar with projects such as the Urban Art Beat program, an after-school program, which teaches kids about the history of hip-hop while and encourages them to create their own rhymes and beats. We sought to leverage digital technology to capture this interest in hip-hop history by re-envisioning the rhyming battle in a new form and context.

We collaborated with developers and set up mobile codes with Textmarks (<http://www.textmarks.com>), and linked each poster and location to a particular rhyme. Online, we display a list of all the artists and locations, each identified with a rhyme. Each of the submitted rhymes are stored in a simple text file, and an updated count of these submissions are displayed on the site using PHP and related web technologies.

EXPERIENCE

At each of the ten locations we linked to a piece of hip-hop history (many are defunct, but a few, such as 1520 Sedgwick, still exist), posters describing the historical event were mounted. Each poster displays an early hip-hop pioneer (DJ Kool Herc or Afrika Bambaataa, for example) an original rhyme that describes the significance of that location. Viewers are invited to text a response of their own. All rhymes and responses are archived on BronxRhymes.org, where visitors can also add rhymes. A custom execution of Google Maps was integrated to plot the locations and historical details. The result is both an exploration of hip-hop's foundations and a forum for creative expression and historical dialog.



SUMMARY

Bronx Rhymes leverages physical, digital, and mobile communications with the aim of inviting the local community to engage with its own history, and with each other. The publicly mounted posters call attention to a fading history, and encourage passersby to engage with that history via sms. This medium of communication was selected for its prevalence among our target demographic. BronxRhymes.org launched on November 15th, 2008, and to date has received 1,700 unique visits, with users spending an average of 2:32 minutes on the site. We have received approximately 60 submissions, along with calls from local DJs and MCs interested in the project's expansion. Finally, we have been reviewed by the *New York Times*, the *PSFK* and *PBS: Mediashift* blogs.

BIOGRAPHY (OR BIOGRAPHIES)

Claudia Bennett is an artist and designer living and working in New York City. Since receiving her MFA from Parsons School of Design in 2000, she has been creating work that operates at the intersection of the digital and physical realms, and explores cognitive responses to human-computer interaction. She also works as an interaction designer in the Mobile and Emerging Platforms group at R/GA where she leads the user interface development on a wide variety of digital tools, toys, and experiences.

Maria Loveva is an interaction designer and motion graphics artist. Her interest in urban narratives led her to create "after-images" of the city—a series of animated dreamscapes in which past, present and fantasy intertwine. In previous pieces, she has re-imagined classic New York silhouettes such as the Brooklyn water towers and the abandoned elevated High Line rail line. She received an MFA from Parsons School of Design in 2005, and currently works as a Senior Interaction Designer at R/GA for the Nike+ account.

NOTES

1 *The Chicago Manual of Style: The Essential Guide for Writers, Editors, and Publishers, 15th Ed.* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 600.

2 *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 603–605.

3 *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 603–605.

4 *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 601, 602; *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 601, 602; *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 601, 602; *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 601, 602.

5 See note 1 above.

6 *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 606. Author commentary follows the citation.

7 “When a note includes a quotation, the source normally follows the terminal punctuation of the quotation. The entire source need not be put in parenthesis, which involves changing existing parentheses to brackets and creating unnecessary clutter.” *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 607.