

Writing a Narrative for Virtual Harlem: A Learning Experience

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When I was first asked to write a narrative for the Virtual Harlem environment, I welcomed the opportunity. Having been involved with the project in various ways for almost two years, witnessing the technical development and expansion of the environment, I looked forward to the point when I could contribute my talents as a creative writer to the project. I had personally experienced Virtual Harlem on a number of occasions and conducted tours of the environment for visiting groups and scholars. Each time I entered the environment I was intrigued and inspired. Like most creative writers, I always see the possibility for story. Through Virtual Harlem I was convinced that Harlem had many stories to tell, I and could only imagine what those stories were. What went on behind the doors of the various buildings? In the townhouses on Strivers Row? In the tenement apartments? Who was peering out of the windows as we strolled through the environment? What was life like for the club musicians, dancers and waiters when the music and nighttime ended and daylight set in? Where did they go? Who did they go home to? The answers to these questions are also what made up Harlem, not just the literary and artistic movements. For me, Harlem, just prior to, during and following the period known as the Renaissance was inherently rich with stories. The artistic, sociological and political movements of the time made it such. How those movements intersected with the people, famous and unknown, and their everyday lives is where I believed the stories were hidden.

As a creative writing instructor, the semester before I began writing my narrative I took my class to view Virtual Harlem and subsequently gave them a writing assignment to create a story set in Harlem during the Renaissance. We were studying fictional time and place. This in a sense would be a test run to see what types of fictional narratives the environment would elicit in creative writers. The students' inspirations for stories would come from the setting and atmosphere which the environment presented. They would not have to invoke the setting and atmosphere from the depths of their imagination, but interpret them based on their perceptions and imagine what transpired in that space. In doing so, creating story, they would also be contributing to this atmosphere. The narratives created by my students were "traditional" short stories and

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many of them quite interesting. There was a tale of three teenagers “hanging out” in Harlem on a Saturday night, going to different locations until one is tragically killed in a scheme gone wrong. There was the tale of a young woman who wanted to become a cabaret singer, and one of a working mother who had to leave her children at home at night to go to work as a maid in a hotel uptown. The environment helped facilitate the creative writing process for them in two ways. First, it provided them with background information. Usually, when writers set a story in a time period or location with which they are not knowledgeable, a great deal of research has to be conducted in order for them to become familiar enough with the location to write a convincing narrative. The customs, habits, locales, prevailing societal attitudes, etc. of the space all become important as a way of grounding the story. Additionally, Virtual Harlem also assisted with another important aspect of the creative writing process, the expansion of imagination. For creative writers the ability to imagine, to “see” in their minds where a story takes place is essential for it can impact how a story unfolds and what is told. When creating fiction the descriptions of the setting in a story may be linked to the themes. These descriptions become tropes. Setting thus becomes an unspoken language of synonyms. It is a way of describing the same themes that occur in the dialogue and narrative, but through setting these themes are translated through imagery. As participants in a virtual environment, my creative writing students were not only imagining the setting, they were able to “virtually” experience it on a personal level, to step into it. In other media such as written text and film, experience and imagination are impaired by distance. With the assistance of Virtual Harlem the students were “set inside” of the place and time, the distance being reduced they could imagine the setting more fully. The imaginative process was, thereby, expanded and enhanced.

In the fictional narratives created by my students, Harlem served as the backdrop in the stories, was incidental. It provided the atmosphere and “flavor” to the stories, but Harlem, itself, was not “the” story. However, in writing a narrative specifically for Virtual Harlem, a narrative that would be inserted into the environment, I would be doing something different. In the case of Virtual Harlem, Harlem itself was already the existing text. It was Harlem that the participants were coming to engage, experience and learn about. There were already existing mythologies, stories and attitudes associated with the Harlem Renaissance. What I would be essentially doing in writing narratives for the environment would be to create the subtexts, those minor narratives which comprised the attitudes, social conditions, movements and artistic forums which when viewed collectively, reflected Harlem as we have come to “read” it, and perhaps challenge participants to re-think what they had previously “read” into Harlem. The significance of these narratives would be similar to the “back stories” or “under stories” in a drama. In a stage play, many times the only way the audience gets the full exposition of the story on the stage is by getting the story

that takes place off stage, because it affects what happens on the stage. The off-stage stories fill in the gaps and heighten understanding. The off stage stories are forces which shape and impact the main story, they are subliminal, the subtext that affect the text. For instance, some character runs in from the wings announcing that the dam has broken, and half the town has been destroyed, or it is announced that the wealthy patriarch of a family has died, but prior to doing so he revealed that the stable boy is his son, a secret he has kept for twenty years. None of this has taken place on stage, yet it greatly impacts the story on the stage, complicates it, creates moments of crisis, climax or resolution. In creating the narratives for Virtual Harlem, these subtexts would be spotlighted and momentarily brought to the forefront as a means of producing a greater understanding of Harlem, as a black cultural mecca during the 1920's and 30's.

As enthusiastic as I was about the challenge of creating narratives for Virtual Harlem, I could not help but contemplate what seemed like a reasonable question to me. "Why create narratives for Virtual Harlem as opposed to continuing to enhance the audio guided tour which currently exists in the environment?" The present guided tour highlights the various landmarks, individuals and activities associated with Harlem while providing historical information. There are interactive moments during the tour where one can pause and hear a poem virtually recited by Langston Hughes, a speech by Marcus Garvey, hoodoo tales recounted, and performances in the Cotton Club. So why create narratives to guide participants through the environment? What would they add to the experience? It is interesting to note that those more performative "narrative like" portions of the environment (poems, speeches, interior of the Cotton Club) appear to be the aspects which the participants have found the most enjoyable. Why? Perhaps it is because fictional narratives provide possibilities for learning that are both informative and pleasurable at the same time. We are given the opportunity to contemplate the nature of how things "were and are." Scholar J. Hillis Miller in his essay "Narrative" says, "in fictions we order or reorder the givens of experience...with fictions we investigate, perhaps invent, the meaning of human life." Narratives, by their very nature and the type of engagement that they require, involve not only the writer but also the reader/viewer in this process of investigation and reordering of experience. Through narrative, as opposed to just being given a tour, the participants are called upon to interpret and evaluate the significance of the narrative in relation to their concepts of Harlem.

I had considered the constraints involved in writing about a historical location and historical figures, the mediation between the importance of historical accuracy and the desire for creative license. However, I had not given much consideration to the differences and challenges that existed between writing for a virtual environment and a conventional literary text. After all, in my mind storytelling was storytelling, whether oral, written, or "virtual." I

was to learn that the dictates of the virtual environment would prove otherwise. When writing a literary text, one is limited only by one's imagination. The page or computer screen offers freedom of movement and entrance into any spaces the writer's imagination wishes to inhabit. This is not always the case with virtual environments due to the constraints of technical development combined with the time consuming task of modeling environmental structures. A case in point is a scene that I intended to include in my first narrative. The scene was to take place in James Vander Zee's photography studio. A young child and her mother were coming to have the child's photograph taken. I had found a photograph of a little girl taken by Vander Zee in 1925 that could be used in the environment. The child was a tap dancer and had just been selected for a Broadway show. The scene offered a wonderful opportunity for participants to learn about Vander Zee, a famous black photographer during the Harlem Renaissance who documented a great deal of Harlem life. There was also the opportunity to discuss Florence Mills, a famous black dancer during the period and also the subject of my narrative. In addition, this scene had the potential for interactivity on the part of the participants viewing the environment. I envisioned them standing behind Vander Zee's view camera; each time they clicked the flash they would change the child's pose until they ended up with the pose Vander Zee developed. It was only after I began writing the scene that it was brought to my attention that the scene could not be implemented as I had envisioned it. Even though there was the exterior of a photography studio already present in the environment, the interior had not yet been developed. If I wanted to use this scene, all activity would have to take place outside of the studio. Granted, Vander Zee could talk to them in front of his studio, but the scene would not have had the same effect. The participant would not experience him at work in his studio and the envisioned interactivity would have to be eliminated. I decided to put the scene aside and include it in a future narrative when the interior of the studio is modeled.

To a greater extent, however, the narratives would possess many of the same features of traditional storytelling. They would be informative, entertaining and provide insight into the emotional development of the main character, in this case Harlem. Traditional story structure would, however, be another matter. A good story has a beginning, middle, and end. A certain amount of time is needed to develop a cohesive story and plot. In a virtual environment timing of the narratives is crucial. It is desirable to keep the participants moving throughout the environment, pausing momentarily to experience a location and then keep moving. The idea is to give the participants a sense that they are strolling through the streets of Harlem, picking up overheard tidbits of conversation, moving in and out of buildings, greeting and passing people on the streets. They are both participants and voyeurs. Ideally the narratives should not be linear. Participants should be able to select a particular segment/scene of a narrative, experience it, and then click on another narrative if they chose not to view all

of the scenes in a particular narrative. Yet, the segment that they viewed would need to be framed in such a way that there is a sense of cohesiveness and closure.

I wanted to create a narrative that would allow participants to learn more about Florence Mills, a famous performer during the period. I was interested in exploring and revealing the various social and artistic contributions made by Mills, and how various individuals in Harlem interpreted her status as a cultural icon. This approach would also expose the participants to various historical locations in Harlem, as well as a number of class and cultural attitudes among African Americans in Harlem during the time period. In my first attempt, the narrative opened with two women talking in front of Abyssinian Baptist Church. They were discussing Florence Mills, problems in Harlem and Abyssinian's contributions to the black community. It was only after I was into page four of my writing that I realized that these women had done nothing but stand in front of the church and talk for four pages. If they were just standing there, the participants viewing the narrative would have to stand there and listen to four pages of dialog as well, for dialog was really the only writing tool I had at my disposal. Unlike literary text, narrative in the virtual environment is much more like that in film. There are no interior thoughts to describe, as the scene unfolds, no descriptions of body language, impressions, etc. which could be written into the scene to add interest and detail. I realized that a straight narrative, which followed just two characters moving from location to location from beginning to end, would probably not be very interesting in a virtual environment. Short, segmented, self-contained scenes that leads the participants from one location and scene to the next would be more useful. But how would I incorporate Florence Mills, the subtext on which this narrative was to focus? I decided to approach the writing from the perspective of creating a "narrative montage." A narrative montage would allow flexibility and the freedom of movement through the environment, and could be interdisciplinary—incorporating art, history, politics, etc. as they relate to a specific theme. By definition a montage is the "process or art of creating a composite picture by bringing together into a single composition a number of different pictures." In the case of the Virtual Harlem narratives, miniscenes would be arranged so that they formed a blended whole, life in Harlem during the Renaissance period, while each scene would remain distinct. In keeping with the literary mechanics of story and montage, the overall theme for each scene and throughout the narrative would be Florence Mills.

The concept of "montage" seemed extremely viable when contemplating a structural form for narratives written specifically for a virtual environment. This form has been utilized in a number of other media. In motion pictures, montage is a process that produces a rapid sequence of very short scenes to show a rapid succession of associated ideas. Similar to the motion picture montage, the Virtual Harlem narrative would consist of a number of short scenes which were all related in their focus on either a specific his-

torical character (Florence Mills), a landmark (the Dark Tower), or an artifact (Crisis Magazine). Each image/scene of the montage would build upon or intersect the one prior to it, expanding the various ways in which the subject was to be viewed and contemplated. Also like film clips, these scenes would be short, replicating the rapid succession, in order to facilitate a sense of fluidity and movement through the environment. Although the virtual environment differs from that of motion pictures in that the latter is strictly voyeuristic and the former allows for experiences that extend beyond mere voyeurism into one that is interactive and participatory, and virtual environments allow for narrative experiences to be presented in a 3-dimensional form, similar to a stage play with the participant becoming an "extra" in the production, the end product would be similar. Since virtual environments consist of not only the visual, but also the aural as well, the ways in which montage is utilized in radio was also useful in providing a narrative structure. In radio, montage is a sequence in which voices or sounds break in on one another, blending to suggest activity, confusion, introspection, etc. This aspect of montage facilitates the sense of movement within the street scenes in the narrative, creating a type of "call and response" within the virtual environment.

Below I have included a scene/image from my narrative on Florence Mills. The narrative consists of six short scenes/images each focusing on some aspect of Mills, with the overall narrative creating a composite of Mills. This becomes significant, since Florence Mills does not appear until near the end of the last scene/image of her.

INTRODUCING MISS FLORENCE MILLS

ABYSSINIAN BAPTIST CHURCH:

Scene opens with Nora standing in front of the Abyssinian Baptist Church. Her friend Helena walks up. Both are attractive, well-dressed middle-class young Negro women in their early twenties.

NORA:

It's about time you got here. I thought we were supposed to meet at 1:00. So, what is it that you have to show me?

HELENA:

Girl, I'm so sorry. It was just too crowded at Madam C.J. Walker's Salon today, so it took longer than I thought. It seems like every Negro woman in Harlem was in there to get her haircut. Everybody that's Anybody wants their hair done up in a Florence Mills bob. Ever since she was featured in Vogue and Vanity Fair. But, can you blame them? She's so beautiful and fashionable. Not to mention one of the biggest stars in the world colored or white.

NORA:

Florence Mills is the cream. I've seen her in almost everything she's done—Shuffle A Long, the Plantation Review, Black Birds on Broadway, and Dixie to Broadway. She was wonderful in all of them. It was the best dancing and singing I've ever seen. She's amazing. When I first saw her perform, I couldn't believe all that music and energy was coming out of such a petite woman.

HELENA:

Yes, Miss Mills may be tiny, but she's a big presence on the stage. Well, since you're such a Florence Mills fan, what do you think? How do you like my hairdo?

NORA:

That's what you wanted to show me?

HELENA:

Yes. So, do I look like Florence Mills?

NORA:

I like it. It's very stylish. If I didn't know better I'd think you were Miss Florence Mills herself.
(Both women laugh)

HELENA:

Yes, it is kinda sassy. I took a picture in with me so they'd get it just right. (Takes picture of Florence Mills out of her purse. Close up of Mills photograph and hand holding it). Then of course, I had to stay a little while for TeaTime to catch up on the latest gossip. Tea Time at Madam C. J. Walker's Salon is the thing. It's so tres chic. While I was there I heard that while Florence Mills was performing over in England some royal Duke was at her show sitting on the front row every night. The two of them were also seen leaving together each night after the show.

NORA: (Sounding a little shocked)

Oh! I see.

HELENA:

Ah-huh. That was my reaction too. I know Florence Mills is a big star and all, but she's still a colored woman and she doesn't need to go forgetting herself over there in England. Anyway, how was your meeting? What's the good Rev. Dr. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. and Abyssinian Baptist Church planning now? More soup kitchens for the hungry, finding jobs for the jobless, or reading classes for the illiterate?

NORA:

The congregation is looking at buying more property to provide housing for the people here in Harlem. People are steady streaming up here from the South, and frankly there's not enough housing for everybody, at least housing that's decent and affordable.

HELENA:

That's the truth. They seem to just keep coming, and some of them are so backwards. Too, country for me, girl. Why, just the other day a man dressed in overalls with a chicken under one arm and a suitcase under the other was coming up from under the subway at one hundred thirty fifth street. He stopped me and says, "Excuse me ma'am, is this here Harlem?" I started to say, "No," and send him on back down south. Can you believe it! Live chickens in Harlem. And somebody needs to tell these young girls they can't wear those flour sack frocks up here either.

NORA:

I know. I'm trying not to look down on them or judge, but some of them don't seem to understand the first thing about appropriate behavior and respectability. It's important to the race if we're going to progress. They can't act the same up here like they did in the country. And I guess it's our job to educate them. Anyway, we're thinking about holding a fundraiser to help pay for the property. Maybe, a formal dinner with a performance by Mr. Roland Hayes. I have to find a location to hold it.

HELENA:

Why not hold it at the Renaissance Ballroom or the Rockland Palace?

NORA:

The Renaissance sounds like a good idea. It's a fairly nice place and in the neighborhood.

HELENA:

Why don't you go take a look at it now since it's right up the street?

(Following them, the user goes up the street. When user gets to the Renaissance Ballroom a smartly dressed woman in a suit is standing outside the front door along with a young couple. We would then pick up their conversation. This idea of moving in and out of scenes and entering in the middle of conversations continues throughout the narrative).

One of my goals when writing the narratives for Virtual Harlem was to create a type of "call and response" within the environment

between the narrative and the participants. The effect was not only to present information--"the call," but also a desire to write the narrative in such a way that it would elicit a "response" from those experiencing the environment. This response would come in the form of questions, which the narrative would evoke in the minds of the participants. This dialogic relationship was intended to stimulate further discussions and research on the part of the participants.

For example, in the narrative segment presented above, there is a point where Helen tells Nora that Florence Mills was seen "dating" one of the members of the royal family while she was performing in London. Neither woman approved. Hopefully, the response of the participants would be to wonder, "why?" Why was this seen as unacceptable behavior for a black woman during that time? Wouldn't any woman, black or white, welcome the opportunity to date a prince or duke? What do they mean by "Florence forgetting herself?" This brief moment was intended to initiate an examination of the racial, class, gender and sexual politics of the time. The black middle-class of the period sought full equality of opportunity with whites; worked with them on social and political advancement for blacks; counted many whites as friends of the race; and reflected white culture and values in their lifestyles. However, within the politics of black respectability, interracial romantic/sexual relationships were taboo, especially for black women. Florence Mills was crossing a line that was not acceptable to this class of blacks.

As a writer I found that the experience of creating narratives for Virtual Harlem presented me with two wonderful opportunities to expand my creative writing process. First, creating prose for a virtual environment, an environment where the technology is continually evolving, and having to consider the dynamics of "writing on" a three-dimensional space as opposed to a one-dimensional surface, caused me to contemplate new strategies for writing. I had to be highly selective in "what" was presented and find innovative ways for "how" it would be presented.

Inherent in Virtual Harlem is the idea of expanding the opportunities for cultural discourse. As a result, this objective was the impetus for my again rethinking the writing process. Typically when writing narratives, one wishes to raise questions in the minds of the reader, which the narrative will eventually answer. In order to expand the opportunity for further dialog, I made the decision to do just the opposite when I constructed the Virtual Harlem narratives. I created narratives that would raise more questions than they would answer, yet I had to do this in such a way as to also leave the participants with a sense of satisfaction and closure. From my perspective, I have found the experience of writing for a virtual environment challenging, however, like Virtual Harlem itself, it was also engaging and very enlightening.

Final Thoughts