

On Wings of Flame: Towards an Aesthetics of Augmented Reality Storytelling

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Foreword: On Critical Making and Comparative Media Studies¹

In 2014, I launched a series of explorations into “storytelling with the New Screens” as a Research Fellow at the Annenberg Innovation Lab at the University of Southern California. These New Screens included virtual reality, augmented reality, connected homes, connected cities, the Internet of Things, and so on, with the overarching research question being, “What is the future of storytelling?” Part of that work eventually became a triptych of spatial storytelling experiments: *The Lighthouse in the Woods*, *On Wings of Flame*, and *A House Out of Time*. Adopting a blend of “critical making” and “comparative media studies” approaches, these three projects investigated how to tell stories in physical spaces and with physical objects beyond such “traditional” methods as stages, actors or theme park settings, with an eye towards discerning the affordances of these media and how they might best be used by storytellers – especially transmedia storytellers – moving forward.

The “critical making” approach in my work differs somewhat from that of such scholar-practitioners as Matt Ratto and Stephen Hockema. In his writings with Hockema, Ratto, the director of the Critical Making lab at the University of Toronto, describes critical making as “an elision of two typically disconnected modes of engagement in the world — ‘critical thinking,’ often considered as abstract, explicit,

¹ NB: This entire document is meant to be one third of an eventual book, *Storytelling with the New Screens: Three Spatial Storytelling Experiments*. This foreword will appear at the beginning of the book, followed by three sections. The first section will be on my virtual reality storytelling experiment, *The Lighthouse in the Woods*. The rest of this paper will be the second section, on my mobile storytelling experiment, *On Wings of Flame*, with notes on how that might evolve into an augmented reality or holographic storytelling experience for platforms like Microsoft’s HoloLens or the Magic Leap. My final paper for IML.602 will be the third section of the book, on my installation storytelling experiment *A House Out of Time*. I’m including this foreword in both this paper for IML.605 and my paper for IML.602 to set the stage for what follows; feel free to disregard it in grading the rest of the paper.

linguistically based, internal and cognitively individualistic; and 'making,' typically understood as tacit, embodied, external, and community-oriented" (Ratto 52). I'm fine with this definition – in fact, I wholeheartedly applaud combining theory and practice, as I believe both suffer deeply in isolation – up until the very last words, “community-oriented”.

I believe Ratto and Hockema ascribe far too much importance to the social implications of making, as I do not agree that such a socially-minded desire is *necessary* for *any* kind of making, even critical making. Many artists create not for society, but to further their own development, satisfy their own curiosity, or sate their own simple need to create. True, just as many (if not more) may make out of a desire for social improvement, by which I mean either the improvement of their society or the improvement of their own standing within that society (if not both), but I to *require* being community-minded is, I believe, a failure to understand the breadth of the human desire to create. Many writers, Stephen King and Joan Didion among them, have said that they write not to *say* what they think, but to *find out* what they think. To my mind, making is frequently just such an act of discovery, both in the internal sense of discovering what the maker thinks, feels and believes through the work as they are making it, and in the external sense of finding out more about the capabilities and possibilities of the medium as they work with it.

To my mind, critical making should be thought of as a form of making that is particularly *mindful*, in much the same way that critical thinking is itself a very deliberate and careful mode of thinking. I embrace a model of critical thinking where it is not done so much as an adoption and implementation of a particular critic's model of thinking ("a Kantian critique of reason") or as an oppositional evaluation of a particular thing ("a critical assessment of the university") so much as a close, intensely present mode of existence. I have always appreciated critical thinking as the process of thinking carefully and mindfully about a subject under examination, analyzing and evaluating the topic at hand as one goes. To read more critically is to be mindful of what has been written, who has written it, why they

have written it, and how they have written it, paying close attention to such elements as symbolism, structure, character arcs and chosen terminology, whereas to read less critically may be more akin to traditional reading for escapist enjoyment, allowing oneself to be swept up in the plot and letting all the motivation, biography, scaffolding and technique fade away behind the dazzle of the experience.

If to think critically is to be mindful of the what, who, why and how of the work being experienced, then to make critically is to be mindful of the what, who, why and how of the work being made.

I believe this is useful in most forms of making (as living more mindfully is generally a better way to go, as per Socrates), but is exceptionally so when conducting a deliberate exploration into a new area of interest. Much as a naturalist explorer might fill their journals with illustrations of their discoveries to add new knowledge (again, for either personal or social gain are both equally valid motivations), so too might a maker fill their own journals with sketches of their own creations as they develop, including entries on the what, who, why and how of each exploration.

Similarly, I also adopt an explicitly “comparative media studies” approach in my work. As developed by Henry Jenkins and William Uricchio in the Comparative Media Studies program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, comparative media studies explores the context, culture and capabilities of media through comparison, such as contrasting television against film to understand the unique characteristics and opportunities of both. Through careful consideration of those differences it becomes easier, to manhandle Raymond Carver, to understand what we talk about when we talk about media.

Applying a “comparative media studies” style of critical thinking to one’s approach to experiencing media and a “media arts and practices” style of critical making to one’s approach to creating media is, I believe, the best approach to not just better understanding others’ works, but making one’s own works better overall.

Others' approaches may differ (as per Ratto and Hockema) but this is my personally preferred method, and is the one I have adopted for this particular work – as will be seen in the pages that follow.

I. Towards an Aesthetics of Augmented Reality/Virtual Reality Spatial Storytelling

Introduction: The Challenge

In the summer of 2015, I was invited to create a narrative app experience that would unfold as audiences moved through downtown Los Angeles. The experience would be delivered exclusively via users' personal mobile devices (e.g., phones, phablets, etc.), and neither the environment nor the people in it would react to the user's actions or choices. The only interactivity would come from how the user chose to navigate the city.

The Concept

In the experience I designed, *On Wings of Flame*, audiences are instructed to begin at the Pacific Electric Lofts building downtown. When they arrive, the app directs the user to start walking towards the Bradbury Building and prompts them to play an audio file on their mobile device as they walk. That audio file is a short scripted scene ("Prologue: the Pacific Electric Lofts") that introduces the main character (Gabriel Graystone, a onetime angel who now walks a fine line between good and evil as a private detective) and presents the user with his latest case. When the user arrives at the Bradbury Building, they are prompted to play a second short scripted scene ("1. Bradbury Building"), after which the user is presented with several choices as to where to go next. If they choose the correct answer, the mystery continues to unfold at the next stop. If they choose the wrong one, they are directed back to the right destination so the story can continue. Making too many bad choices results in too much wasted time, and the villains literally get away with murder.

It's a very simple mechanic, and as designed it satisfies an original super-challenge: to get people to experience a wider range of locations in downtown Los Angeles. Originally the experience was intended to be audio-only, and the story, while set in 1937, directed the user to places that either existed in 1937 (e.g., [Angel's Flight](#)) or deliberately evoked a mood akin to 1937 (e.g., [The Edison](#)). The main reason for the detective being a supernatural creature is to grant him a limited ability to see through time, which resonates with the audience taking a time-distorted tour of LA as well. The primary design goal here is to establish a mood through what is effectively an augmented tour, a la the Museum of London's Streetmuseum app [1].

The Findings

As I developed the script for *On Wings of Flame*, I began to realize two initial key insights:

1. Stories in media that fall on the "cool" end of a McLuhanian spectrum, such as those in text or audio that rely on the user's imagination for the visuals, are wonderful – but in this circumstance, the story is inherently "warmed up" by the real-world images. Since the real world is largely uncontrollable, whatever's happening in real time may be directly in conflict with the mood the story seeks to develop.
2. Writing a script that unfolds in scenes at particular key nodes ignores the vast amount of space and time existing between those nodes at its own risk. For an experience where users may physically walk from node to node, they may literally be physically exhausted before reaching the conclusion of the story.

This second insight is akin to the story in a video game unfolding in certain pre-scripted cutscenes between levels, an approach that has historically proven extremely divisive among players. Some players are driven by the story, and burn through the levels of the game as quickly as possible to find out what happens next. Others are more driven by the gameplay in those levels, and skip through the cinematic cutscenes to get to more of the gameplay as quickly as possible. Modern games experiment with these boundaries to try and find a sweet spot between the two (or in some cases, like Remedy's *Quantum Break*, double down on the cutscenes by effectively interspersing game levels with episodes of a lightly interactive TV show).

The solution may actually be found in theme park designs. As onetime Disney Imagineer Don Carson writes for *Gamasutra*:

One of the trade secrets behind the design of entertaining themed environments is that the story element is infused into the physical space a guest walks or rides through. In many respects, it is the physical space that does much of the work of conveying the story the designers are trying to tell. Color, lighting and even the texture of a place can fill an audience with excitement or dread. [2]

The problem is that video games and theme parks are both (more or less) controlled environments. Imagineers go to great lengths to architect visitors' experiences that connect the main attractions in Disneyland and Walt Disney World, ranging from the overt (multiple specific options for food and souvenirs along the way) to the subtle (the use of sounds and smells and textures that blur into each other as they move from specific land to land). Little such control can be exerted over real-world environments, especially those connecting distinct nodes in downtown Los Angeles.

The closest one might get to a semblance of such control is to move beyond the audio-only approach I initially took for *On Wings of Flame* and move more towards a

mix of audio and augmented reality video overlays. Not only will this allow for more continual immersion in the storyworld between each node, instead of asking the audiences to jump in and out of immersion as they walk from node to node, but it will also make the experiences at each node that much richer.

Augmented reality (AR) technologies like Microsoft's HoloLens or Magic Leap will provide spectacular location-based AR experiences outside the home (once they achieve a sufficient level of brightness to be experienced in direct daylight and a sufficiently simplified level of hardware that it can be worn in public unobtrusively), but even so, such "geomedia" or "geotainment" experiences, as Thielmann calls them, may be as limited, and as expensive, as theme park attractions [3]. This led me to a third key insight:

3. Only a strictly limited number of people may ever experience a truly geo-locked experience like this one. If this is true, then it may have an insufficient business model to support the development of visual assets of a sufficiently "cinematic" quality.

It is easy to compare location-specific AR experiences to live theater, and location-agnostic virtual reality (VR) experiences to film (with some crossovers, like the VR theme park 'The Void' in Utah [4]), but AR experiences may be even more difficult to scale than theatrical experiences because at least theatrical performances can tour. As much as proponents of AR may insist that such experiences will dominate the post-cinematic media landscape, this inherent limitation of the possible audience size may kill the medium before it can ever take off – or, at the very least, make it prohibitively expensive for most audiences (again, akin to a theme park or live theatrical performance) and keep it from going "mainstream". An AR experience that is reliant upon a particular building at a particular location will be locked to that particular building at that particular location, thus dooming its ability to scale.

Or does it?

As I developed *On Wings of Flame*, I began concocting workarounds to this challenge, which may make for some interesting bedfellows moving forward. One option is to create AR experiences for locations that are almost perfectly replicated from instance to instance, such as chain restaurants like McDonald's where franchise owners are frequently themselves given a limited menu of architectural models to choose from. Such perfectly-replicated buildings can easily support perfectly-replicated AR experiences.

A second option is to use services like those of Factual, an LA-based startup seeking to provide extremely specific information on both the physical layout of a location and the context surrounding it. This information, coupled with advanced volumetric scanning technology akin to that used in Microsoft's Kinect and Google's Project Tango, can allow for an AR experience designed for one specific context to be lightly tweaked to allow it to exist in another one. This can become even more specific when coupled with publicly-available big data sources, like the blueprints for one's house. It might be a privacy nightmare, but it's easy to imagine a user scenario where, instead of walking a Tango handheld device from room to room in your house to give the system the lay of the land, you instead typed your address into a search field and it pulled up your architectural blueprints on file with city hall.

A third option is to revisit the history of media and rethink the relationship between AR experiences and VR ones. Our current working definition of "augmented reality", and how we distinguish it from "virtual reality", goes something like this:

Augmented reality (AR) is a live, direct or indirect, view of a physical, real-world environment whose elements are augmented by computer-generated sensory input such as sound, video, graphics or GPS data. It is related to a more general concept called mediated reality, in which a view of reality is modified (possibly even diminished rather than augmented) by a computer. As a result, the technology functions by enhancing one's current perception

of reality. By contrast, virtual reality replaces the real world with a simulated one. Augmentation is conventionally in real-time and in semantic context with environmental elements, such as sports scores on TV during a match. With the help of advanced AR technology (e.g. adding computer vision and object recognition) the information about the surrounding real world of the user becomes interactive and digitally manipulable. Artificial information about the environment and its objects can be overlaid on the real world. [5]

However, what if we're making the same mistake about AR that we made when television was first invented? When Rignoux and Fournier debuted their early proto-proto-prototype of transmitting images in Paris in 1909, the understandable concept model was something like radio for visuals (as compared to Alexander Bain's proto-proto-prototype fax machines for still images in 1843-1846, which could be likened more to a telegraph for single images). Twenty years later, when Farnsworth and Zworykin were both experimenting with transmission of images electronically using cathode ray tubes, the focus was still on *liveness* – but now only a tiny fraction of televised content is done live. Outside of sports and news broadcasts, liveness has become something of a gimmick.

If we remove liveness from the definition of augmented reality, then it's a short leap to also removing the requirement that the audience be in that precise location, instead using something like a VR headset to be virtually there. According to Tristan Thielmann, an augmented reality experience that does not need to be experienced in a particular fixed place or time still qualifies as "locative media":

The term "locative media," initially coined by Karlis Kalnins in 2003 (see Hemment 2006b; Tuters and Varnelis 2006), seems to be appropriate for digital media applying to real places, for communication media bound to a location and thus triggering real social interactions (Varnelis and Friedberg 2008). Locative media works on locations and yet many of its applications are still location-independent in a technical sense. As in the case of digital

media, where the medium itself is not digital but the content is digital, with locative media, the medium itself might not be location-oriented, but the content is location-oriented.

When we remove the requirements that an AR experience be live and/or geo-locked, we can instead start to think of AR more directly as *the aesthetic or technique of augmentation*, the superimposition of secondary information or other imagery upon a dominant primary image. In such a circumstance, AR might have more in common with the heads-up displays (HUDs) used in video games like *Halo*, which themselves co-evolved with military applications, and, most directly to the point I want to suggest, to "mixed reality" films like *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* and, well, increasingly every film to come out of Hollywood since *Star Wars: Episode I*. Put this way, the idea of using computer-generated imagery to augment otherwise "real-world" photography becomes downright mundane. The trick, however, may be to do so in such a way that allows such superimposition to seemingly happen in real-time according to how the audience chooses to move and where they choose to look – however, not attached to a live feed, but set within a photographically-generated, pre-recorded environment.

In other words, it leads us to imagine AR experiences in VR.

To my mind, these two "new screens" are nowhere near as distinct as people seem to want them to be, especially those invested in, well, investing in one technology over the other. It is easy to imagine a future in which everyone wears ocular displays with a shifting opacity, similar to those used in transition eyeglass lenses now. Instead of moving between clear glass in low light and shaded glass in high sunlight, however, such headsets would be able to shift between displaying augmented reality overlays over top of real-world, real-time "inputs" as the user moves through the world, but can shift at a touch to a fully opaque virtual reality headset once that user settles into a chair, or enters some otherwise safe environment (such as a "Holodeck" or CAVE-style room).

Imagine a scenario similar to our current situation with sporting events. A handful of people in the right place at the right time and who are sufficiently wealthy to afford the tickets will experience "live" augmented reality experiences "on site," so to speak. These audiences would be able to experience *On Wings of Flame* walking through the real downtown Los Angeles. However, those of us who cannot make it to Los Angeles due to constraints of wealth, time or health may also experience a version of *On Wings of Flame* through virtual reality headsets. I believe audience preferences will be divided between the two options, in much the same way that some people prefer the comforts of home to the crowds, weather and \$12 hot dogs of sports stadiums.

Here, then, is the sticky wicket: if AR is so easily transported into VR effectively through time- and location-shifting, what then are the unique affordances of AR versus VR? Is it merely the superimposition of CGI elements onto a photographic backdrop, with the audience given control over the camera? If this were true, then any mixed-reality content experienced in a 360-degree environment like VR would be a type of AR, which I'm reluctant to assert. It's easy to imagine James Cameron developing a version of *Avatar* that does precisely that, but calling that an AR experience feels like a stretch.

Perhaps it remains necessary, then, to leave liveness and geo-locked presence in the real world as necessary conditions for something to be called AR, as a live 360-degree video stream with AR-style augmentations consumed via an Oculus Rift in one's living room still feels more like VR than AR. These distinctions may be sufficiently well-entrenched and of insufficient ROI to be worth rattling those particular cages.

However, what may be more beneficial is rethinking how we script AR experiences so that they can be adapted into VR experiences, in much the same way as live sporting events are architected now with one eye on how they might be experienced

on television, or as feature films are now being created with one eye on how they might be reworked to play in China.

For example, as outlined above, an AR experience may need to design interstitial pathway experiences that connect the dominant nodes in the storytelling experience (in other words, it may want to design the user experience of the 10-minute walk between two locations). The same experience adapted for VR may have more film- or television-like expectations, and cut from important node to important node. An experience meant to be experienced either way will need to be enjoyable under both circumstances.

This leads to a fourth, particularly key insight:

4. If an experience is intended to be consumed as both an AR and a VR experience, storytellers may need to create what are, in effect, collapsible stories in much the same way as storytellers create tiers of experience in intertextual, transmedia story experiences. What you experience as you walk from node to node enriches how you enjoy and understand the key narrative points at those crucial nodes, but if you don't experience those connecting "expanded" scenes, you can still have a satisfying story experience.

This also leads to a fifth, slightly less impressive but still useful insight:

5. Unlike film or theater, audiences at an augmented reality experience may not have the option to sit down. Therefore, "write tight" takes on even greater importance: those nodal scenes must be kept short and highly compelling, as audiences may be unwilling to simply stand around for ten minutes or more.

To veer away from the more utilitarian affordances of AR/VR and back again towards the more artistic or aesthetic ones, what are other affordances that a storyteller may wish to leverage when creating an augmented reality experience?

Based on my personal experience envisioning the AR version of *On Wings of Flame*, such augmentations might include the following.

Create characters or objects that aren't really there. This is basic, but placing a fictional element into a non-fictional location is the first step towards AR storytelling. In multiple instances in *On Wings of Flame*, I had my detective approach and converse with such other fictional characters as Althiel at Angels Flight (scene 3A), which, in an AR environment, would necessitate a full 3D rendering (or recording) of an actor superimposed onto the real-world scene.

Create "windows" to look into sealed buildings. In multiple instances in *On Wings of Flame*, a scene unfolds in particular room inside a building, which, shy of owning the building as in certain installation theatrical performances or alternate reality games like *The Institute*, *Sleep No More* or *Then She Fell*, might prove impossible. In an augmented reality experience, however, the audience may remain standing outside a building while the UX might call attention to a particular window; when the audience focuses on it, a "zoom" effect may pull a view into the room out of the building and down to the sidewalk in front of the audience member.

Nest augmentations inside of augmentations. Again, I created my protagonist as a supernatural creature to give him the ability to see through time, much as the audience is seeing through time to this adventure in 1937. In one scene (5B) our detective uses his supernatural powers to look back in time to see (what seems to be) the murder occur:

I carefully made my way around the edge of the room until I was standing in a corner, safely away from all of the detective's men. And then I opened my eyes to see.

If anyone had been close enough, they would have told you that my eyes had turned silver – not just the normally gray irises, but the pupils and whites, too, all as shiny as twin balls of mercury. That's what angels' eyes look like when we're peering through time.

As for what we see, well, that's another matter entirely. Have you ever seen Eadweard Muybridge's photographs of a horse in motion? That big grid of frozen moments, spread out and placed side by side, so it makes up a giant mosaic of time? It's like that, with right now in the center, and the past and the future stretching out around it. I looked forward, and I caught glimpses of what the place would become, new lives lived there. Then I looked backward, and I saw empty air – too far, too far. Only glimpse back a little bit, only a few hours, not a few decades...

And I saw it. There.

I saw the so-called Angel of Death, the Assyrian griffin with wings of fire, burst into the room like a comet. It shattered one of the windows, the fiery corona surrounding its body instantly setting the curtains and anything else it touched aflame. The monster was the size of a healthy German shepherd, with a wingspan of a good six to eight feet across, so the entire room was engulfed in fire within seconds. It swept through the room, then hovered over Stark's inert body, and touched its beak down onto his face like a dog licking its master. I watched the fire sweep over him and swallow him up completely, and then I heard the monster screech and explode back out through another window as quickly as it had come, leaving the apartment a furnace in full roar and trailing fire across the Los Angeles sky...

Such an effect might be achieved by a similar "windowing" effect as described above, only in this case it's a window peering through time instead of space.

We are right at the beginning of an emergent language of AR/VR storytelling, and, much as the language of cinema (mise-en-scene, close-ups, jump cuts) emerged as cinematic storytellers learned from one another, so too will post-cinematic storytellers learn from one another as they develop solutions to narrative challenges, as described above. For example, another element for a storyteller to consider:

Heighten the unreality of the augmented reality elements. I very deliberately set *On Wings of Flame* in 1937, partly because in an augmented reality version any actor superimposed onto the real world would be dressed in such a way that it was clear they were an actor (or perhaps a hipster). However, that same effect might be amplified by giving all the AR actors a deliberate look, such as a faint shimmer. It'll be some time before AR systems are robust enough to truly nail the lighting in any given scene, so all such actors or objects may appear otherworldly for a good while yet, but it's also easy to imagine storytellers using this deliberately to direct audience attention as desired, much as key interactive characters in video games like *Assassin's Creed* are frequently depicted with a distinct glow.

Conclusion: Next Steps

In the pages that follow, I've included the script for Act I of the original audio-only version of *On Wings of Flame*. As of this writing, the developer kits for both Microsoft's HoloLens and the Magic Leap have yet to be released. When they are (currently expected to be sometime in 2016), I'll be able to test the feasibility of the approaches I've outlined above. As each will be a 1.0 product, my expectations for both are somewhat low (according to all reports, the HoloLens is not even expected to work outdoors), but developing some basic prototypes on each of these New

Screens should provide some insights into where this new form of post-cinematic storytelling is headed.

In many ways, augmented reality storytelling gets the closest to what storytellers have always done: make us see the world differently. It is impossible for anyone to see Dublin the same way once they've read Joyce, or to see London the same way once they've read Rowling. These new technologies promise to enable storytellers to make those re-imaginings and re-interpretations explicit, overlaying their unique visions onto real-world spaces and literally changing the world before the eyes of their audiences.

It's an incredibly powerful promise, loaded with both potential and danger. Some critics believe that virtual reality presents a terrifying opportunity for audiences to become completely lost in fictional universes, but I'd argue that augmented reality offers a much more insidious possibility: that immoral storytellers might create augmented reality experiences that literally step between us and reality, not just splicing in animated fictional creatures and the like as described above, but splicing in augmentations or annotations of reality as they want us to perceive it.

This leads to the next great question: who will have read-write access on the world? Some augmented reality artists are already experimenting with augmented reality graffiti, as in BC "Heavy" Biermann's "The Pirates of Wall Street," a 2012 piece in which he superimposed the faces of such Wall Street criminals as Bernie Madoff over the faces of the characters in the movie posters for *Pirates of the Caribbean*. [6] Would Disney have granted Biermann the rights to use their ads as the basis for his art? It's not likely. J.K. Rowling is already working up the next story in the *Harry Potter* universe as a stage play, so it's not a huge stretch to imagine that she might want to experiment with augmented reality storytelling, superimposing a "leaving for Hogwarts" story onto the space between platforms 9 and 10 at Kings Cross Station in London. Would the people who run the train station welcome hordes of *Harry Potter* fans descending upon their station to experience that story, blocking

traffic and disrupting business? Again, most likely not. However, denying Joyce the right to “reinterpret” Dublin would have in turn denied us the possibility of ever experiencing some works of great literature, so should the city of Dublin have the right to decide who can and cannot write about it? Should the owner of a physical space have the right to decide who can and cannot overlay AR stories onto it? Are those two questions really that different?

Again, we are at the very beginning of a new era of storytelling, and the next few years will prove both extremely informative and extremely formative. In these pages I’ve described a few insights I’ve already discovered just by working through AR storytelling as a thought experiment; I can’t wait to see what else I discover once I get a chance to play with the real (unreal) thing.

Endnotes

1. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-2567739/Streetmuseum-app-creates-hybrid-images-London.html>
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2. The Story: *On Wings of Flame*, Act I

Elevator Pitch

The Maltese Falcon meets *Wings of Desire*, as if written by H.P. Lovecraft.

Story Synopsis

Los Angeles, 1927. Gabriel Graystone is an angel determined to stay neutral. To do so, he's set himself up as a private detective, helping enough victims to stay out of Hell and hurting enough villains to be kept out of Heaven. When Graystone is hired by a beautiful woman to find out who killed her father, he soon uncovers a bigger plot tied to a dead professor, a missing Assyrian statue of a griffin with wings of flame, and a string of murders by arson stretching across the city...

Experience Synopsis

On Wings of Flame is a noir detective radio drama designed for mobile devices, which changes based on how the user physically moves through Los Angeles.

At the end of every scene the user is presented with three choices: a "thorough" choice, an "efficient" choice, and a "misstep" choice, although it's only clear which one's which if the user reads the chapter carefully. Each choice directs the user to another location in Los Angeles. If the player chooses the "thorough" choice or the "misstep" choice, at that scene's conclusion they'll get redirected to the "efficient" choice's location, so the user has to experience the "efficient" scene to proceed.

If the user collects all the "thorough" scenes, they'll enjoy a deeper, richer story experience, and pick up on more clues to other stories in the overall *Gabriel Graystone* storyworld,

perhaps even unlocking additional exclusive content or other rewards along the way. This is the equivalent of earning “bonus points”.

If the user only hits all the “efficient” scenes, they’ll understand the story, and perhaps be rewarded for being such a quick sleuth, but they won’t have as deep or as rich an experience.

If the user hits too many “misstep” scenes, they’ll still experience the “efficient” version of the story, but will receive the “bad” ending.

Prologue: The Pacific Electric Lofts

To be played while the system guides the user from the Pacific Electric Lofts to the Bradbury Building, but it also allows this story to start from anywhere.

[Note: all of Gabriel's lines with “VO” are him acting as the narrator, and should have a very slight effect applied in order to make it clear when he’s talking to the audience, and when he’s talking to other characters. Think Garrison Keillor in GUY NOIR, PRIVATE EYE.]

GABRIEL GRAYSTONE (VO)

Aquinas, Chillingsworth, and all those philosopher types got it wrong. The question was never, “How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?” The *real* question is, “How many angels can balance on the edge of a razor?”

Let me tell you about a balancing act I call, “On Wings of Flame.” Head on over to my office in the Bradbury Building and we’ll get started.

[This next bit is triggered when the user starts walking.]

GABRIEL (VO)

Los Angeles has been called the "City of Lost Angels" since the day it was founded, but lost to whom? Lost to Heaven? Lost to Hell? Or maybe to both?

What if I told you that not all angels want to stay in Heaven, but that not all of the Fallen tumble all the way to Hell? That some angels love the in-between, and would do everything in their power to stay on Earth, halfway between both Paradise and Perdition?

Luckily, angels *do* have power, a very *specific* power: angels exist ever so slightly outside of time. They can steal little glances backwards into history and peek forwards into the future, along the thin strands of causality and consequence that weave *everyone* and *everything* together. That's how the good ones know *just* when a soul is suffering its darkest hour and most needs to be saved, and how the bad ones know *just* when a soul is teetering on the tipping point of damnation and only needs the slightest little push...

Most of these angels just keep their heads down, and use their powers to avoid being noticed by knowing where, and when, nobody's looking. But every so often one goes on the offensive, using its powers to help enough victims to keep out of Hell – and to hurt enough villains to stay barred from Heaven.

These lost angels walk the streets of Los Angeles. They walk with you, beside you, before you and after you, and they savor every careful step along that razor's edge.

My name is Gabriel Graystone. I'm a detective. And I have *excellent* balance.

[Music cue: sad saxophone or lonely trumpet, playing Gabriel's Theme.]

Act I: A Detective Downtown, Downtown LA

1. Bradbury Building (default)



GABRIEL (VO)

It began, as tragedies usually do, with a beautiful woman walking into a room.

In this case, the woman had hair as red as a house on fire, mascara the color of ash and eyes as cold and gray as tombstones. The room was the tiniest, filthiest, nastiest flat in the building. It also happened to be my office.

RUBY

Thank you for meeting me, Mr. Graystone.

GABRIEL

Always happy to help a lady in trouble, Miss Calloway, especially when I can charge by the hour. What's this all about?

RUBY

Please... Call me Ruby.

GABRIEL

She lowered herself into the cracked leather chair across from my desk and crossed a pair of long, lovely legs that would've made Michelangelo throw down his chisel in surrender.

RUBY

It's my father, Thadeus. I was out late last night with some girlfriends at the Edison Club, and when I came home I found him in his library...

GABRIEL

I'm sorry for your loss, Miss Calloway, but murders are extra. On account of having to deal with... Y'know. Murderers.

RUBY

I never said he was murdered.

GABRIEL

You didn't have to. If it'd been a heart attack that got him, you wouldn't be talking to me. What did the boys in blue say?

RUBY

That someone plugged him, Mr. Graystone. Twice, in the chest. Detective Patrick from the LAPD said it was a botched robbery, but...

GABRIEL (VO)

She took a small piece of paper out of her purse and slid it across my desk. On it were scrawled three words: WINGS OF FLAME.

RUBY

It's not my father's handwriting.

GABRIEL (VO)

She reached back into her purse, pulled out a fat envelope, and slid it across my desk to rest beside the note.

RUBY

That'll get you started. There's more where that came from, once you find the bastard who killed my father.

GABRIEL

I never said I'd take the case.

RUBY

You didn't have to. If you didn't need the money, you wouldn't be talking to me.

GABRIEL (VO)

With that, she turned on her heel and disappeared out my door. I kept the smile off my lips until she was gone. If only she knew.

I chewed over my options as I pulled on my coat. I could go grill my old pal Detective Patrick at Police HQ, since he still owed me a favor. Or I could go double-check Ruby's own alibi at The Edison. I never could trust a redhead.

Decisions, decisions.

CHOICES

>> Check Ruby Calloway's alibi at The Edison (*thorough; go to 2A.*)

>> Talk to Detective Patrick at Police Headquarters (*efficient; go to 2B.*)

(Note: There's no misstep in this first scene.)

2A. The Edison (*thorough*)



GABRIEL (VO)

I slid onto one of the leather-topped mahogany stools lined up like a firing squad in front of the Edison's main bar. The bartender, a willowy young man with a nose like a mountain, sauntered over and flashed me a toothy smile.

BARTENDER

What'll you have?

GABRIEL

Information. Did you serve a young lady last night with gray eyes, red hair down to here and a neckline that probably plunged down to here? Hanging out with some other girls?

BARTENDER

Oh, yeah. Real Clara Bow type. She was in here, all right, but I don't remember her being with any other girls. Naw, she was tossing 'em back with this real nerdy-lookin' older guy until this reporter fellow swooped in outta nowhere and snapped their portrait. That pissed the nerdy guy off something fierce, but by the time we'd all blinked the stars out of our eyes from the camera's flash, the reporter guy had split.

GABRIEL

Any idea where the unhappy couple went after they left?

BARTENDER

The nerdy guy was pretty upset, so I think they both said something about calling it a night. You sure I can't get you anything to drink?

GABRIEL

Nah, that hit the spot.

GABRIEL (VO)

I tossed a couple bills on the bar and hit the bricks. It was time to pay old Detective Patrick a visit.

CHOICES

>> Talk to Detective Patrick at Police Headquarters (*go to 2B*)

(Note that there's only one choice here, redirecting the player back to the "efficient" step.)

2B. Police Headquarters (*efficient*)

DET. PATRICK

Graystone. What the hell do *you* want?

GABRIEL

Always good to see you too, Detective Patrick. I'm here about the Calloway case.

DET. PATRICK

What case? Old rich guy gets plugged twice in the chest by some would-be robber that didn't expect to find anyone home, that's all there is to it. I got a witness who saw a guy built like a tank hightailin' it from the scene with a .38 in his hand and a black ski mask on his face. We recovered a ditched .38 at the Angels Flight not twenty minutes ago, and we're having it checked out now. From the witness' description, I'm betting it's registered to that prick Joe "The Mongol" Mongioli. We'll have this all buttoned up by sundown tonight, don't you worry.

GABRIEL

It's my job to worry. If you worried a little more, I'd be out of business. You don't think that's just a little too easy, finding the gun like that?

DET. PATRICK

Hey, sometimes you get a little help from above, you know?

GABRIEL

No. I don't.

[A beat.]

Mind if I ask the witness a few questions myself?

DET. PATRICK

What, you don't trust the LAPD to get the job done?

GABRIEL

Not since I left the force. C'mon, you still owe me for the Thompson case.

DET. PATRICK

Fine. But after this, we're even. Ask for Marcia Hernandez at the Last Bookstore, down at Spring and Fifth. She works there, real churchmouse type. She'll tell you what she saw.

GABRIEL (VO)

I bid my old “friend” adieu and headed back to the street, but paused when I got there. Patrick’s boys might have missed something useful at the Angels Flight. Or I could drop in on J.W. Robinson’s, see if anyone memorable bought a black ski mask recently. And then, of course, there was always the dame – I mean, the *witness* – at the bookstore...

CHOICES

- >> Look for additional clues at Angel's Flight (*thorough; go to 3A*)
- >> Talk to Marcia Hernandez at The Last Bookstore (*efficient; go to 3B*)
- >> Check out J.W. Robinson’s (*misstep; go to 3C*)

3A. Angels Flight (*thorough*)



GABRIEL (VO)

I walked up to the base of the Angels Flight, and fought to keep a sneer off my lips. Maybe it was the sheer uselessness of it, like people can't be bothered to walk two blocks up and down a little hill, or maybe it was just how the name of the place was too on-the-nose for my comfort, but this thing had rubbed me the wrong way ever since Colonel Eddy opened it up back in 1901. Most likely, though, it was the gray-haired, silver-eyed guy who was its usual operator this time of day, hiding in plain sight.

GABRIEL

Althiel.

ALTHIEL

Gabriel. What are you doing here?

GABRIEL

Double-checking a lead in a murder case.

ALTHIEL (uncomfortable)

Oh, *hell* no. Patrick and his boys were crawling all over this place just a few hours ago. You know I can't get involved.

GABRIEL

Easy, Alfie. All I need to know is if you caught a glimpse of some big moose of a guy ditching a gun near here last night.

ALTHIEL

And you also know I don't work the night shift.

GABRIEL

Yeah. I know. And *you* know that's not what I'm asking.

ALTHIEL

Oh. (sighs) Why don't *you* do it?

GABRIEL

Because this is *your place*, Alfie. You're much more attuned to this place than I am. I could *try* it, but I won't get your kind of picture.

ALTHIEL

Fine. *Fine*. But you owe me. And if this tips my scales...

GABRIEL (VO)

Althiel cast a quick glance both ways, to make sure no one was looking, and then he ducked his chin to his chest. When he looked up again, the whites of his eyes had gone the color of a .38.

ALTHIEL

Yeah, I see it. Right there, by that trash can. The gun. But... It's not some big guy ditching it. It's someone smaller, skinnier, wrapped in a black cloak. There's fear. Fear, and... And fire? (groans)

GABRIEL

Who was it? *Who do you see?*

ALTHIEL

I... I'm sorry. It's gone. That's all I caught. But... I think it was a *woman*.

GABRIEL

Thanks, Alfie. Hang in there. Don't let this job make you blue.

ALTHIEL (confused)

Why would it do that?

GABRIEL

Oh, you know. It's got its ups and downs. See you around, Alfie.

GABRIEL (VO)

What can I say? There's a reason I didn't choose to be a comedian. I gave Alfie a little salute and headed back to the street. It was time to pay the witness a visit.

CHOICES

>> Talk to Marcia Hernandez at the Last Bookstore (*go to 3B*)

3B. The Last Bookstore (*efficient*)

GABRIEL (VO)

I inhaled deeply through my nose as I made my way through The Last Bookstore. I loved the smell of books, the mustiness of old paper, the faint hints of mold, and most of all the indescribable scent of human hope. I always thought that books were humans' best, most valiant attempts to become like angels, using their imaginations to peer through time and imagine what history was like or what the future would become, or trying valiantly to use such simple tools as pen and ink to become immortal. Such beautiful, elegant, desperate hope.

It didn't take me long to find her. There were lots of churchmice on the bookstore staff, but only one looked ready to jump out of her fur.

GABRIEL

Marcia Hernandez?

MARCIA

Uh... Um... Uh... Who, who wants to...?

GABRIEL

It's okay. I'm a detective.

MARCIA

I... I'm sorry. I, I already told the cops everything I know!

BETTY

Hey! Leave her alone!

GABRIEL (VO)

A hand clamped down on my shoulder and whirled me around, followed by a solid slap across my face. I readied a punch, but pulled it when I got a good look at my assailant: a pretty young blonde, a full five foot nothing in her stockings, wearing a USC jacket as red as her face.

BETTY

It's not enough that she had to be grilled by the cops? Now she's got to tell her story to every two-bit would-be snooper in town?

GABRIEL (VO)

Oh, I *liked* her.

MARCIA

Betty, *please!*

BETTY

It's not Marcia's fault she was in the wrong place at the wrong time! She did her part for society, she did her part as a fine upstanding citizen, and now it's high time you and your copper buddies left! Her! *Alone!*

GABRIEL

All right, all right, I hear you. Loud and clear. Miss Hernandez, I apologize if I caused you any undue distress. Please call off your friend.

MARCIA

Oh. Well, that's... That's all right. No harm done.

GABRIEL

I do have one question, though.

BETTY

What did I *just say*?

GABRIEL

Settle down there, Mata Hari. It's about a book. What can you tell me about *On Wings of Flame*?

[Marcia makes a strangled noise.]

MARCIA

I... I... I've never heard of it!

BETTY (hurriedly)

That's it, Mr. Private Dick. No more questions. Leave. *Now*.

GABRIEL

Of course. You've told me quite enough. Thank you for your time.

GABRIEL (VO)

I gave a little bow to the flustered bookseller and to her furious friend as I turned to go. After all, they *had* told me everything I needed to know. The fleeting glance that Marcia gave her friend when I asked about the book, and the just as fleeting look of horror that stole across Betty's face, told me volumes, and about that one volume in particular. They were lying. I needed to find out why.

It was time to ask an old friend... Or maybe to dust off my library card.

CHOICES

>> Ask about “Wings of Flame” at the Los Angeles Central Library (*efficient; go to 4A*)

>> Go visit your old friend at Pershing Square (*thorough; go to 4B*)

3C. J.W. Robinson’s (*misstep*)

GABRIEL (VO)

The look the sales clerk gave me as I sauntered into J.W. Robinson’s sporting goods section was a mixture of perky professionalism and thinly-veiled skepticism. I didn’t blame her. I’m not exactly what you’d call the sporting type.

CLERK

Can I help you, sir?

GABRIEL

You do a lot of business in ski masks?

CLERK

Oh, no, sir. The skiing around these parts is terrible.

GABRIEL

...Are you putting me on?

CLERK

No, sir. Ever tried to ski down Figueroa? It's a bit of a bumpy ride. Not exactly the bunny slopes, sir.

GABRIEL

I see. So if you *had* sold a ski mask to somebody, it'd be a pretty memorable experience.

CLERK

Oh, I get it. You're some kind of gumshoe, is that it?

GABRIEL

Something like that.

CLERK

Well, then. I hate to break it to you, but if trying to track down where some robber bought their ski mask is your plan, you must be really hard up for clues. Sir.

GABRIEL (VO)

Right about then was when I decided to cut my losses and head back to the street. She was right – I *did* have better clues to investigate. Starting with that witness at The Last Bookstore.

CHOICES

>> Talk to Marcia Hernandez at The Last Bookstore (*go to 3B*)

4A. Los Angeles Central Library (*efficient*)

GABRIEL (VO)

I sauntered up to the Information desk, but the tall, thin librarian with skin the same color as the papers he was poring over didn't even look up.

GABRIEL (not quietly)

I'm looking for a book.

DUMAH

Shhh. Just a moment, sir. I'll be right with you.

[A beat.]

GABRIEL (loudly)

I'm looking for a book, *now*.

DUMAH (exasperated)

[Sighs.] Well, then, congratulations on finding your way to a *library*, sir. Is there a *particular* book you're looking for, *sir*, or will any old tome do?

GABRIEL (VO)

With that, the librarian finally deigned to cast a glance at me over his thick, half-rimmed glasses. When he did, I flashed him a broad smile. He didn't smile back.

GABRIEL

Oh, come on, Dumah. Don't act like you're not happy to see me.

DUMAH

Mister Graystone, need I remind you that the last time you paid my library a visit, we were carving bullets out of our bookshelves for weeks? Plus, there's still the small matter of your overdue fines for the copy of *City of God* that you borrowed back in 1904.

GABRIEL

Ah. Well, add the cost of the bookshelves to my tab.

DUMAH

[Sighs again.] I already have. What do you *want*, Gabriel?

GABRIEL

Like I said, I'm looking for a book. Something called *On Wings of Flame*.

DUMAH (surprised)

Really? I hadn't pegged you as the academic type.

GABRIEL

Academic?

DUMAH

Indeed. *On Wings of Flame* is the work of the good Dr. Stephen Stark, an archaeology professor at USC. A nice enough gentleman, even if he does seem to have a bit of a taste for younger members of the opposite sex...

GABRIEL

I think I may have heard something about that. But the *book*, Dumah. Tell me about the *book*.

DUMAH

Ah. *On Wings of Flame* is Stark's exegesis on the history and mythology of the Angel of Death.

GABRIEL

Someone wrote a book about that overblown putz *Azrael*?

DUMAH

No, no. The *Assyrian* Angel of Death. It's an old legend about a monstrous griffin-like creature with wings of fire. According to the myth, the ancient kings would summon the Angel to use as a weapon against their enemies, dispatching it to hunt them down and burn them.

GABRIEL

Huh. Like a hellhound with wings.

DUMAH

Quite. Stark was obsessed with it, and had been trying for years to get an expedition to Assyria funded because he claimed he knew where to find it. After his book was

published, some blueblood who also happened to be obsessed with that silly myth stepped forward and opened up his pocketbook.

GABRIEL

I don't suppose that "blueblood" was named *Calloway*, was he?

DUMAH

Why, yes. I believe it was. Stark packed up his fellow USC professors Welles, Donovan and Bradley and set off for the desert. They were down there for a good three months, and they've only just returned a few weeks ago. Although...

GABRIEL

What?

DUMAH

Welles and Donovan play chess here every week beneath the globe chandelier, but they didn't show up this morning. It's not like them to miss a week. Perhaps they're off on another expedition. Or maybe they're still over at the library bar, a few too many sheets to the wind. Ah, well. Would you like me to see if *On Wings of Flame* is available?

GABRIEL (VO)

I nodded, and Dumah lowered his head. When he looked up again, his eyes had turned completely silver. His eyelids flickered, and then he frowned. He blinked once, hard, and then his eyes returned to normal.

DUMAH

I'm sorry, Gabriel. I'm afraid the book is... Missing. It's very odd. It's not on its shelf, but I looked backwards, and no one ever checked it out. I looked forwards, and no one ever will. Odd.

GABRIEL (VO)

I thanked the librarian and headed for the street, my mind racing. My murdered millionaire Calloway had funded Stark's expedition to find this Assyrian Angel of Death? Something felt wrong. I found the nearest phone and gave USC a ring.

OPERATOR

University of Southern California, how may I direct your call?

GABRIEL

May I speak with Stephen Stark, please? He's in the Archaeology department.

OPERATOR

I'm sorry, sir, there's been a... *Disruption* at the Archaeology building this morning. You might want to try Professor Stark at home in the Pacific Electric Lofts.

GABRIEL (VO)

I thanked the operator and replaced the phone. A disruption? That sounded like a trip back to school was in my not-so-distant future. But first, I had some leads to follow here downtown. If Stark had a thing for the ladies, maybe my reporter buddy Peter at the *Herald Examiner* might know about it. Or maybe I should just go drop in on Stark at home, and ask him myself. Or perhaps I should swing by the Library bar, and see if Welles and Donovan are around to answer a few questions first?

CHOICES

- >> Go visit Peter the Reporter at the *Herald Examiner* (*thorough; go to 5A*)
- >> Go visit Stark's home at the Pacific Electric Lofts (*efficient; go to 5B*)
- >> Go look for Welles and Donovan at the Library Bar (*misstep; go to 5C*)

4B. Pershing Square (*thorough*)

GABRIEL (VO)

I took a leisurely stroll through the park until I spotted my old friend. To be honest, my nose picked him up first. Either way, I found him on a bench, sleeping under a pile of newspapers.

GABRIEL

Benathiel. Still doing the hobo thing, huh?

BENNY

Hey, Gabe! I got the sun on my back and the wind in my hair. What else could an angel want?

GABRIEL

I dunno, Benny. Deodorant?

BENNY

Hah! That's why I always liked you, Gabe. You were always the funny one. What can I do you for?

GABRIEL

Got another case. A murder.

BENNY

[low whistle] A murder, hey? Gonna have to charge ya extra, on account of...

GABRIEL

...The murderers. I already told that joke once today.

BENNY

See? See? I told ya you were the funny one. So! Whatcha wanna know from old Benny?

GABRIEL

Detective Patrick and his band of merry flatfoots think that Joe “the Mongol” Mongioli may have killed a millionaire named Thadeus Calloway last night. I’m not so sure. You know those mobster types better than anybody, Benny. Have you heard anything?

BENNY

Hmm. I might’ve, I might’ve. Lemme ask the city... Hmm.

[A beat.]

Yeah. Yeah, baby? Yeah. Yeah, I’ll tell ‘im. Yeah, the city says Mongol’s got red on his hands all right, and fresh red too. Only... It ain’t so clear if it’s Calloway’s red, you follow?

GABRIEL

What do you mean?

BENNY

I dunno. The city says that Calloway and the Mongol definitely criss-cross, but she won't say if one of 'em exactly *crossed*, y'know?

GABRIEL

No, Benny. I'm not sure that I do.

BENNY

Heh. Sorry, kiddo. Me neither. Now, about my bill...

GABRIEL (VO)

I thanked Benny with one of the few bills left in my wallet, then I hit the streets again. Luckily, the library had always been a poor man's best friend.

CHOICES

>> Go to the Los Angeles Public Library (*go to 4A*)

5A. Herald Examiner Building (*thorough*)

GABRIEL (VO)

I'd always been fascinated by the press, by the magic wrought by these scriveners practicing the ink-black art of translating each day's worldly events into brief,

easily-digestible columns of text, culling the few shiny things to care about from the near-infinite cascade of things that weren't, as they said, "fit to print", and telling the masses what had happened, what was happening, and what was about to happen. So much wisdom and weaponry captured in a bundle of trees pressed thin, that would, after only barely a few moments, be used to wrap the next day's fish.

There's a moral for you in there somewhere, I'm sure of it.

When I got to the *Herald Examiner*, my reporter buddy Peter greeted me as warmly as a man who has enjoyed a significant number of career-advancing scoops from just such a visitor. Funny that. Unfortunately, this time I was coming to ask, not so much to give.

PETER

Sorry, Gabe, I don't know much about Stark, and I know even less about Calloway. The social scene isn't really my beat. But I do know just the guy you should talk to...

GABRIEL (VO)

A few minutes later I was having a little one-on-one chat with Jerry Dean, the kind of photographer who, not too many years later, would be rightfully sneered at with the other paparazzi. I considered the man carefully. He had beady little eyes, one of which was sporting a truly remarkable shiner, and thin little arms, one of which was in a cast. He looked sullen, and he barked out a resentful laugh when I mentioned Stark's name.

DEAN

Yeah, I know Stark, but believe you me, I wish I didn't. The professor hired me a few months ago to tag along on a visit to this millionaire Calloway's mansion up in the Hollywood Hills, and take some photos of a moldy old book that's supposed to be magic or something. Only when we get there, the whole thing goes tits-up.

First, Calloway may have invited Stark up to *see* the book, but he sure didn't want me taking any pictures! *Then*, here comes Calloway's daughter, and the minute after Daddy introduces her she starts putting the whammy on Stark something fierce. That dirty dog, he's no dummy, so he starts flirting right back, which pisses old man Calloway off something fierce. Meanwhile, me, I know what side *my* bread's buttered on, so I sneak off into the rich guy's library while they're all distracted-like. The book Stark wanted was up on a podium out in the middle of the room, so I just went for it. I must've got a good half-dozen plates captured before I started hearing them calling my name and had to pack up shop. I made up some fish story about getting lost looking for the bathroom, and we hightailed it out of there – but the professor just kept throwing glances back over his shoulder, trying to catch another glimpse of Calloway's daughter. Man, did he have it bad!

Stark was *thrilled* when he found out what I'd managed to pull off, but that didn't stop the stingy bastard from only paying half of what we'd agreed on, since I didn't get *all* of the pages. 'Course, that didn't exactly sit right with me. Wasn't my fault, right? Hell, I had to get all sneaky and all to get the shots I *did* get, right? I should've charged the bastard *double* for the shots I *did* get!

So I figured, I'd get mine back. I knew he was still drooling over Calloway's daughter, and when I heard that Calloway had agreed to ship Stark and some of his buddies off to the desert for three months, I figured three things. One, old man Calloway probably did it to keep the professor's fingers off his daughter. Two, when Stark came back he'd probably make a beeline right for the girl. And three, if Stark wanted to get any more funding out of the old man, he'd probably do his damndest to keep his nocturnal affairs with Calloway's daughter a real secret, right? Right! And of *course* I was right, right as rain on *all three*.

It didn't take much to find out when and where Stark and the young Miss Calloway would be doing their rendez-vous-ing... I mean, what kind of a journalist would I be if I didn't know how to bribe a few servants? So I tailed 'em down to the Edison Club, and, just as they was about to get to canoodlin', I snapped some prime photos. They were perfect, just what I needed to make Stark pay the rest of what he owed me, if he didn't want me mailing 'em straight to the old man.

Only Stark, he wasn't playing ball. Instead, he did *this* to me. Broke my arm, broke my camera, damn near broke my head to boot. I'll get him, though. I'll get my lawyer on him. Just you wait.

GABRIEL

You're going to sue the guy you were trying to blackmail for beating you up?

DEAN

Damn right I am.

GABRIEL

[laughing] Sir, I'm afraid you born a few generations too soon...

GABRIEL (VO)

Just then Peter came bursting back into the room, his eyes wide as wheels.

PETER

Sorry to interrupt, but we've gotta go. There's been a rash of fires popping up all day today, and now they're coming faster and faster, like there's some mad arsonist burning his way across town! We just got word that the Pacific Electric building's been torched!

GABRIEL (VO)

My heart sank. The Pacific Electric building was where Stark hung his hat. I thanked Dean for his story, wished him the very best of luck with his upcoming litigious adventures, and beat feet out of there as fast as I could go.

CHOICES

>> Go visit Stark's home at the Pacific Electric Lofts (*go to 5B*)

5B. Pacific Electric Lofts (*efficient*)

[Note: This scene is the climax of Act I, and should tie things together. If the system is smart enough to have tracked where all the user has been, it could serve up multiple versions of this scene depending on how thorough the user has been and how many missteps the user has taken. If the user experienced the "Stark and Ruby" romantic subplot by visiting the Edison and the Herald Examiner, this scene could expand to have Gabriel expound on what Stark threw onto the desk (Dean's roll of film). If the user took too many missteps, there could be a worse version of this scene that has Patrick mocking the user for taking so long. These could be labeled 5B-T, 5B-E, and 5B-M. The scene as written is 5B-E.]

GABRIEL (VO)

When I arrived at the Pacific Electric building, the whole front of the scorched-looking building was black, a horde of exhausted-looking firemen were packing up their trucks, and a bunch of dazed-looking displaced folks were milling around outside, staring at each other and wondering what had just happened. I found myself thinking much the same thing. Only luckily for me, I had my guy on the inside. So to speak.

I snuck past the firemen when they weren't looking and slipped inside. After a quick check of the resident listing board in the lobby, I stole up to the stairs to the fourth floor, where Stark had kept his apartment.

I found Detective Patrick right where I was afraid I would: in the center of the burned-out apartment, standing over the blackened remains of Stephen Stark.

DET. PATRICK

Graystone. For the second time today, what the hell do *you* want?

GABRIEL

Same reason, Detective. Same case, too. What happened here?

DET. PATRICK

What does it look like? A troop of girl scouts broke in and got overzealous roasting marshmallows. Get out of here, Gabriel, this isn't your case.

GABRIEL

Actually, Detective, I think it might be. I only need to look around for a minute. You won't even know I'm here.

DET. PATRICK

Fine, but if I see the slightest hint that you're disturbing my crime scene, I'll have you thrown outta here before you can say Jack Robinson.

GABRIEL

Ah, the good Sir John. Now *there* was an efficient lawman.

DET. PATRICK

Come again?

GABRIEL

Nothing, Detective. I'll just be looking around.

GABRIEL (VO)

The truth was, there wasn't much left to see – not by mortal eyes, anyway. I carefully made my way around the edge of the room until I was standing in a corner, safely away from all of the detective's men. And then I opened my eyes to *see*.

If anyone had been close enough, they would have told you that my eyes had turned silver – not just the normally gray irises, but the pupils and whites, too, all as shiny as twin balls of mercury. That's what angels' eyes look like when we're peering through time.

As for what we *see*, well, that's another matter entirely. Have you ever seen Eadweard Muybridge's photographs of a horse in motion? That big grid of frozen moments, spread out and placed side by side, so it makes up a giant mosaic of time? It's like that, with *right now* in the center, and the past and the future stretching out around it. I looked forward, and I caught glimpses of what the place would become, new lives lived there. Then I looked backward, and I saw empty air – too far, too far. Only glimpse back a little bit, only a few hours, not a few decades...

And I saw it. There.

I saw the so-called Angel of Death, the Assyrian griffin with wings of fire, burst into the room like a comet. It shattered one of the windows, the fiery corona surrounding its body instantly setting the curtains and anything else it touched aflame. The monster was the size of a healthy German shepherd, with a wingspan of a good six to eight feet across, so the entire room was engulfed in fire within seconds. It swept through the room, then hovered over Stark's inert body, and touched its beak down onto his face like a dog licking its master. I watched the fire sweep over him and swallow him up completely, and then I heard the monster screech and explode back

out through another window as quickly as it had come, leaving the apartment a furnace in full roar and trailing fire across the Los Angeles sky...

Wait. Stark's inert body?

I blinked, and I looked again. A little further back, by only another hour or so. And I found what I was looking for.

I saw Stark enter the apartment, his hands shaking and bloodied. He staggered into the room and threw something – a roll of film? – onto his desk, before slumping down, the definition of exhaustion, into his chair. A moment later, Stark's head jerked up and he looked to the door. I couldn't hear what he was hearing – angel vision is just that, *vision* – but I watched Stark get up and limp to the door. He peered through the peephole, and then the door burst inwards, the intruder nearly knocking the door clean off its hinges. It was a giant bear of a man, a misshapen lump bound up in a cheap, badly tailored pinstripe suit. Huh. So this was the fabled Joe "The Mongol" Mongioli everybody kept talking about. I could see why.

Stark staggered back to his desk, his eyes huge and his mouth working fast. I'm no lip-reader, but it sure looked like the professor was demanding to know who this guy was and why he was in the professor's home. Mongioli, on the other hand, simply walked slowly, menacingly toward the professor. He said something, and then he said it again. Again, I'm no lip-reader, but it looked like the mobster was saying, *"Where is it? Where is it?"*

At this point, Stark had given way to full-fledged panic. He had backed up against his desk, and was reaching back and fumbling blindly with the top drawer. Finally he got it open and snatched up his prize: a small pistol, which he aimed at Mongioli with trembling hands.

The mobster smiled at the professor like a patient, pitying parent, then simply batted the gun out of Stark's hands. The pistol flew across the room, then landed on the floor and disappeared under a couch.

For a guy who had lived such an intellectual life, Stark gibbered like an idiot right up until the end, when Mongioli seized Stark's head with his left ham-sized fist, seized Stark's shoulder with his right, and then, simply, *twisted*.

I didn't need to hear the snap of Stark's neck breaking, or the potato-sack sound of his body crumpling to the floor, to get the full nauseating effect.

I watched, sickened, as Mongioli proceeded to toss Stark's apartment, tearing it apart with increasing ferocity as the mobster failed to find whatever it was he was looking for. Finally, Mongioli turned to the professor's corpse, spat on it, and then stormed out the door, nearly shattering it into splinters as he slammed it behind him.

Having got what *I* came for, I jumped back to the present – and just in time, too. I blinked the last of the silver out of my eyes as Detective Patrick walked up to me.

DET. PATRICK

Find anything, Graystone?

GABRIEL

As much as I hate to admit it, Detective, you were right. Mongioli *is* the killer you're looking for.

[A beat.]

DET. PATRICK (voice dwindling in volume)

Wait, *what?* You mean for Calloway, right? Mongioli couldn't have done this – he's a *mobster*, not an arsonist! Whaddaya mean, we want Mongioli? Graystone?
Graystone?

GABRIEL (VO)

I left Patrick sputtering behind me. I didn't have time to waste laying it out for him. This Assyrian Angel of Death was still on the loose out there, and the longer it took me to figure this mystery out and somehow get that monster back on ice, the more people were going to die. I didn't know where Mongioli was headed, just as I didn't know what he'd been looking for, or why he'd killed Stark, or who had dispatched the Angel to burn Stark, even if it *had* been too late to the party. I knew none of those things, not yet. But I had a pretty good idea where I needed to look next.

It was time to go back to school.

CHOICES

>> Head to USC (*begin Act II*)

5C. The Library Bar (*misstep*)

GABRIEL (VO)

I looked around the Library Bar with a faint air of appreciation. The place reminded me of the kind of gentleman's club I'd loved a few decades ago, full of mahogany and velvet and alcohol. If this was what librarians got up to in their off hours, I owed Dumah an apology.

After a few minutes' examination, I concluded that Welles and Donovan weren't here. Unless, of course, USC had begun employing professors with PhDs in breaking kneecaps, in which case I would need to rethink the two goons who were incongruently sucking down whiskies at the bar.

What the hell, I figured. If they were here, I might as well ask some questions.

GABRIEL

Gentlemen. Unless I miss my guess, aren't you two part of "Tommy Gun" Maledetto's gang? Do you know Joe "The Mongol" Mongioli?

BOB THE GOON

Who's asking?

POWELL THE GOON

Yeah, who wants to know?

GABRIEL

A friend of a friend, that's all. My friend knows this millionaire named Calloway, who says that he knows the Mongol...

GABRIEL (VO)

The sound of chairs scraping the floor filled the bar as the two goons rose from their seats. I suddenly had an inkling of what it might feel like to literally be between a rock and a hard place.

GABRIEL

No need to get up, gentlemen. I can see I must have you two mistaken for some other fine ruffians.

BOB THE GOON

We don't know no Mongioli.

POWELL THE GOON

Yeah. And Joe don't know no Calloway.

BOB THE GOON

Yeah. And after today, ain't nobody gonna know *you*, either.

GABRIEL (VO)

I attempted to graciously extract myself from this little dance, since I had no clear idea of exactly what killing these two idiots would do to my overall karma, but to no avail. I can't remember who threw the first punch. That's probably because it connected with my jaw hard enough to lay me out flat. I can't remember who threw the second punch either, for much the same reasons.

Luckily, our jig was cut short when a screeching news bulletin burst from the bar's radio.

NEWSCASTER

We interrupt this broadcast to bring you this breaking news. A series of fires that have broken out across Los Angeles this morning are now thought to possibly be the work of a single arsonist. Fires are being reported on the USC campus, in the garment district, and now downtown... Hold on, another report is being handed to me... Another fire has broken out at the Pacific Electric building downtown. Repeat, a massive fire has been reported at the Pacific Electric building downtown...

POWELL THE GOON

Hey, wasn't that where Joe said he...

BOB THE GOON

Shut up, you idiot. You, flatfoot. This ain't over. You keep stickin' your nose where it ain't wanted, next thing you know it'll be suckin' in water from the bottom of the Pacific. Got it?

GABRIEL (VO)

I nodded my agreement, as my jaw hurt too much to actually form words. The two goons shuffled out the door, and as soon as I'd managed to heal myself to walk – we angels are fast healers, but it's not instantaneous – I hustled out after them. I had that cold, hard feeling in my gut that comes when you know you're too late for something important, and the only thing left to do is to just face the music.

Yeah, I definitely needed to just stick to books. This whole “music and dancing” thing wasn't working out for me.

CHOICES

>> Go visit Stark's home at the Pacific Electric Lofts (*go to 5B*)

END OF ACT I