

“A Girl’s Life” in Virtual Harlem

Georgia Tappan

Virtual reality scenarios at the Virtual Harlem project are currently restricted to “tours” wherein a group guide, controlling the remote, chooses the route a visiting group will take along the streets of Harlem. The group may walk up and down random streets and stop to eavesdrop on private conversations or to listen to public speakers; they may ride the trolley or go inside some buildings (the Cotton Club, for example) to watch filmed sequences unfold.

A different, interactive narrative form has been proposed by Jim Sosnoski and Tim Portlock in their paper “A Design for Multiple Interactive Narratives in VR Scenarios” (in this volume). Sosnoski and Portlock proposed a form they entitled “VR-history” to emphasize the historical aspect of these Harlem tales. Their proposal utilizes episodic narratives to tell stories of everyday life in Harlem during one of the three Harlem Renaissance (HR) periods (Bohemian Period, 1926-34; Talented Tenth Period, 1924-26; or Negro Renaissance Period, 1926-35). In these narratives, viewers would choose avatars and then make choices from options available to that particular avatar: for instance, a young, African-American female avatar would be presented with a different set of choices than would an older, white, male avatar. The visitor’s choice of avatar would determine the VR-history that would then unfold outside the visitor’s control until the next narrative convergence where a choice again would be required with the available options dependent on the pre-chosen avatar. These episodes as proposed by Sosnoski and Portlock will require the collaboration of Harlem Renaissance scholars to make the episodes both historically accurate and historically significant.

As a graduate student in creative writing at the University of Illinois at Chicago, working under the direction of Jim Sosnoski, I designed three episodic narratives with varying degrees and types of interactivity to bridge the gap between Virtual Harlem as it now exists (essentially as a tour only) and the eventual Virtual Harlem as proposed by Sosnoski and Portlock. The narratives would be performed, filmed and inserted into Virtual Harlem. Visitors touring Virtual Harlem, remote in hand, would encounter characters who, when the visitor came close enough, would start to move and speak. Presumably, the visitor would be interested enough to stand

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and watch the scene unfold, interacting when prompted by the characters. Visitors would, of course, always have the option of moving away which would cause the scene to abort.

My goals were that these narratives should be episodic and tied together through some “thing” that visitors would recognize as being a common thread. I also wanted the narratives to feature conversations involving everyday people rather than historical figures (though the conversations would contain references to historical figures, settings and events). An additional goal was that these scenes be interactive with the viewer. An initial goal, not realized for reasons I will explain, was to structure the episodes with a loose, linear plot.

According to Prince as quoted by Sosnoski and Portlock, an episodic narrative is “a plot in which no strong causal continuity exists between one event or episode and the next.” I wanted each narrative to be free-standing in that it would require no information from a previous narrative to be enjoyed or understood. And yet, I wanted the episodes to be related to each other. I chose to tie the episodes together by using an issue of *Crisis Magazine*, a monthly literary magazine published by W.E.B. DuBois, edited by Jessie Fauset, and popular during the Renaissance among African-Americans in Harlem and all over the United States. Using the *Crisis* allowed me to write dialogue that mentioned DuBois and Fauset along with other writers, that touched on the migration of people from various parts of the country to Harlem thereby portraying the grass-roots aspects of the Renaissance, and that included some of the tension between groups promoting varying ideas of the best way for African Americans to co-exist with white culture.

All three finished episodes feature one particular issue of the *Crisis Magazine* as it is passed from person to person through Harlem on a day in 1925, changing hands through a series of dramatic incidents. The episodes share a linear logic in that one character brings the magazine into the scene, the magazine is handed off to a different character through the resolution of a conflict within the scene, and the different character then carries the magazine out of the scene. A visitor to Virtual Harlem may encounter any of the scenes in any sequence and they will make sense, but at some point, visitors may recognize characters from prior scenes and start to get a sense of the overarching design — or, they may not, with no substantial loss to the experience. Currently, only three scenes are written, but the circle of the magazine’s trip through Harlem is not closed so that other writers (possibly students in a course on the Harlem Renaissance) could contribute additional scenes.

My initial goal had been to write toward a climax where a characters from the first and second scenes were united in something of a romance, the boy meets girl scenario of Sosnoski and Portlock’s paper, or maybe like the instant coffee commercials that aired on television several years ago. The problem with this scenario was that it required the scenes to be encountered in a specific order. Because viewers on a tour of Harlem have the freedom to move as they wish, no specific order could be guaranteed.

Two of the scenes I wrote feature interactivity where the viewer is asked to perform a task that will be helpful to the characters. The viewer obviously can choose to perform the task or not to perform the task. If the viewer performs the task, the characters express their thanks. If the viewer chooses not to perform the task (or takes too long to choose), the characters perform the task and make a comment to the viewer. The third scene features interactivity where the viewer is asked to make a decision that will change the direction of the story. This scene is included below and illustrates that the opportunities of the Renaissance weren't shared equally by male and female.

A GIRL'S LIFE

A Scene For
VIRTUAL HARLEM

by
Georgia Tappan

CAST OF CHARACTERS

GRACE HALE. Eight or so.

HELEN. 30s. Proper, a God-fearing woman.

GENEVIEVE. 20s. Lively, wearing makeup. Hair bobbed.

LUCIA HALE. Grace's mother, 30s, a serious woman.

SETTING:

Side alley outside the Cotton Club. Two chairs are positioned beside a door, presumably the employee entrance/exit. Across from the two chairs is an open trash container. Helen and Genevieve are sitting in the chairs. Helen is drinking lemonade from a pint jar. She sits properly with her knees together. On her lap is a towel. On the towel is her lunch. At her feet is a tote bag or satchel. The bag is open, and a sheaf of tracts is visible. They're religious tracts, and Helen is reading one; its cover shows an open-armed, blond, (blue-eyed) Jesus standing in a shaft of heavenly light. Genevieve sits swinging one leg crossed over the other. Her demeanor is casual, but there is something young and daring, almost edgy, about her.

Grace has entered the alley to fetch her mother home for lunch. She's carrying the copy of the "Crisis" that she swiped from Ernest.

GENEVIEVE:

Can this gorgeous young lady be Miss Grace Hale coming to visit? Hello there Miss Grace.

GRACE (*Shyly*) :

Hello, Miss Genevieve. Hello, Miss Helen.

HELEN (*To Genevieve.*) :

Don't you be putting airs in that girl's head. Good morning, Grace. Are you here to see your mother?

GRACE:

Yes'm. Daddy wants her to come home for lunch.

GENEVIEVE

Why you look as pretty as a flower in that dress, Miss Grace. Pretty soon you'll have all the boys buzzing round you just like bees around a flower. Why, I'll bet they're starting to buzz already.

HELEN

You stop talking like that, Genevieve. Grace is a good girl, being brought up in the ways of the Lord.

GENEVIEVE (*Shoots a look at Helen.*) :

I never said anything that would make her out to be anything else. It's the Lord that made her so pretty. It's the Lord that gave her those big eyes and those round cheeks. (Shakes her head in a tsk-tsk motion) I guess it's the Lord, too, that gave her that hair.

GRACE (*Touches her hair*) :

Is there something wrong with my hair?

HELEN:

Your hair is just the way God made it.

GENEVIEVE:

There's nothing wrong with your hair that Madame C. J. Walker can't fix.

(GENEVIEVE reaches into her pocket and takes out tin of Madame C. J. Walker's Hair pomade. She holds it out toward Grace.

GRACE transfers the "Crisis" from one hand to the other and reaches for the pomade-tin.

GENEVIEVE doesn't release the pomade, reaches instead for the magazine.)

GENEVIEVE:

What you got there, sugar?

GRACE:

A magazine.

GENEVIEVE:

What kind of magazine?

GRACE:

It's the "Crisis." It's got stories and pictures. I found it. My daddy reads it but he won't let me have his — he says I'll get it dirty.

GENEVIEVE:

Hmm-hmm. I know some men read magazines like that but I didn't think James Hale was one of them.

HELEN (To Genevieve) :

Hush, now. Don't be talking about the man like that in front of his baby.

Keeping the tin of pomade, GENEVIEVE takes the magazine from Grace and flips through it.

GENEVIEVE:

Why this is just a lot of writing. Who'd want to waste their eyes on so much tiny print?

GRACE:

Most of the stories are too hard for me but there's a page especially for kids. It's got a poem. (*She loses her shyness as she talk.*): Sometimes more poems. Sometimes stories.

GENEVIEVE: (Gives the magazine back) :

Why, little Miss Grace Hale, I think you might be turning into one of those girls who wears her eyes out reading and reading. Then you'll have to wear glasses and there won't be one boy in Harlem who'll give you a second look.

HELEN:

Better she wears out her eyes reading the Bible. I know your mama reads the Bible.

GRACE:

Daddy reads us these stories. Last month he read us one about a lady who thought she was white until she met her long lost cousin who turned out to be black. I thought it was sad. Mama said it was just pathetic, black people wanting to be something God didn't mean them to be.

HELEN:

Your mama's right. The good Lord gave every one of us a purpose on this earth. Our job is to search the ways of the Lord and learn to be what he means for us. I don't know what the Lord's purpose is for you, Grace Hale, but you keep listening to Miss Genevieve here and you'll end up dancing hootchie-kootchie like Florence Mills and Josephine Baker.

GRACE (*Shy, again*) :

I think I want to write poems.

GENEVIEVE:

Poems. Poems. Honey, you don't want to be hiding away somewhere writing poems. You want to be fixing yourself up and going out to parties. How you gonna get yourself a beau by staying indoors and writing poems?

HELEN:

You don't want to be writing poems and you certainly don't want to be listening to Miss Genevieve, here. You do that, and you'll turn into a woman who's almost 25 and still going to parties. The way to get yourself a husband is to keep your eyes down. You go to church and read the Good Book and be a god-fearing woman. Then a God-fearing man will choose you to be his helpmate and raise his children.

GRACE:

Maybe I could write poems, too.

(*HELEN and GENEVIEVE both laugh.*)

GENEVIEVE (*Still laughing*) :

Honey, being a woman is a full-time job. It doesn't matter whether you're fixing yourself up to get a beau or going to church to get a husband. Either way, you got no time for writing poems.

HELEN:

You want poems, you read the Psalms. They'll give you all the pretty words you need. Here. (*Holds out the religious tract*): You give me that magazine and I'll give you this story about the coming day when our Lord returns to gather us all to his bosom and take us to our rightful home.

GENEVIEVE:

Unh-unh, Grace. You give *me* that magazine and I'll give you this tin of Madame C. J. Walker's hair pomade. (*Holds out the tin*): It'll take the nap right out of your hair and make it shine like midnight. Make every fella turn his head and say, "why who is this fresh little cookie coming down the street?"

(GRACE clutches the "Crisis" to her and looks back and forth between the tract and the tin.)

The door opens and LUCIA comes out to the alley.)

LUCIA:

Grace. What are you doing here?

GRACE *(Still clutching the magazine and torn between the two offers for its trade)* :

Daddy sent me to tell you to come home early for lunch. We have company.

LUCIA *(Brusquely)* :

Company? Again? I suppose he's dragged one more sorry poet in off the street. Well, Grace, you've dawdled until it's too late to get home early. *(She notices the magazine)*: What you got, there? *(Sees what it is)*: Get rid of that thing. We surely don't need another dreamer in our house.

(GRACE looks back and forth between the tract and the tin.)

GRACE *(To viewer)* :

What should I do?

SCENARIO – 1

Viewer Choice:

If Viewer does nothing, then go to Scenario 2.

If Viewer clicks on the tract, then go to Scenario 6.

If Viewer clicks on the tin, then go to Scenario 7.

If Viewer clicks on the "Crisis," then go to Scenario 8.

SCENARIO – 2

GRACE (To viewer) :

Please help me. Please tell me what you think I should keep.
Click on the tract or the tin or the "Crisis".

Viewer choice:

If Viewer does nothing, then go to Scenario 3.

If Viewer clicks on the tract, then go to Scenario 6.

If Viewer clicks on the tin, then go to Scenario 7.

If Viewer clicks on the "Crisis," then go to Scenario 8.

SCENARIO – 3

GRACE (To viewer, pleading) :

Please, please click on the tract or the tin or the "Crisis."

Viewer Choice:

If Viewer does nothing, then go to Scenario 4.

If Viewer clicks on the tract, then go to Scenario 6.

If Viewer clicks on the tin, then go to Scenario 7.

If Viewer clicks on the "Crisis," then go to Scenario 8.

SCENARIO – 4

(GRACE sinks to pavement and starts to cry.)

HELEN (To viewer) :

You get on out of here. What kind of a grown person makes a little girl cry?

Viewer choice.

If Viewer does nothing, then go to Scenario 5.

If Viewer tries to click on tract, tin, or "Crisis," then go to Scenario 5.

SCENARIO – 5

GENEVIEVE (To viewer) :

You heard her. You had your chance to help, and you didn't take it. Now, get on out of here.

(FRAME FREEZES)

— END —

SCENARIO – 6

(GRACE exchanges "Crisis" for tract. HELEN smiles smugly. GENEVIEVE puts the tin in her pocket.)

LUCIA:

Hurry up, Grace. Your daddy's waiting.

(LUCIA grabs GRACE'S hand and pulls her along. GRACE looks back at her forfeited magazine. HELEN tosses the "Crisis" toward the trash can. It falls short and lands on the pavement. GRACE sees; her lower lip starts to quiver. GRACE follows LUCIA out to the street and they disappear.)

— END —

SCENARIO – 7

(GRACE exchanges "Crisis" for tin. GENEVIEVE grins jubilantly. HELEN puts the tract back in her bag.)

LUCIA:

Hurry up, Grace. Your daddy's waiting.

(LUCIA grabs GRACE'S hand and pulls her along. GRACE looks back at her forfeited magazine. GENEVIEVE tosses the "Crisis" toward the trash can. It falls short and lands on the pavement. GRACE sees; her lower lip starts to quiver. GRACE follows LUCIA out to the street and they disappear.)

— END —

SCENARIO – 8

(GRACE hugs the “Crisis” tighter. GENEVIEVE puts the tin back into her pocket. HELEN puts the tract back into her bag.)

LUCIA:

Hurry up, Grace. Your daddy’s waiting.

(LUCIA grabs GRACE’S hand and pulls her along. LUCIA sees that GRACE is still holding the magazine, takes it from her and tosses it toward the trash can. It falls short and lands on the pavement. GRACE sees; her lower lip starts to quiver. GRACE follows LUCIA out to the street and they disappear.)

– END –

As yet, none of these scenes have been performed. I believe decisions will have to be made with respect to what movements will be required to get characters in and out of the scenes. When people appear, where do they come from? Do they “fade in” or do they just appear like time travelers in a science fiction movie? Are they part of the background until some cue in the scene triggers movement? I believe that in the same way that the flaw in my initial design to string the scenes together into a loose, linear plot didn’t become apparent until I started writing, the technical way these entrances and exits will be accomplished won’t become apparent until we start filming.

Writing these scenes was different from other fiction writing I have done. In story or novel writing, the author has complete control over the reader as long as the reader continues to choose to read. The author establishes the significant details of a scene. For instance, a description of a room will include only the artifacts the author deems important or for other reasons wants the reader to know about. The reader isn’t free to roam at will, peeking into closets and so on, observing details outside of the author’s choice. In writing for the camera, the scriptwriter turns over some of that control to the director who determines what will be included in the camera’s gaze. The director then relinquishes control to the audience who will probably follow the camera’s gaze but are certainly free to look at any area of the screen they choose. In writing for the stage, author and director give some control to the members of the audience who have the option of directing their various gazes at any part of the stage though there still is something of a convention that theater audiences either keep their seats or leave the theater – they don’t wander onstage or backstage during a performance. But, visitors to Virtual Reality can roam the stage at will. If the author/director wants the audience to look at something in particular, they, author and director, must make that object attract the audience. The audience’s gaze isn’t controlled, directed or confined.

As an author, I've found it thrilling to watch a play I've written performed in front of an audience: to see the actors bring the characters to life and to hear audiences react in exactly the way I'd hoped in exactly the right places. It can be even more thrilling to hear audiences react in ways I never anticipated. I'm looking forward to seeing the scenes I've written for Virtual Harlem performed by live actors, filmed and then inserted into Virtual Reality. Even more than watching "my" scenes performed, I look forward to visiting the Virtual Reality lab and watching people on tour interact with people I've created. Exhilarating!

