Flora: A Study in Postcards

by

Travis Lesli Alber

Bachelor of Arts
English
Valparaiso University

A Thesis
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Master of Arts Degree

Department of Interactive Multimedia
in the Graduate School
Southern Illinois University
Carbondale
July 1999

Table of Contents

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Travis Alber, for the Master of Arts degree in Interactive Multimedia, presented on July 16, 1999, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: Flora: A Study in Postcards

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Maurice Methot

ABSTRACT:

We are surrounded by pieces of the past--concrete messages from lives that have gone before us. Yet these artifacts are largely ignored in our present world of planned obsolescence and digital communication. My project combines unsuspecting messages from a past life, my interpretations of those messages, and a computer interface through which to understand them.

In the summer of 1998 I discovered a number of postcards from the year 1947. They were sent by a twenty-something woman named Flora who traveled the United States alone, sending postcards to her family. The postcards moved me because Flora and I have many things in common: our ages, upbringing, and struggles, and because she traveled alone in that era. My project focuses on studying the cards, the notes they delivered, and my own impressions gathered from them. I was able to categorize the cards into four dominant themes: age, sense of place, time, and communication (primarily with family), and from those themes I created two separate storylines. The first storyline focuses on the death of a friend and the personal ramifications involved in such an event; the second story deals with the marriage of a friend and the tension between independence and love.

The project was completed as an interactive CD-ROM using Macromedia Director. My two objectives were: to create, with the aid of the real postcards, sound, graphic design, text, a believable Flora character, and to discuss my own feelings about issues presented in the storyline. My opinions were visible in Flora's writings, but were also presented on screens of their own. Using a computer allowed me to present other aspects

of the experience: the sounds gave a sense of place, the graphic design of the Forties gave a sense of time, the writings gave a sense of age and filial communication. My two objectives were accomplished in the creation of these elements.

Chapter 1: Inspiration

Late in the summer of 1998 a woman passed away in the obscure township of Henry, Illinois. I do not know how she died, or exactly when. I do not know her last name, nor can I guess her state of mind. I was not among people who seemed to mourn her passing.

As is often done in rural Illinois, particularly among those who grow old childless, her personal belongings were sold at public auction, that day presided over by Col. H. Prichard, of Lacon. The auction took place on a Saturday afternoon, and had all the trappings of a small-town cavalcade, replete with serious buyers, travelers, onlookers, refreshments, and society talk. Lunch was catered from a truck with the words "The Lunch Box," hand painted up the side in red, where servings of boiled hot-dogs and warm soda were sold for fifty cents a piece. The event took place on the woman's front lawn. All her "salvageable" belongings were up for sale; furniture, lamps, dishes, bicycles, old magazines, and carnival glass are good examples of the fare. The practical items sold quickly for most of the day: fevered antique dealers, having driven an hour or more, fed the bidding fury over resellable objects. The event lasted five hours, winding down around the hottest, slowest hours of an August afternoon.

Near the end of the day a box of the woman's personal possessions were presented to the crowd of number-waving bidders. I was surprised to see the bidding start at only four dollars. The crowd was distracted--disinterested in things they could not reuse or resell. The asking price seemed to drop steadily, and as encouragement, more things were piled on top of the stack. As I struggled to keep pace with the Colonel's calls, which shot

noticeably past the ears of restless small-town farmers who wanted nothing to do with the dead woman's personal belongings, I felt a swelling curiosity. I was curious about who the owner of all these things was, and why, after a lifetime of collecting, it was all being pawned off at a huge glorified garage sale. I wondered why all these people wanted to buy. I was curious about the reason for selling it all rather than just giving it away. Was it necessary to pay the bills of a woman already dead? Was it for a profit? Was it going on to provide a social event? I was concerned that no one but me seemed concerned about the reality of the situation--the auctioning off of the humanity of a past life. And my curiosity was also sadness, for the very same unexplained reasons.

As the first pile of belongings was sold for a single dollar, I began to pay more attention to what the personal items were. My eye came to rest on a short, faded pile of postcards. They were dusty to the touch, and yellowed. When I flipped the first one over, I found that it had writing on it, addressed to "Mother" from "Flora." The second was from Flora as well, and as I dug through the stack I was surprised to find that most of them had notes scribbled on the back, mostly from Flora, of Peoria, Illinois. I waited patiently until the stack was announced, and then watched as the price fell from five dollars to fifty cents. I bid one dollar. No one outbid me.

Picking up my winnings I stopped to reflect on the crowd around me. I understood the need for community, especially in such a small town. I also understood that death can represent freedom rather than perpetual sadness, and that this could simply be another way to celebrate Flora's passing. Perhaps the other bidders never knew Flora either, which would explain their disinterest. But I still felt conspicuous, as if I were caught looking through a neighbor's garbage, or reading a friend's diary, or digging through a stranger's lost wallet. My conscience's only saving grace was Flora's writing. I reflected that while these people rummaged through some stranger's belongings for purely materialistic reasons--passing judgment and placing value on old junk, I had purchased artifacts of a life. Instead of scavenging through the woman's life-long collection of "things," I was

blessed with snapshots from her life. I walked away from that afternoon with an honest, personal, "real" piece of this woman's personal history.

The cards become important because they validate a life, create a history. And they become more exciting because, much like the diaries of Anne Frank or Anais Nin, the cards allow the reader to know the more personal, idiosyncratic facets of the writer's character. The actions we do without thinking, the words that slip when we are comfortable and feel no need to censor ourselves, are often some of the most telltale examples of our character. The same is true of words jotted in passing; they are not consciously examined, lost in obfuscation for the benefit of strangers. Instead they are real.

Flora's cards are written in sentence fragments, in sometimes almost illegible handwriting. Sometimes they are written more to acknowledge the person they are sent to-- to let the receiver know that Flora is thinking of them. Others are written to try to capture the moment--the essence of a place or time or experience. Some of them are written simply as reminders to Flora herself. These "reminder" postcards are incredibly revealing, because they simply record her thoughts about a place or time for her own benefit, like a diary. These cards serve as placeholders to the memory, and often have only the most brief reminder on the back: "where we ate," or "cold." These thoughts, in combination with the pictures on the front, create a pretty decisive picture of part of a story, or, at the very least, a part of a personality.

From what shaky pieces of writing I can decipher from the cards, I have found that most of the cards came from Flora, and that they are addressed from all over the United States. There are at least two hundred fifty cards, spanning the years 1947-1951. About a third of the collection is blank, I assume they were collected along the way as souvenirs. Some mention people she's heard from: Elsie and Pearl and Mimi and James. Sometimes a "Billy" is included. I may never decipher who these people are, or what relationship they might have had with Flora. However, I cannot ignore the strong sense of time and place the cards, and their writings, represent.

My project focuses on studying the cards, the notes they delivered, and my own impressions gathered from them. I am aware that certain prejudices figure into the interpretation of these writings, especially obvious in the paradigm shift from a late-Forties traveler in a post-war world to my late-twentieth century upbringing. I will never be entirely accurate. There are some commonalties, in that we are of the same approximate age, from the same area of small-town Illinois, and have traveled to many of the same places. Even after fifty years there are many aspects of Peoria that have not changed, and those pieces of small-town life remain the same between us.

More importantly, the postcards are the only tangible part of these peoples' lives that I have, and I must fill in the pieces. None of the people mentioned in the letters were there to claim them--before I happened upon them they were only another piece of clutter to be auctioned off to the highest bidder. I see it as my job to give them significance again. I do not seek accuracy, but instead seek to create an understanding of who this woman appears to be and my reactions to her perceived experiences.

From the cards I hope to have built a narrative that not only addresses what Flora might have felt, but that also reflects my feelings. My feelings will be couched within the cards' dominant themes. Of the many themes I have found in the cards, the writing often reflects the person, the place, and the era. I have structured the writing by loosely dividing it into four major themes: travel (or sense of place), communication (especially between family), age, and time. These subjects represent the messages I feel are important in the cards. I would hope that these themes would act as guidance instead of tangible parts of a letter, however. Hopefully they will allow me to better understand who this woman was, and what her feelings were.

I chose the four major themes of time, age, communication, and travel because I want to discover how these themes affect me. I have two objectives. The first is to create, for myself, an understanding of who Flora is and to represent that to the best of my ability. I want to present a character that develops as the plot changes. My screens, meaning my

digital combination of visual, auditory, and textual content, should re-enforce character development. For the most part the project will reflect these changes through color, language, and music.

My second objective is to represent my own feelings, structured within the four aforementioned themes. Part of this draws directly from my commentary. However, it also draws from my writings of Flora's thoughts and personal writings.

The project does so well within this digital structure because the pieces, particularly the cards, are all modular pieces of a particular story. When I use the term modular, I mean to point out the fact that each screen represents a thought or idea within itself; one that can stand alone as a message. Although the story is incomplete without all of its parts, each part is in itself a singular idea. With each viewing the parts together tell a little different story; they relate to each other a little differently. The same main ideas are still there, however, as they have been for fifty years.

Chapter 2: Justification

I work in a transitory medium. Time passes. Work passes. Unlike the fate of paper and the work it catalogs, which rots slowly for centuries before total decay, the ability to view my project will most likely disappear within the next twenty years. Only a determined few who posses defunct technology will be able to look at it. I can accept that because every aspect of my career and graduate education is centered around the primitive computing machines and non-intuitive human-computer interfaces of the late twentieth century. Their imperfection, which I am all too familiar with, demands improvement and subsequent change. Current technology and the way in which we interface with it will pass on; to constantly seek a better and faster way is part of our culture and our education, and I do not dispute it. Part of the speed of change associated with interactive multimedia is generated by its infancy--of which I am happy to be a part. At this point in my life, and to most of the world at this time, the medium of interactive multimedia is exciting, engrossing, and to some, even inspiring. The desire to pursue new mediums of expression, to create multiform narratives and non-linear stories, and to be among the first to explore how these activities are most successful, is very rewarding.

Flora's postcards are a lot like interactive multimedia because they, too, are transitory. Postcards comprise a throwaway medium in themselves, they are meant to communicate the "now" to others, they are briefly read, and they are forgotten. Each card can represent a time, a place, an idea, a message, and a fragment of someone else's life--for a moment. Both interactive multimedia and postcards contain stories in a modular, transmittable fashion, and both are transitory in nature.

However, there is still the question of "why." What is the reason for creating this particular project with postcards in a medium that strips the concrete characteristics of touch and smell from them? After all, I cannot transmit the reality of the postcards themselves: the musty smell, the soft yet brittle feel of the paper, the weight and fragility of the cards. In place of these traits, however, I can represent a reality from within the cards themselves-- purely from what the pictures and words represent. I can add sound and movement; I can introduce more information than could fit on the postcard itself. In short, I can create an experience from within the card. Granted, it may not involve as much a sense of reality as does holding the card between your fingers; instead, it adds to the sense of what the experience might have been like for the writer herself. The person who bought and sent the card did not live in a two-dimensional world devoid of sound and movement, but in a world where life continued around her. My justification for producing this project in a digital environment is to represent the experiences beyond the concrete messages recorded on paper.

A second justification, perhaps less quantifiable, draws from my inspiration to create it in this medium based on how this medium processes messages. These postcards tell a story. Computers allow new ways of telling stories; I would even claim they aid in telling stories more conducive to the way in which human thought processes emotions and evaluates actions. Just as the cards are modular representations of the themes of time, communication, age, and travel, my project presents these themes in modular ways common to both the computer and the human psyche. These screens are modular and within them the writings and thoughts, which appear on the screen, are modular, too.

Chapter 3: Execution

The Cards

There were several steps in deciding which cards to use, what final plot should surround them, and in what order and style they should be presented. Over two-hundred fifty cards were available to choose from, so my first step was to limit the number of cards I was going to use to a maximum of thirty. I felt this was necessary to make sure I gave each card proper attention rather than cramming too many into the project in an effort to use them all. I wanted to make sure the project was built well around fewer key points. Therefore, the first move was simply a matter of taste: whichever cards "looked" the best to me, I chose. In each card that I chose I was looking for: a good representation of the time period in design and title, cards that present a vast array of different-looking objects, buildings and people, and, lastly, for cards from different areas of the country. I was able to rule out approximately half of the cards this way. I followed this same process three more times over several days, until I was able to reduce the number of cards to ninety.

With only ninety cards left I divided them into three piles according to what area of the country they were from: Eastern, Central, or Western United States. Next, I found a map of the United States and tried to lay out two possible trips originating from Peoria, Illinois: one trip was contained within the Central United States, the other covered a East Coast to West Coast trip. No Peoria card is included, so although they do believably originate from Peoria, the trips always begin with one of the first stops on the trip. The cards discuss train, plane and car transportation, so I used the map to make sure both trips were viable according to these three methods of travel.

After the cards were collected into two separate trips I further reduced the number of cards by allowing only one card from each city, and tried to vary the distance between the chosen cities by geographical location. This helped somewhat, but in the end I just had to choose to remove some of the cards from my list to make the project feasible. This final decision cleared the remaining few cards and brought me below my pre-determined limit.

<div style="text-align:center">The Narrative</div>

Although I had divided the cards into piles that I would use for visual effect, I wanted to be sure that I gleaned as much narrative from the cards as possible, so I gathered all the cards and typed in the text from each one. There was no need to attach the writing on the back to the proper postcard because the messages were so sketchy that it worked better to record them together and glean whatever I could from a mass of simple writings. Moreover, my creation of a narrative makes this project complete and I wanted to make sure that I had a hand in the message presented to the reader.

The messages presented to the reader follow two plot lines, which I commonly refer to by the letters A and B. Each plot line is independent of the others, and is associated with a particular trip. For example, storyline A is deals with the death of a friend from injuries sustained during the war and follows a trip through the Midwest, while storyline B is a coast-to-coast trip involving the marriage of a friend. The two storylines are presented in no particular order. The rational for this derives from the fact that memories are often associated with place and people long before we remember them chronologically. Therefore, it is fitting that the order of the trips should change slightly from time to time. Although the trips are presented in no particular order, the storylines themselves, i.e. the content and screens within storyline A, are completely linear. I designed the project to keep the screens within the particular story linear to ensure that the story itself, which not only

follows an event (like the death of a friend in storyline A or the marriage of a friend in storyline B), or a trip to a certain area of the country, but also an emotional progression. This character development and emotional progression is implicit in the colors and the thoughts that appear on screen, and although it is not blatantly referred to onscreen it provides another level of development.

My work with what becomes Flora's stories are related to what Janet Murray, author of Hamlet on the Holodeck, calls "multiform stories." Such stories involve simultaneous plot variations like a single plot-line in multiple formats, or stories that do not have a particular place for the beginning or end. One of Murray's examples is Milorad Pavic's Dictionary of the Khazars, which contains three "incomplete" dictionaries of religion in Yugoslavia. Pavic does not presuppose any order to the book; in fact, he suggests opening it at the beginning of any random section and starting to read, since all the parts of the book are interconnected. No part of the book is more or less valuable to the reader, so the order in which it is read is extraneous. Flora's original postcard snippets, coupled with the narrative that I wrote for Flora, as well as my commentary relative to whatever theme is going on in the card itself, is a kind of multiform narrative. Much like Pavic's book, either one of Flora's stories can be read first without compromising the integrity of the project. It should be noted, however, that while Flora's postcards are a kind of multiform narrative, the stories themselves are linear in nature. It is the ability to read either storyline first that makes it a multiform narrative.

Murray likens the multiform narrative to the disjointed nature of Twentieth Century culture. She suggests that the shift from a definitive universe to one enveloped in Einsteinian physics and ordered only by the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle replaces any reference to an absolute time and space (Murray 34). In that kind of environment the viewer doesn't really have a preordained order of events, and is much more willing to accept alternative viewpoints and an altered sequence of events. It is in this environment that Flora's cards create their narrative. Neither storyline is supreme; neither needs to come

before the other. Moreover, the input from the original cards, my fictional input, and my

self-reflective commentary all work in conjunction with each other to create a full story, a

multiform story.

My plotlines and content were gleaned primarily from the cards themselves. I

accomplished this by taking the postcard messages that I had typed in and grouping certain

themes by subject. From these subject groupings I created the four major themes of time,

age, place and travel as well as the two major plot lines of life/death and love/freedom. I

then created content based on my own experiences with these issues. To do so I first

looked to my creative license and personal writings. In addition, I looked to the

commonalties between Flora and myself. These common features included: being brought

up by an extended family, living our formative years in Peoria, Illinois, and being

concerned with the same issues of family health, death, war, and love. I sought to

extrapolate these commonalties to the plotlines, so that Flora dealt with the issues that I

have also dealt with: death and love.

The Design

Since I had little formal training in design it took a considerable amount of time to

create the project's look-and-feel. Most of my design history centers around the popular

digital design features of the late nineties. For example, I recently worked on a team to

create a contemporary, promotional CD-ROM for an eighteen to twenty-five year old

audience. The project included numerous free-floating animations, animated text, and

unanchored design elements that worked to surprise the viewer. These design elements are

indicative of interactive design, which often includes elements that float in space, that

appear randomly, and overlap. In short, late nineties interactive design is non-

representational. Compared to the pre-television era that Flora's cards were mailed in, an

environment where real-life metaphors were common and the design did not stray too far from the unimaginable, the design of the late Twentieth Century is entirely different. I have found Forties design includes comparatively little in the way of non-representational design. Forties design includes primarily vector shapes, straight lines, non-overlapping text, considerable amounts of writing, and prominently displayed people. Having spent most of my graduate career creating and emulating only what I had been exposed to, especially on the World Wide Web and television, the decade-specific design of the Forties was a real challenge that took weeks rather than days. There are places where I step out of the Forties constraints such as non-overlapping objects to enhance the cards themselves. For example, I often present a larger image in the background, or extra design elements to act as buttons. However, I try to make sure I do not stray too far in the overall composition in each screen.

The screens for my personal comments do not adhere to the Forties design style, but instead take a simplistic and futurist look-and-feel. I present commentary in this style for two reasons. First, this style represents the design, education, and era from which I approach the content. Second, I want to distinguish between the presentation of Flora's experiences and the presentation of my own. Such a distinction between the two provides a significant barrier and limits confusion for the reader.

The postcard screens are designed at a resolution of 640 x 480 pixels, while the project itself is designed for a 800 x 600 screen. I wanted to design for a fifteen inch screen, so I made the "design area" for the main screen 640 x 480 and allowed the difference for navigational devices. I do not feel obligated to design for the oldest machines that might be capable of running this piece because I feel that there is a point where technology needs to push forward rather than continue to support antiquated equipment. A fifteen-inch monitor is a reasonable expectation since it is the current standard and therefore the minimum screen size of my main audience.

The Screen Layout

The focus of each screen centers around a particular postcard and the message conveyed by it. Each screen therefore includes a postcard, a design scheme, a handwritten message (representing the writing on the back of the card), and Flora's thoughts. Sounds are used to re-enforce the message for each screen, often presenting music to underscore the mood, narrated thoughts that may not appear visually, or sound effects to underscore the sense of place. The sounds of the mode of transportation, the location, and the public conversation help to underscore the sense of place as well.

The handwritten messages for each screen were composed by creating a loose storyline, choosing an order of cards (as discussed earlier in this chapter), and attempting to write a part of the storyline in relation to each card. Dialog and the handwritten portions of each screen were composed in relation to the visual content and sense of place of the screen. The handwritten portions were governed by certain constraints, such as a minimum point size of 14, and a need for legibility (there needed to be an obvious difference between "a," "o" and "e"). This stage usually occurred during the design of the screen, if not before, as the design should in some way represent the message. Interaction is often the key to viewing the text. I included a mix of timed appearances of textual messages with a number of rollover texts, so that if all the rollovers are not used a portion of the message is still presented to the reader.

To keep track of all actions and interactions I used a storyboard pad. An example storyboard sheet can be found in Appendix A. For this particular screen I drew the major design elements and recorded the audio, action, interaction, and some text. The rest of the text was included on a separate sheet.

The Project Layout

A schematic of the project can be found in Appendix B. A brief introduction is set at the beginning of the project. It is followed by two linear storylines: life/death and love/freedom. Interspersed among these screens are screens devoted to my commentary. These are optional, mainly because I wanted to give the viewer the option of reading the entire story uninterrupted. The button leading to my personal comments appears and disappears according to the availability of commentary related to a particular screen. The commentary button consistently appears in the same area of the margin to enforce a pattern of recognition in relation to the content it represents.

I have also included buttons leading to a help screen, previously viewed screens, and an exit screen (credits). These options are accessible from any screen in either storyline. The help screen has a brief explanation of the two storyline options, and an explanation of the function of each button. The exit button quits the program via the credits. Forward buttons appear within the screen after a specified amount of time has passed, and use a design element already located on the screen. This element distinguishes itself by slowly glowing or shifting back and forth to alert the reader. Back buttons appear in the form of previous cards and are hidden in the margins. These buttons remain hidden until the reader rolls over them, and only the screens previously viewed are available. My reason for limiting the sidebar buttons to previously viewed content rests in the linear nature of the stories. I want to force the reader to read each story itself in order, so I therefore do not allow any "jumping" to content not previously read.

The Programming

       The project has been completed in Macromedia Director 7.0, for distribution on CD-ROM. It was necessary to use this version of Director because it allowed me to use alpha channels to expediate graphics production. Alpha channels store the transparency of transparent images, and it is much easier to import an image with a transparent background than to try to edit each image to include the correct background, or to alter the imported image by changing the inks. Director 7.0 is also better at producing a Shockwave version, allowing smaller packaging and better streaming for the web. I divided the project into four separate Director projects: "intro.dir" for the introduction, "life.dir" for the life/death storyline, "love.dir" for the love/freedom storyline, and "credits.dir" for the credits section. Of course, the viewer is not aware of this since the project has been made into a projector, but I wanted the project to run as smoothly as possible so I was careful to divide the content appropriately. The project has been built for a Power Macintosh 300 MHz processor with 32 MB of RAM.

Chapter 4: Assessment

Since this project was a creative, self-reflective endeavor, the personal objectives mentioned in Chapter I were always at the forefront of my mind. My first objective, to create an understanding of who Flora was through detailed character development, was evident in practically every aspect of the project. Her thoughts, presented to the reader in written form, often re-enforce her "written" character. Visually, Flora's moods were represented by the mood of the cards: their color, their graphics, and their content. Even the music selected was an exercise in character development. When all the different aspects of the interactive piece as a whole are considered, the project revolves around Flora's characterization.

My second objective, to represent my own feelings within the limits of the themes and plotlines, became an obvious part of the project through the selection of the plotlines for both A (life and death) and B (love and freedom). For example, in reference to storyline A, I have experienced the sadness of the death of people close to me and I sought to project that onto Flora. My most personal experience with death centered around the undignified deterioration and death of a boyfriend's father as a result of pancreatic cancer. Moreover, I have lived in fear of death for the last eight years, as my grandfather has dealt with the treatment and subsequent remission of both lung cancer and prostate cancer during that time. These experiences profoundly affected me. They forced me to question the meaningfulness of life, the existence of an afterlife, my own priorities and goals, my own mortality and the mortality of those I love. In turn I passed these questions on to Flora in the course of Billy's death. Although she comes to deal with the loss of life as I have done,

she does not answer her questions any more than I have done. Instead, and more realistically, she comes to terms with these issues, creating a more believable character.

Flora's reactions to death at her young age and according to her place and time were further enhanced by the influence of my grandparents. My maternal grandmother, Elizabeth Williams, suffered the loss of her mother while away from home at roughly Flora's age and during the same approximate time in history. Her experience helped me to further realize Flora's reactions to death. Moreover, Billy's character as a soldier was based on old war stories and recollections of my maternal grandfather, Glenn Richard Williams, a World War II veteran and a survivor of Pearl Harbor. His reflections on the places and people of that time, and the stories that they left behind, heightened my understanding beyond words. However, beyond these personal insights, the level of fear and loneliness and the process of healing presented in this project is universal. I used both aspects: the timeless nature that has affected my own experiences, and the losses suffered by real people during that era to build Flora's character.

Beyond satisfying my objectives, there were several things I learned about multimedia development from this project. I was forced to create a naming scheme for my media long before any programming began. The pre-programming phase was by far the most complex and difficult to manage, so I began prefixing all my pieces with the storyline and then screen number with which it is associated. For example, for a graphic that would be presented in storyline A, screen two, the name would be "graphicname2A.pct," making sure to keep the name under eight characters. By the end I had division-names for the introduction, credits, storyline A, storyline B, commentary A, and commentary B.

I also learned a considerable amount about design and how to research and represent different graphical eras. My design is usually good for the medium it represents. I understand the aggressive click-happy nature of the computer generation, the need for flash-and-sizzle and constant motion to satisfy a short attention span. But many of these elements were compromised by the era and mood I was trying to represent in this project. I

learned to not only research other design periods via textbook commentary, but to go directly to the source, if at all possible. Hence I found myself pouring over <u>Life</u> magazines from 1947 a number of times. I still designed for a younger audience; after all, the majority of people who view CD-ROMs are in the baby-boom generation and younger. I included numerous "Easter eggs," or hidden interactions, for the viewers to uncover, and tried to complement the click-happy compulsion via more appropriate channels like the uncovering of those "Easter eggs". However, I do not provide the intentional distraction the "MTV generation" expects from music videos. Instead I tried to strike a compromise and limit the non-representational design that would have been unfamiliar to Flora. That is not to say some screens are not more non-representational than others, but I did take "Flora's view" into account.

Finally, if I were to do this project over again, I would augment the timeline to allow more time for writing and audio. I felt it was often pushed aside by the two most visible elements of any interactive project: the visual and the programming.

The project itself was a very positive experience. Since my goals were, for the most part, personal, I feel like I have grown not only in my knowledge of the creation, design, and production of an on-line interactive creative piece, but also in my knowledge and appreciation of what has come before me. Granted, the formal educational experience taught me how to better appreciate the design elements of earlier generations by emulating them. I also learned better character development and representation through writing; and skills for telling a story visually. But I also became closer to my family, as I had innumerable questions for my grandparents about lifestyles in the Forties, and talked at length with my family about filial relations. Finally, I became a better person myself as I discussed issues that were important to me, ranging from: dealing with death, the loss of youth, the passage of time, the desire for freedom, and the need for companionship.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Since that unbearably hot August afternoon during the Summer of 1998 I have come to learn a lot about who Flora was. Perhaps I have not learned about Flora in an accurate, quantifiable way; but instead I have learned who Flora could have, or might have, been. I did all that I could do to revisit a forgotten life, and I did it in the best way for me, in a medium I understand and love. Moreover, from those memory fragments and fictional pieces I have furthered my own thoughts and feelings about my life, my priorities, and my future. I cannot help but wonder about all the postcards I have sent in my lifetime. Where are they? Has anyone saved them? Fifty years from now will someone read them and wonder about me? Will these transient afterthoughts one day be the sole indicator of my identity for another generation?

Such questions remind me of my great-uncle, whom I know only as Uncle Ells. A farmer and war veteran now in his nineties, Ells lives in the small town of Bellwood, Pennsylvania, near where he was born. He often seems lost in another time, somewhere fifty years ago. He is stodgy, chews tobacco, loves chestnuts, and is set in his ways. As a child of eight I decorated an Easter egg and brought it to him as a gift. The last time I visited Uncle Ells, I noticed a similar egg sitting on a shelf in his house. I picked it up, and to my surprise, it rattled, as if the inside was hardened by time. Upon asking him where it came from he scoffed and said, "Why, don't you remember? Humph. You gave that to me for Easter a few years back." I told him I was surprised that he still had it, and again he scoffed at my question and replied, "Well, of course I still have it. You gave it to me, didn't you?" I was amazed and flattered that such a incidental gift had been elevated to such

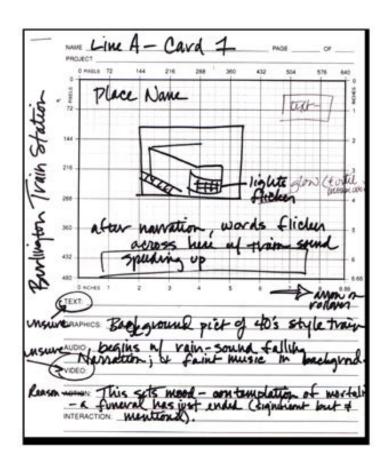a prominent place in his home, and that, fifteen years afterwards, he still remembered it and cherished it.

I can compare that to my family's search for ancestors in an attempt to fill out our family tree. While the Schmudde line can be traced back hundreds of years, my Alber lineage ends only hundred and fifty years back. In the struggle to understand where we came from, my family searches for names in old church documents, overturned headstones, and yellowed courthouse documents. Even if I pick up the search and work to restore my lineage, there is very little I have in the way of "people." A bullet from the Civil War and a letter from World War I help me understand these people in vague terms, but they have left me very little to work with except names. It is important, however, to remember that even those faceless names are important. After all, we all leave clues behind us that define us in some way; if not in the form of written words, then at least in the form of pictures, or even Easter eggs. It is up to the curiosity, reverence, and respect of the people who follow to bother to read them.
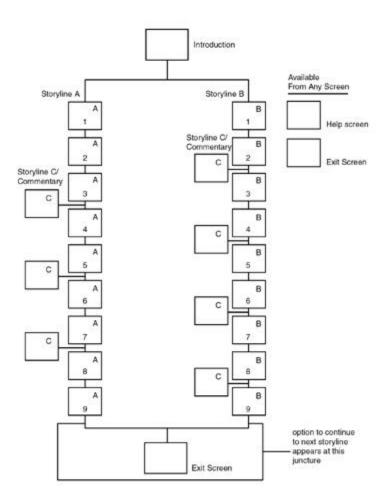
References

Murray, Janet H. (1997). *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in CyberSpace.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.

Appendices

22

Appendix A: Storyboard

23

Appendix B: Project Layout

Introduction

Storyline A
A 1
A 2
A 3
A 4
A 5
A 6
A 7
A 8
A 9

Storyline C/Commentary
C
C
C

Storyline B
B 1
B 2
B 3
B 4
B 5
B 6
B 7
B 8
B 9

Storyline C/Commentary
C
C
C
C
C

Available From Any Screen
Help screen
Exit Screen

Exit Screen

option to continue to next storyline appears at this juncture

VITA

Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale

Travis Alber   February 1974

2831 W. Pinehill Lane Peoria, IL 61614
talber@superfinedesign.com

Valparaiso University
Bachelor of Arts, English, May 1996

Thesis Paper Title:
            Flora: A Study in Postcards

Major Professor:
        Maurice Methot