INTRODUCTION:
Virtual Experiences of
the Harlem Renaissance

James J. Sosnoski

In an article, "Experiencing the Bonds of Slavery," Janet Ginsberg describes her participation in one of the nation's most ambitious museum programs: "Follow the North Star," a part of Conner Prairie, a 1,500-acre living-history museum north of Indianapolis in Fisher, Indiana. "Conner Prairie is rooted in history," says the museum's Marcel Riddick. "During the day, its an exquisitely detailed re-creation of an early 19th century prairie settlement. On a sunny autumn morning, gardens are bursting with pumpkins and squash, and smokehouses are filled with pork. Everyone seems industrious and content. But all is not goodness and plenty in this frontier Eden" (1D). The "North Star" program aims to provide a firsthand historical experience - in this case, of American slavery and the Underground Railroad. Janet Ginsberg describes her experience as a virtual slave at the museum. The Conner Prairie staff developed the North Star program to give people "an even richer and deeper experience - putting them in the shoes of the runaways" (1D), says Marcel Riddick, who also helped develop the slave-auction program at Colonial Williamsburg in 1994. (That program stirred controversy when civil rights groups complained the auction trivialized the slave experience. By contrast, North Star has been extremely popular.")

Janet Ginsberg gives us some idea of the "script" they enacted in this "living-history" museum. "We—11 middle-class professionals, men and women, black and white—find ourselves being sold—illegally—under cover of darkness in a field somewhere in central Indiana," Ginsberg writes, "The year is 1836, and our night's journey has just begun" (1D). She accounts her experience as a drama in which she finds herself playing the role of a slave who is sold and then runs away:

> "You! Get in front of the line! ... Get that face on the ground!"
>
> The man's voice is full of anger and whiskey. Although

I can't see him I can feel his cane - or is it a sword? - pressing into my back. I have been a slave for less than five minutes, and my owner is making sure that I and the others in my sad little party understand exactly how things are.

"Get over there, boy ... You sassin! me 'boy? Did I tell you you could look up?" A slave kneels on the ground, meekly presenting his hands for inspection.

"Ain't no calluses on those hands," a would-be buyer says with disgust

Our nervous laughter has evaporated into an edgy silence. We're dependent on these foul-mouthed, tobacco-spitting, gun-toting thugs, who are sizing us up as "bucks" and "breeders" while we move a pile of wood from Point A to Point B and back again.

We become so submissive that the traders put one of us in charge while they go off somewhere. Their parting words: "If you stop or they stop, you die" - punctuated by a shotgun blast.

We're still moving wood when a woman approaches, demanding to know what we're doing on her husband's land. There are I I of us, yet we follow orders, line up and keep our eyes down. The world has taken on a sur-real quality of soft shadows and hard words.

"In Indiana we've got two kinds of darkies," the woman says. "We've got free darkies, and we've got runaways. Let's see your free papers."

When we can't produce any, the woman curses us but leads us into a barn, where she advises us on finding our way to the Underground Railroad and freedom.

We have moved up in the world, from slaves to run-aways, and we'll spend the rest of the evening trying to hang on to our new status.

Our little band' of runaways learned that lesson as we tried to figure out which cabin with a light in the win-dow was the "good" one with the friendly Quaker fam-ily. No clue we'd been given seemed solid.

We are directed to the cabin of a free black couple, the Wards from North Carolina, who encourage us to keep heading north - to places such as Cass County, Mich., whose larger black community would make it easy to blend in.

> We have traveled in 90 minutes what might have taken months in 1836. But before we can return to the modern comforts of indoor plumbing and central heat we meet an older man sitting on a cabin porch, and he tells us our fates. One of us makes it up to Cass County. Another drowns in a river. Others are nursed by Quakers after injuries. Then the prophet points to me: "They capture you and take you back to your master. He brands you for running away. But you get away again ... and you make it to freedom this-time." My slave self, I think, is more courageous than my real self, and I wish her the best as I head back to my life in the 21st century. (1D-2D)

As Riddick notes, the living-museum staff developed the North Star program to give people "an even richer and deeper experience—putting them in the shoes of the runaways." We want to call attention to the fact that Janet Ginsberg and her fellow museum visitors were never slaves. The time was not 1836. They did not go to Michigan. Visitors to the living-history museum play the part of a runaway slaves; and, at the end of the evening, find out how their play ends. Ginsberg for instance, was captured and returned to her master. However, the living history museum in Fishers, Indiana can only give it's visitors a *virtual experience* of "the bonds of slavery." Yet, though not real, the experience of living history, as the staff guarantees, leaves a powerful impression on those who endure it.

The Virtual Harlem Project

Reading Janet Ginsberg's account of the North State program, it is easy to imagine oneself at a living history museum, playing a role as a slave. The role would be an uncomfortable one, and the continuous prodding and mistreating you'd suffer surely would provoke rather hostile feelings before long. One would, as Marcel Riddick assures us, find oneself "in the shoes" of a slave. Most likely, the experience would produce empathy for the plight of a runaway slave and it would, as Ginsberg testifies, allow one TO FEEL LIKE A SLAVE. We begin with this account of re-living history because it is similar to the experience of being immersed in a virtual reality scenario. Finding oneself encompassed by a scene, you feel that you are a part of it. When figures approach you and speak to you, asking you to behave in the way they wish you to behave, your feelings come into play despite the fact that you are not actually in a real situation. In a virtual reality scenario developed by Josephine Anstey at UIC entitled "The Thing Growing," a virtual woman approaches you seductively, only to become more and more demanding and insistent on getting you to dance in the way she wishes. In the end, most visitors become so frustrated with her behavior that they attack her, using a remote control device that

they have learned can make figures in the scene "disappear." We've known people in this scenario to begin shouting "let me out of here." Anstey intended to put the visitors to her VR scenario re-enact domestic violence. Our point is that virtual figures have real effects on people. Virtual Harlem is a form of virtual history; one can experience the past as if one were able to go back in time through a time-machine.

Imagine being able to incorporate experiences like the ones described above with students on a daily basis within almost any discipline and supplementing almost any text. With educational budgets being slashed at every level, we all know it is almost impossible to take our students out into the field every time we want them to experience something. Then there are other matters with which to contend, for instance, controlling the environment, directing the experience to match what we would like it to rein-force, and the ever looming risk of physical injury every time we take our students off campus. Educators have had to deal with these problems for years. Now, with the advent of technologies such as videotape, cable television, and the Internet, virtual expe-riences of history have become possible that do not require a field trip to a museum like Conner Prairie.

Computers in the classroom have extended learning experiences beyond its walls. Web sites for almost everything, containing a wealth of textual material, images, sound, allow us access literally to the world. Still, there is something lacking.   what is currently available online is mostly flat "two dimensional" and relatively detached. One of the objectives of the Virtual Harlem Project is to provide a virtual experience of the past that is closer to lived expe-riences.

We designed an experience that allows students to travel back in time to a recreated Harlem of the 1920s and 30s, interact with vir-tual characters, move freely about the city, assume different per-sonae, and have the environment intelligently respond to choices visitors make while navigating through it. We face many chal-lenges in building Virtual Harlem. Although computer speeds have increased, graphic quality has come closer to that which we see in real life, and artificial intelligence has become more sophisticated, we are not quite at the point where we can recreate life-like expe-riences through any computer interface. But we are making progress. Virtual Harlem represents not only the dream of a former graduate student from Missouri but also serves as a platform on which we anticipate the most recent multidisciplinary research and technology will be incorporated.

The Contents Of This Volume

This issue of *Works and Days* on Virtual Harlem is intended to introduce readers to potential of virtual reality as an instructional technology. Many of its contributors (see "Contributors' Pages") are specialists in technology. We have asked them to avoid technical terminology in their essays and to comment on the project in ways

that do not assume special knowledge of virtual reality models. We have organized the essays in the following categories: the history of the project, the technology involved, reactions to the project, related projects, art and drama in Virtual Harlem, and finally some perspectives on the Virtual Harlem project.

The history of the project begins with Bryan Carter's application to the Advanced Technology Center to create a Virtual Harlem. In "Virtual Harlem: In the Beginning…." Bryan Carter, who now teaches English at Central Missouri State University, describes the project and gives some of its history. Erec Smith's interview with Bryan Carter, "A Conversation with Bryan Carter," adds additional information. Some Humanists will be mystified that English professors and their students can work hand in hand with engineers because they may wonder why an engineer would be interested supporting humanistic research. William Plummer's essay, "Why Engineers are interested in projects like Virtual Harlem," offers answers from the Director of the Advanced Technology Lab at the University of Missouri, the person who accepted Bryan Carter's original proposal.

The next group of essays describe the technologies involved in the Virtual Harlem project. In "Descriptions and Illustrations of the Technologies Used in the Virtual Harlem project," Jim Pyfer, from the Communication Department at UIC, describes in understandable language the immersive virtual reality CAVE, video conferencing, and other communication technologies used in the project (accompanied by illustrations). Andy Johnson, Computer Science—Electronic Visualization Lab [EVL] at UIC explains how various VR technologies —the CAVE, immersa-desks, and VEILS — are designed as learning environments and explains what we are trying to discover about their effectiveness as learning environments in "VR as Instructional Technology: The CAVE as classroom."

Extending the discussion of technology but turning attention to its impact on endusers, Jason Leigh, Andy Johnson, and Kyoung Park, co-workers in EVL at UIC, study the impact of VR experiences on students in networked courses on the Harlem Renaissance at UIC and CMSU. In "Are Humanists Technophobic or is this a myth?," Richard Besel, Communication, the Unviersity of Illinois at Urbana, describes how attitudes toward technology manifest themselves in a learning environment that depends upon the use of technology. He analyses the responses of students in Jennifer Brodey's & Bryan Carter's linked classes on the Harlem Renaissance. James J. Sosnoski, in "Will new technologies impair the critical and imaginative capabilities of students?: Virtual Harlem, an experiment in learning environments," discusses Virtual Harlem as an instructional technology, focusing on the ways students have used it critically and imaginatively in the light of concerns about the potential negative effects of technology. Veronica Watson, who teaches African American literature at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, expresses the concerns of a Harlem Renaissance teacher who works at a university at which there is no VR equipment. Brenda Eatman Aghahowa, who teaches at

Chicago State University, describes her experiences as an African American Assistant Professor of English during the demonstration of Virtual Harlem to the MOBE group in "The Digital Divide and Langston Hughes: Bridging the Gap through the Virtual Harlem Project."

The next group of essays describe projects closely related to the Virtual Harlem project. In "Virtual Harlem in Harlem: The Harlem Renaissance 2001 Project," Bruce Lincoln, Columbia Teachers College, demonstrates that the Virtual Harlem Project is not limited to university classrooms but is a way of connecting the university to the community through a learning environment that both can share. For example, Virtual Harlem is a feature of the high tech Community Centers in present day Harlem. Marcelo Milrad, who teaches in the Mathematics and Engineering department at Växjö University in Sweden outlines the parallels between the collaborative learning network infrastructure of the Virtual Harlem project and the COLDEX project in Europe in "Parallels between the Virtual Harlem project and the COLDEX project."

The next group of essays describe the efforts of artists and creative writers to develop Virtual Harlem. The first essay in this group, "An Artist Moves to Digital" by Tim Portlock, who is in the Fine Arts department at UIC but also a programmer at EVL answers the questions: Why would someone in the Fine Arts who is a painter program Virtual Harlem? What are the differences between painting and programming? What are the constraints in each activity? The remaining essays in this group deal with dramatizing the events of everyday in 20's Harlem. The first essay by James J. Sosnoski and Tim Portlock, "Dramatizations of Everyday Life in Harlem during its Renaissance," proposes a narrative architecture for Virtual Harlem that would allow for dramatizations. The remaining two essays in the section, "Dramatizing the *Crisis Magazine* in Virtual Harlem" by Georgia Tappan and "Everyday Life in Virtual Harlem" by Janice Lively describe what it was like, as creative writers, to write a drama within the parameters of VR technology. Both Janice Lively and Georgia Tappan are in the Creative Writing program at UIC.

The final section of the issue attempts to place the Virtual Harlem project in perspective. It begins with a poem, "Virtual Rupture: An Experiment Upon An Experiment" by Duriel Harris (Creative Writing, UIC) that presents us with the reactions of an African American creative writer to the experience of Virtual Harlem. Through her poem, Duriel reminds us of the human dimensions of the Harlem Renaissance that no VR project can hope to capture. Ken McAllister's "In On the Job: *Praxis*, Critique, and the Evolution of Virtual Harlem" provides us with some cautionary notes on the Virtual Harlem project. Ken is heavily involved in technology at the University of Arizona but believes that persons working with technology must be constantly watchful. The allure of technology is great and it is all too easy to acquire a technology for its own sake mindset. This section ends with an essay by Steve Jones, who heads the Communication department at UIC, that looks ahead to

the future of new media like VR, "Virtual Reality Technology and the Future of Education."

There are two appendices to this issue, one is a selective bibliography compiled by Georgia Tappan and the other is a glossary of terms used in the issue compiled by Jim Pyfer. We thought that readers might appreciate having all of the works cited and some helpful references to VR technology that were not cited all in one bibliography. We also thought that a glossary would be helpful to readers who were not familiar with the terminology used by persons who work in VR environments.

The volume ends with a brief dialogue between us which we've called an "afterword."

Acknowledgements

Studies program at UIC, brought their students into Virtual Harlem to experience the Harlem Renaissance. Richard Besel interviewed them and studied their responses, a key aspect of the project since without student feedback we would have no way of knowing if the project was meaningful. Veronica Watson made a special trip to Chicago to review the project to give us a teacher's perspective. Brenda Eatman Aghahowa articulated the responses of many African Americans who have seen Virtual Harlem. For their commitment we are grateful.

Of course, you would not be reading these sentences if it were not for David Downing's perspicacity. For his commitment to the Virtual Harlem project, we are very grateful.

It has been our great, good fortune to have the opportunity to work on the Virtual Harlem project. We don't know of any comparable academic experience. For Jim, near to retirement, this is the culmination of a career in which he has seen teaching and learning transformed. For Bryan, at the start of his career, this is the beginning of a new way of teaching and learning. The Virtual Harlem project is many things—a think tank, a learning environment, an electronic classroom, a cutting edge textbook, a virtual publication of reseach, an experimental lab, a time machine. The feelings it engenders, we surmise, are akin to those the first aviators felt. For these experiences we are grateful to our collaborators.

Work Cited

Ginsburg, Janet. "Experiencing the Bonds of Slavery," *USA TODAY*. (February 2, 2000): 1D-2D.