

# **The story of Volund: A translation from the oral to the visual**

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## **Abstract**

The story of Volund from Norse poetry was the foundation of a large scaled installation in the spring of 2014 in the online virtual world of Second Life<sup>®</sup>. The installation was created in collaboration between a storyteller and a visual designer, who are also the authors of this text. This article will discuss how the principles of oral storytelling, agency and presence were woven together to bring about a ‘story-world’ in which visitors was able to become both protagonist and storyteller through various means and devices that were put at their disposal. This process – both the theoretical considerations that played a role during the formulation of the project, as well as the strategies employed during its building – will be examined through a literature review encompassing oral storytelling and its performative aspects, the extension of these into virtual environments, Joseph Campbell’s Hero with a Thousand Faces, and a discussion of the myth of Volund himself.

## **Keywords**

Agency, Avatar, Art Installation, Second Life, Storytelling, Storyworld, Virtual World, Norse Poetry, Oral Tradition.

## **Introduction**

The project that is discussed in this text is the third in a series of installations created by the authors. All of these projects revolved around an investigation as to how the tradition of oral storytelling could be successfully translated into an online virtual world in which narrative would be accomplished, not by a storyteller, but instead by avatars who inhabit a story space that consists of a complex architecture and/or ecology placed within a custom designed climate. What was aimed was to create a ‘story-world,’ a concept promoted by David Herman (1999: 21-25) that denotes an integrated view of narrative with time and space, in which all components are deemed to be equally important to building a compelling storytelling environment.

Herman's concept of the 'story-world' is particularly relevant since in narrative theory, traditionally there has always been more emphasis on temporality than on spatiality. Stories are commonly framed as sequences of events and space is seen to be a mere static description that is woven into the narrative. Such a time/space opposition, however, has been challenged by Mikhail Bakhtin who was the first to pick upon this conundrum. Bakhtin replaced this opposition with the concept of the 'chronotope,' which he defined as a space-time complex in which the connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships is deemed to be a key element of the success of a narrative. (Bakhtin 1981: 84–258)

When it comes to virtual worlds, time and space appear to play an even more crucial role in the construction of narrative, and not only during the authoring process itself, but also for comprehension on behalf of the participating avatar. Teresa Bridgeman says of this process that *"to read a narrative is to engage with an alternative world that has its own temporal and spatial structures,"* (2007: 52-65) while Espen Aarseth claims that *"the defining element in computer games is spatiality. Computer games are essentially concerned with spatial representation and negotiation; therefore the classification of a computer game can be based on how it represents or, perhaps, implements space."* (2007: 44-47) Finally, Henry Jenkins observes that gamers create their own *"mental maps of the narrative action and the story space"* and act upon those mental maps *"to test them against the game world itself."* (Jenkins 2004: 118-130)

### **Who is Volund?**

The virtual installation is based on the tale of the elf Volund, whose sojourn, starting from childhood into maturity to old age, was recounted through an avatar actor who was situated in a scenic architecture of 12 stages, populated with objects and silent avatar sculptures that reflected the details of this tale.

In the version used for this project, Volund's tale starts during his childhood years when his father apprentices him to a tribe of dwarfs who excel in the art blacksmithing. During this early stage of the tale, although he has a calling to a quest, Volund chooses to ignore this call. However, things come to a traumatic end when the dwarfs kill his father and Volund has to make his escape with a boat which marks the onset of the Hero's Journey through a symbolism that also draws upon the metaphor of the 'Belly of the Whale.'

This journey proceeds through further stages in which, encouraged by his aptitude at forging magic objects Volund captivates and espouses a valkyrie<sup>1</sup>, who has taken on the appearance of a swan. Before she leaves him at the end of seven years, the Valkyrie gives Volund a ring which is a symbol of union. Decked out with this ring the protagonist eventually encounters his next powerful adversary, 'The King,' who cripples Volund in order to hinder his journey home. Volund's revenge is fierce: Not only does he rape and impregnate the King's daughter but he also kills his two sons in order to ensure his own progeny's inheritance to the throne. These brutal events however also help bring about the passage home: Volund forges himself a gigantic pair of wings through which he overcomes his crippled state. Donning these wings

he flies, birdlike, to a rooftop from where he gives the King a final account of what happened and what the future will hold; and then, at long last, he takes off on his journey home. Thus, while the journey started in the ocean the end of it, the return home, is undertaken gloriously in the sky, ending a series of events in which Volund has been alternately prey and predator. These have helped shape him into a wiser, older man, who now deserves to put on the shield and mantle of the hero. As Joseph Campbell writes: “*the hero is the champion of things becoming, not of things become, because he is,*” a statement which can be continued with a further quote by the same author: “*Having died to his personal ego, he arose again established in the Self.*” (Campbell 1973: 225)



*Figure 1: “Meet Volund! Become Volund! – Stage 2” Second Life, 2014. Photograph by Elif Ayiter.*

As a basis for the installation two sources that are different in both form and content were used: the Norse poem *Völundarkviða*, and an excerpt from the ‘Saga about Didrik of Bern.’

*Völundarkviða* is located in the Elder Edda<sup>ii</sup>, and consists of two main motives: the swan motif in the first part, and the adventures of Volund the blacksmith in the second part. The ‘Saga about Didrik of Bern’ is a collection described as “*riddersagaer*”<sup>iii</sup> which consists of several stories that are linked by a frame-story that allows for a fluid transition from one story to the other. Both sources originate from medieval literature, a genre which today seems to have reached a status of timeliness through computer games, TV series and movies. This medieval material appears to be of special importance to contemporary storytellers since an understanding of the context around it is deeply “*embedded in the historical and cultural context of narrative practices.*” (Contzen 2014)

A poem like *Völundarkviða* was, in all likelihood, performed by a skald<sup>iv</sup>, a performer whose performance excelled into an art form in its own right. Indeed, so strong could a skald's recitation be that *“good poets were believed to possess magic powers that enabled them to destroy their enemies.”* (Lönnroth 2009: 49-60) There are several passages in the sagas where one can find descriptions of their practices, including examples on how the skalds prepared their performance far in advance and how they dressed up in order to enhance their performance. Indeed, these performances were often powerful enough to put their audience into an altered state whereby they could effectively become participants in the performance. (Lönnroth 2009).

Contzen writes that much of medieval literature lacks a strict plot such as can be expected to be found in modern literature, saying that *“medieval narration often contains too little or too much information, that characters lack a discernible ‘character’, that logical breaks and ruptures constitute a significant plot element, and that meaning is created in retelling and varying traditional stories.”* (Contzen 2014) Medieval literature consists of repetitive jumps that move back and forth in the text and even of events that apparently do not seem to connect together. Furthermore, literature from the medieval period was usually not directly translated, instead it was adapted, (Contzen 2014) bringing forth even more non-linearity through this process.

Returning to Volund, he is one of the few named elves that are found in Norse poetry. (Jakobsson 2006: 227–254) It is written in the ‘*Norrøne Gude – og heltesagn*’<sup>v</sup> that elves usually stayed among human beings and caused partly good and partly bad events. The bright elves lived in a location known today as *Alvheim*, and the dark elves lived underground with the dwarfs. Of further interest may also be that there are no myths about how elves were created, although the creation of dwarfs and other beings in Norse mythology is amply manifest. From the poem *Völundarkviða*, it is known that Volund is as beautiful as the light elves, but at the same time he has attributes that place him within the domain of the dark elves: Through his beauty he attracts both the sons of the king whom he kills, as well as the king's daughter whom he rapes. (Jakobsson, 2006)

In the ‘*Saga about Didrik of Bern*’ it is said that he is trained by the dwarves to become a blacksmith. Noteworthy is that in Norse mythology dwarves also lived in the earth – a circumstance that adds yet another layer of information to Volund's dark influences. The saga says that Volund looks like a human being, and yet he also represents something else, something alien. Jakobsson writes: *“Volund may serve as a figure for the excessive and uncontrollable emotions of humans. He is the non-aggressive, kind, gentle, optimistic, and naive side of humanity that, when provoked, may surprisingly metamorphose into cruelty and wickedness. He is a reminder of what is buried inside us under layers of self-control.”* (Jakobsson 2006) In the virtual installation the avatar Volund reinforces both this sense of belonging to the human ilk as well as being a resident of the realm of the strange and unknown.

Anne Burson points to several problems with the poem *Völundarkviða*: The setting is a Nordic theme which is nevertheless atypical in that it differs greatly from other poems in the Poetic Edda<sup>vi</sup>. There are motifs in the poem which, according to Burson, makes it stand apart from other poems in the Poetic Edda. At first glance, the poem does parallel with the epic, however the swan motif in the first part of the poem also has references to a ‘Märchen’<sup>vii</sup>. This first part of the poem is about love which then abruptly turns into to hatred and revenge creating a structure through which the poem seems to consist of two distinct stories that nevertheless have clear connections. One of the clearest of these bindings is through the bracelet (Burson 1983: 3) which the valkyrie gives to Volund and of which he is deprived in the second part. Another motif that binds the two parts together is the ‘fly motif’ whereby both the valkyrie in the first part, and Volund in the second part flee captivity by using wings. This also ties the poem to the Greek myth of Daedalus who also fled his foes with the help of self-made wings.

The polarities of the medieval poem provide an alternate structure from what would be expected from a modern, written plot – indeed they point to an oral tradition as is found in folktales. Burson believes that perhaps the most striking motif that recurs and that greatly adds to the wholeness of the poem is the polarity of the captive and the captured. (1983: 5) In the first part Volund captures the swan, while in the second part he himself is caught. A particularly interesting twist comes about when it is seen that whilst caught Volund also has the opposite role of the capturer as he wreaks havoc on the king’s children – killing his sons and raping his daughter. It was these complementary aspects that bind the poem together that were used as structuring elements in the composition of the virtual installation.

‘Volund’s Tale’ is a story of transformation. The journey takes the protagonist through various encounters, bringing forth actions that change him, make him grow. It is a tale of self-encounters through which a mythical being is altered, attains knowledge of himself, as well as the world that surrounds him. Telling this ever-changing, transformative tale through a visualized space and its inhabitants was a challenge which was addressed through various means, such as symbolic objects that repeated themselves throughout the stations of the tale, and the creation of a consistent visual system that could nevertheless adapt to and be modified to the requirements of the progression of the story. A further challenge was the creation of an avatar through the wearing of whom visitors could become the protagonist of the ‘story-world’: Volund is a character of considerable complexity, possessed of a dark side that stands in close juxtaposition to his positive attributes. He is both predator and prey and alternates between these oppositional roles at many junctures of the tale. Furthermore, the tale itself is in the nature of a monomyth that finds correlations to Joseph Campbell’s ‘Hero with a Thousand Faces’ which revolves around a hero’s quest for growth and wisdom. Consequently, the task was to create a compelling hero, manifesting as an avatar who was endowed with inherent contradictions of character that would unfold during a tale in which he grew into wisdom and an understanding of ‘self.’

The primary attribute of the project therefore is that the character of Volund, manifesting as a wearable avatar, takes on the main duties of the oral storyteller through a progressively built-

up / changing appearance and through behaviors that were displayed through animations that the wearer could trigger by attaching the objects that these were embedded into. The rest of the storytelling work however fell to the environment itself, resonating with one half of Bakhtin's notion of the 'chronotope,' namely the importance of 'space' in narrative. (Bakhtin 1981: 84–258) To this end a mythical, expanding architecture within which the tale unfolded over twelve stages was brought about; and the navigational durations between these stages were designed in such a way as to bring about the temporal element that, according to the idea of the 'chronotope,' is the other half of the successful telling of a tale – what in effect, David Herman calls a 'story-world,' saying that *“although it is true that narratives display a double temporality, being sequentially organized accounts of sequences of events, stories can also be thought of as spatializing story-worlds into evolving configurations of agents, objects, and places.”* (Herman 1999: 22)

### **The Oral Tradition, Electronic Culture and Storytelling in a Virtual World**

Over the past 50 years oral storytelling has had a renaissance whereby contemporary oral storytellers are considered to be performance artists in their own right, practicing an art form that relates to both tradition and the present, that takes place in the here and now with a storyteller and a listener and a story, all present simultaneously (Dahlsveen 2008). This renaissance seems to have gained momentum with the advent of electronic online cultures manifesting themselves especially through social media in which storytelling appears to be a buzzword and a storyteller can be anything from a writer to a digital navigator.

Such a preoccupation with storytelling in digital domains may correspond to Walter Ong's finding that during the shift from typographic to electronic literature the tightly plotted story of written culture has given way to a novel form of 'deplotted' narrative whereby contemporary literature will oftentimes obscure its plots. (Ong 2002: 148) This development is also deliberated upon by Michael Heim (1994: 41-55) who coined the term 'thought processing' to describe a major shift in the creative mindset from linear to non-linear as it encountered the electronic medium in which:

*“Software not only accelerates our thought process, but also facilitates the birth of a new reality in which we think. We should not mistake the new digital reality for a neutral territory untouched by human intention. Software hides within it specific notions about how we do and how we should think within a digital environment.”* (Heim 1994: 45)

However, fascinating as this shift is, its output may nevertheless lack a certain authenticity since the deplotted storylines of the electronic age do not have the spontaneity that is encountered within oral cultures, the milieu in which the non-linear storyline finds its true calling. Instead contemporary non-linear literature oftentimes is a variation on the plotted stories that preceded it over many centuries of chirographic and typographic literary culture. (Ong 2002: 148) Therefore, when structured on memories and echoes, suggestive of early primary oral narrative with its heavy reliance on the unconscious ((Peabody 1975, quoted in Ong 2002: 148)), these works often result in a self-conscious, characteristically literate

manner of expression, greatly differing from the non-linear output of the oral tradition. It may therefore be speculated upon whether a search for a medium that combines the affordances of electronic expression with the purity / authenticity of the oral tradition does not lead to the popularity of digital storytelling today.

According to Walter Ong, narrative is in certain ways more widely functional in oral cultures than in literate ones since, lacking the organizational and mnemonic capabilities provided by written records, oral cultures are hindered in generating elaborate, scientifically abstract categories of knowledge. Instead they use stories to store, organize, and communicate what they know. (Ong 2002: 138)

The recall of knowledge in oral culture involves poetic structures and procedures of a sort quite unfamiliar to us today. As members of a typographic culture we are likely to think of consciously contrived narrative designed as a climactic linear plot of ascending action building tension, rising to a climactic point followed by a dénouement or untying of a knot. The Ancient Greek epic, however, was not plotted this way, and indeed no oral culture has experience of a lengthy, epic-size climactic linear plot:

*“What made a good epic poet was not mastery of a climactic linear plot which he deconstructed by dint of a sophisticated trick called plunging his hearer in medias res. What made a good epic poet was, among other things of course, first, tacit acceptance of the fact that episodic structure was the only way and the totally natural way of imagining and handling lengthy narrative, and, second, possession of supreme skill in managing flashbacks and other episodic techniques. Starting in ‘the middle of things’ is not a consciously contrived ploy but the original, natural, inevitable way to proceed for an oral poet approaching a lengthy narrative. If we take the climactic linear plot as the paradigm of plot, the epic has no plot. Strict plot for lengthy narrative comes with writing.”* (Ong 2002: 141)

In the virtual tale of Volund a deliberate attempt at replicating the episodic and yet non-linear essence of the oral tradition was undertaken through the very visual nature of the installation itself: The non-hierarchical architecture was comprised of discrete episodic stages which visitors could traverse at their own pace and their own trajectory; while for those who chose to do so, a linear pathway was also provided – although a concerted effort was made that an involvement with the tale did not depend upon this linear route at all.

Of further relevance when it comes to translating from the oral to the visual – as is the case in this project – are Ong’s notes on several discursive attributes that oral traditions manifest: In an oral culture discourse will show traits such as being aggregative rather than analytic whereby far more epithets and descriptors than would be encountered in a literate culture are employed. (2002: 38) A further trait is that verbal communication in oral cultures is situational rather than abstract: Even seemingly abstract concepts remain focused upon concretely situational descriptions. (2002: 48)

The emphasis on epithets in oral culture, whereby the ‘beautiful princess’ or the ‘fearsome warrior’ are described through words, almost seems to call out to its visual counterpart where

such descriptors can be displayed visually with great ease. Similarly, even a composite of abstract concepts such as 'freedom,' 'maturity,' and 'transformation' could be demonstrated in the project through visual means – namely, the big wings that Volund was endowed with on his final journey home.

It would thus appear that oral culture has inherent affinities to visual expression and that a way to bring about storytelling as an authentic genre in electronic culture may involve an amalgam of these mediums of expression.

### ***Virtual Storytelling, Agency and the Avatar***

While discussing storytelling in a virtual world Clive Fencott's list of the characteristics of synthesised aesthetics of interactive digital environments is helpful. The list is an amalgam of ideas from Janet Murray's aesthetics of interactive digital media, Doug Church's 'Formal Abstract Design Tools' for computer games<sup>viii</sup> and Brenda Laurel's ideas on narrative potential<sup>ix</sup>, while also drawing on other work on presence/co-presence, holding concepts such as agency, narrative potential, and transformation. (Fencott 2003: 154)

Transformation, co-presence and presence are concepts that find easy correspondence within traditional narrative forms, and as such they may not need much further explication. However, agency – the characteristic that is first and foremost on Fencott's list – may need some further deliberations due to its significance in virtual environments:

Virtual storytelling can be viewed as an ecology in which stories flourish at the hands of carefully designed agency; and good examples can be considered to be those where participants indulge in a form of narrative play in order to construct a sense of place which will be experienced and added to by later participants. The important point is that agency – creatively and appropriately designed – is the basis on which a virtual 'story-world' achieves purpose.

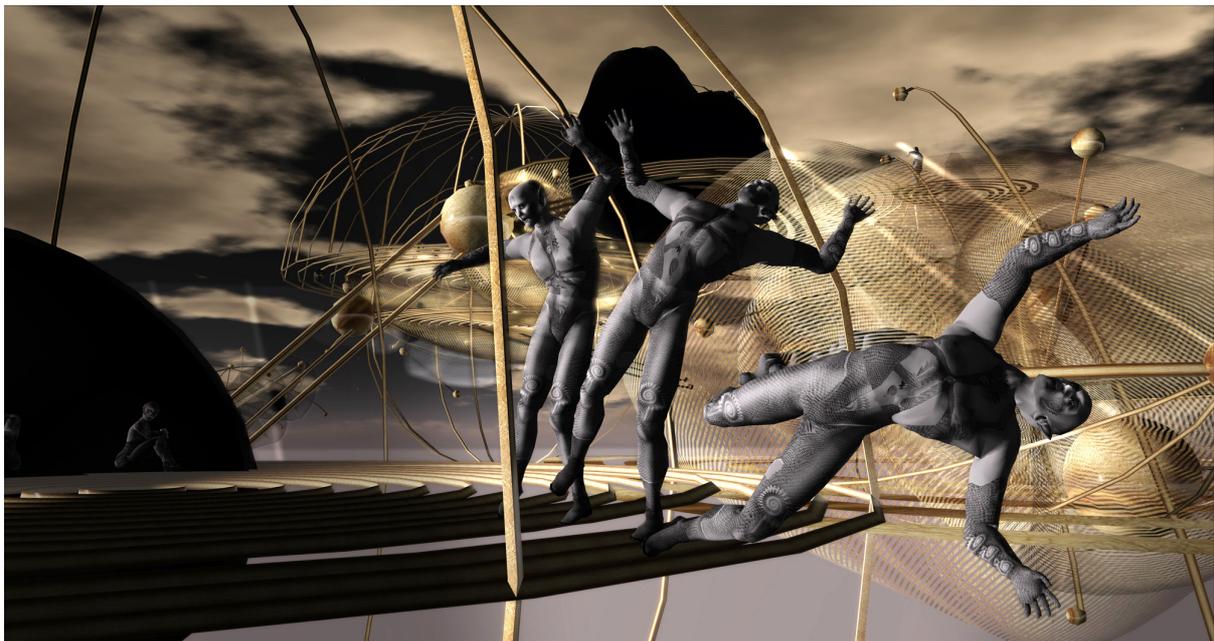
It may not be too far off within this context to propose that the avatar, and especially the appearance of this avatar, is integral to agency. Such a claim can be substantiated by referring to Nick Yee and Jeremy Bailenson who have established that there is a forceful feedback loop between the avatar and the human handler. Their findings show that the appearance of the avatar has a deep influence on our behavior and on our self-perception; that, in effect, avatars go far beyond being mere puppets or proxies, that they are psychological extensions whose power and impact on the workings of our psyche needs to be deeply considered. (Yee & Bailenson 2009: 285–312)

That experienced virtual worlds players will achieve such a heightened state of intimacy far more readily than novice players is put forth by Richard Bartle who says that, typically, a player's relationship to his or her avatar will undergo three transitional stages, the last of which he calls the persona stage:

*“Avatars are dolls, characters are simulacra, but neither are people. The final level of immersion – the one which makes virtual worlds wholly different to anything else – is that of the persona. [] You are not role-playing a being, you are that being; you’re not assuming an identity, you are that identity; you are not projecting a self, you are that self. [] There’s no level of indirection, no filtering, no question: You are there.” (Bartle 2004: 155)*

If an avatar who has reached the ‘persona’ stage is a creature of such potency when it comes to reaching full immersion in a virtual world then wouldn’t the ‘persona’ avatar be the primary means whereby the participant of a ‘story-world’ would achieve a sense of agency? It is with this conception in mind that visiting avatars were given the dual role of storyteller and protagonist. It can of course be argued that, under these circumstances only experienced virtual world residents will be able to achieve a full state of immersion and an appended sense of agency. Such critique duly noted, it has nevertheless been our experience as long time metaverse builders that, for the largest part, visitors to art installations are long term virtual worlds residents themselves, ergo they are individuals who have long reached Bartle’s ‘persona’ stage of identification with their avatars. Thus, the ‘story-world’ targeted a specific user group which consisted of experienced metaverse dwellers.

### *‘Silent Actors’ for Agency and Make-Belief*



*Figure 2: “The Story of Volund – The falling father.” Sculpted figurines take on the roles of ‘silent actors.’ Second Life, 2014. Photograph by Elif Ayiter.*

Coming back to needs of the project in terms of creating further mechanisms of agency, it has been observed that oftentimes avatars visit locations in the metaverse with their friends. In gatherings such as these it can be assumed that much of the performative agency reviewed above will also come about through group dynamics whereby agents bring about the prerequisite conditions for collaborative storytelling. Indeed one of the intrigues was what

would happen when a group of friends all decided to become Volund simultaneously – what quirks might come to pass, what unexpected developments and non-linear pathways a tale enacted by a host of Volund clones might bring about.

What had to equally be taken into account however was that there are many metaverse residents who visit locations by themselves. When it comes to the experiencing of a ‘story-world’ such isolation may become a hindrance to achieving agency, especially when agency is coupled with the term ‘presence,’ which has been discussed by Giuseppe Mantovani and Giuseppe Riva from a social perspective, when they challenge the notion that experiencing a simulated environment is only a matter of perceiving its objective features: ‘Presence’ (real or simulated) means that individuals perceive themselves, objects, as well as others, not only as situated in an external space but as immersed in a socio-cultural web connected through interactions between objects and people. (Mantovani and Riva 1999: 540 – 551)

To this end a cast of ‘silent actors’ that were highly accurate replicas of metaverse avatars were distributed throughout the 12 stages of the tale in order to bring about a sense that one was not alone, that there were others with whom one shared the space of the tale and these others were the ones with whom one had to interact in order to tell/experience the tale. These sculpted avatars were shaped and dressed in correspondence to their different roles and they held dramatic poses and facial expressions that would help draw the solo visitor into a state of interaction with the tale. In this sense, this diverse cast of expressive characters also took on a secondary role of the ‘visual story-teller,’ acting in concert with and in support of the primary story-teller – the avatar of Volund himself whom the visitor was actually enacting through the provided costume and animations.

### **The Hero with a Thousand Faces and Performative Expression through ‘Special Codes’**

When it came to telling the story of Volund through a virtual installation there arose a need for a discursive template. The choice was to study Joseph Campbell’s ‘The hero with a thousand faces’ (Campbell 1973) and use the monomyth structuring of this material. Very briefly, one can say that Campbell’s ‘Hero’s Journey’ is about a protagonist who receives a mission that takes him on a journey during which he must go through a variety of situations before he comes home with new knowledge. The journey is divided into three parts: Departure, initiation and return. Through placing material from the tale of Volund into these situations the structure of the installation was: Volund travels to the dwarfs, Volund is caught by the dwarfs and subsequently escapes from this captivity by escaping inside a tree trunk, i.e., ‘departure.’ Further along his journey he gains power through knowledge with which he entraps a valkyrie, i.e., ‘initiation.’ At a later stage however, he is captured in turn by the King, whose three children he molests. And finally Volund escapes from the king and completes his journey home, i.e., ‘return.’

Richard Bauman argues that some of the most recognizable elements of the verbal arts are what he calls ‘special codes.’ (Bauman 1997: 17) This means that during an oral telling of a story the storyteller often uses a language that differs from everyday language – a language

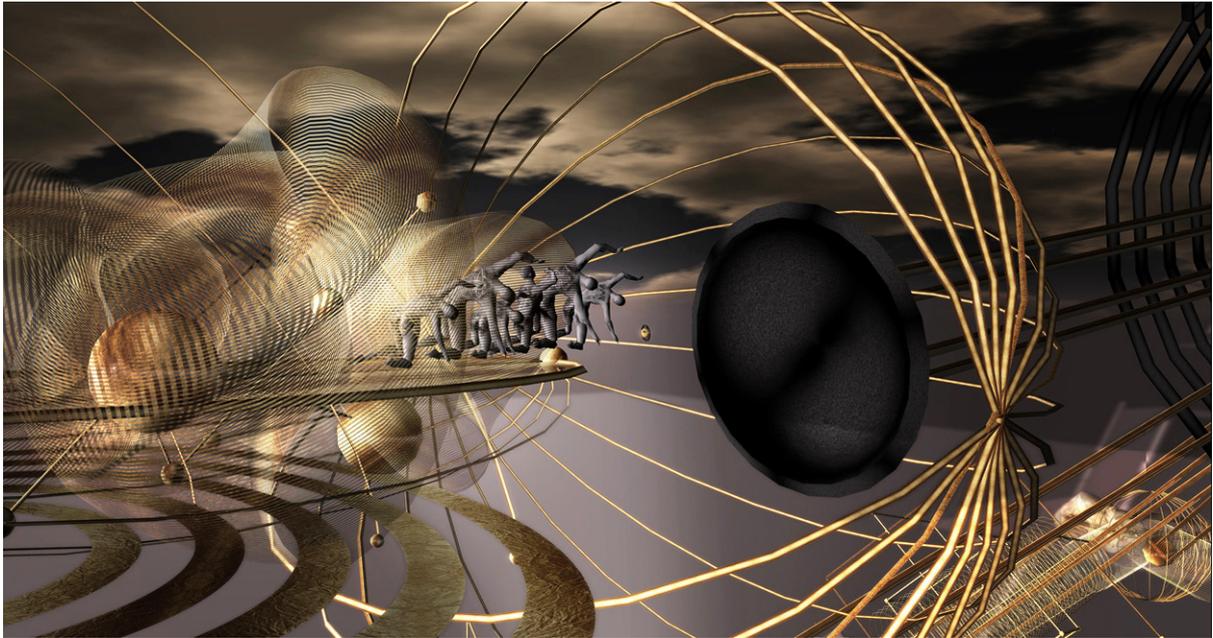
that can often be perceived as ‘old fashioned’ or archaic, or indeed poetic, but that nevertheless this altered mode of expression allows one to still understand what is being said.

The virtual installation had its own distinctive expression which nevertheless held clear references to the sources of the tale itself, as well as to Campbell’s monomyth. Keeping these foregrounded there was a conscious effort to stress the recognizable and the strange that the tale of Volund carries in an intertwined manner through the dichotomy of the light / dark elf. This dichotomy was largely achieved through custom created animations and poses that were embedded into objects such as a sword to be used during heroic endeavors, or a cane to be held during Volund’s crippling; as well as various gifts to be exchanged between the actors of the tale at different stages. Holding these objects allowed visitors to enact events through an augmentation that allowed them to in fact ‘become Volund,’ to live both through the recognizable and the strange, the attributes of both prey and predatory that the hero’s persona carries, through a firsthand experience of that persona which was generated through animations.

Another element is what Bauman calls ‘figurative language.’ (Bauman 1997: 17) Bauman writes that “*The nature of figurative expression is so complex and extensive a subject, that it is impossible even to suggest all the relevant dimensions here.*” (Bauman 1997: 18) This is a large area where the metaphor can be mentioned. The metaphor is a stylistic linguistic figure mentioned by Aristotle in ‘Poetics.’ The metaphor belongs to two disciplines: Poetry and Rhetoric and it has two functions: creative and ornamental: “*The second seeks to persuade men by adorning discourse with pleasing ornaments; it is what emphasizes discourse in its own right. The first seeks to re-describe reality by the roundabout route of heuristic function.*” (Ricoeur 2004: 291)

The metaphor seems to have deep roots in human consciousness. Thoughts make comparisons; one could indeed say that there is an innate tendency to think of two things simultaneously, creating connections between thoughts. It is in this way that the metaphor comes into being. (Ricoeur 2004: 290) The metaphor is not something that is ‘instead of,’ it cannot be replaced. In this operation it takes something from separate thoughts and creates something new that cannot be pronounced in any other way. Thus, “*the girl is a rose*” — *this is a metaphor cliché. The comparison accentuates some properties in detriment of others, but it also evokes something latent in us.*” (Sousa and Dahlsveen 2012: 431-432)

Notable is also Krogh Hansen and Holmgaard’s finding that the metaphor can be seen as a bridge between old and new knowledge, since through the metaphor a number of connotations are activated; acting as a filter that brings together certain characteristics (Hansen & Holmgaard 1997) that may not be all too easily reconcilable otherwise. In this sense, the entirety of the virtual installation can possibly be seen as an extended metaphor that joined ancient knowledge with new technology within which visitors had to interpret the meeting based on their own frames of reference.



*Figure 3: “The Story of Volund – The seafaring vessel and its crew are swallowed by the Whale” Sculpted figurines take on the roles of ‘silent actors.’ Second Life, 2014. Photograph by Elif Ayiter.*

Coming to the specific usage of metaphor in the project – this came about as a seafaring vessel, complete with passengers comprised of adults and children – which was added to the original tale. These passengers also stood in lieu of an ancient Greek choir through which the hero’s actions were reflected by a community that had generated the traditional oral story in the first place.

This vessel accompanied Volund throughout the 12 stages of the Hero’s Journey; albeit losing passengers along the way until only the empty vessel remained during the final stages of the journey. A need to bring such a seafaring object into prominence came about through a wish to integrate yet another metaphor into the ‘story-world.’ This is the metaphor of the ‘Belly of the Whale’ on which Campbell discourses extensively as “*a sphere of rebirth*” whereby the hero, “*instead of conquering or conciliating the power of the threshold, is swallowed into the unknown, and would appear to have died, giving emphasis to the lesson that the passage of the threshold is a form of self-annihilation.*” (Campbell 1973: 83-89)

It should however be added that, while Campbell refers to the symbolism of the ‘Belly of the Whale’ only during the ‘Departure’ phase of the Hero with a Thousand Faces, a poetic liberty was taken by extending the presence of the small seafaring vessel, and its ever diminishing group of passengers, beyond the early/departure stages of the journey to its entirety as a continuous motif, or a recurring visual element, that would bind the tale and give it cohesion. It appeared that a fragile boat which undertook a long journey across a vast virtual space during which it kept losing its passengers to untold calamities was an apt metaphor when it came to the visual conceptualization of a journey in which many dangers were encountered and many battles had to be embarked upon before a passage home could even be contemplated.

Bauman also mentions an element that has been seen as a necessity for the storyteller in the tradition: Parallelism (Bauman 1997: 18). This is one of the tools for the storyteller to remember a story and manifests itself in the story through the use of repetition and spans from being “*short and conversational to elaborate and highly marked.*”

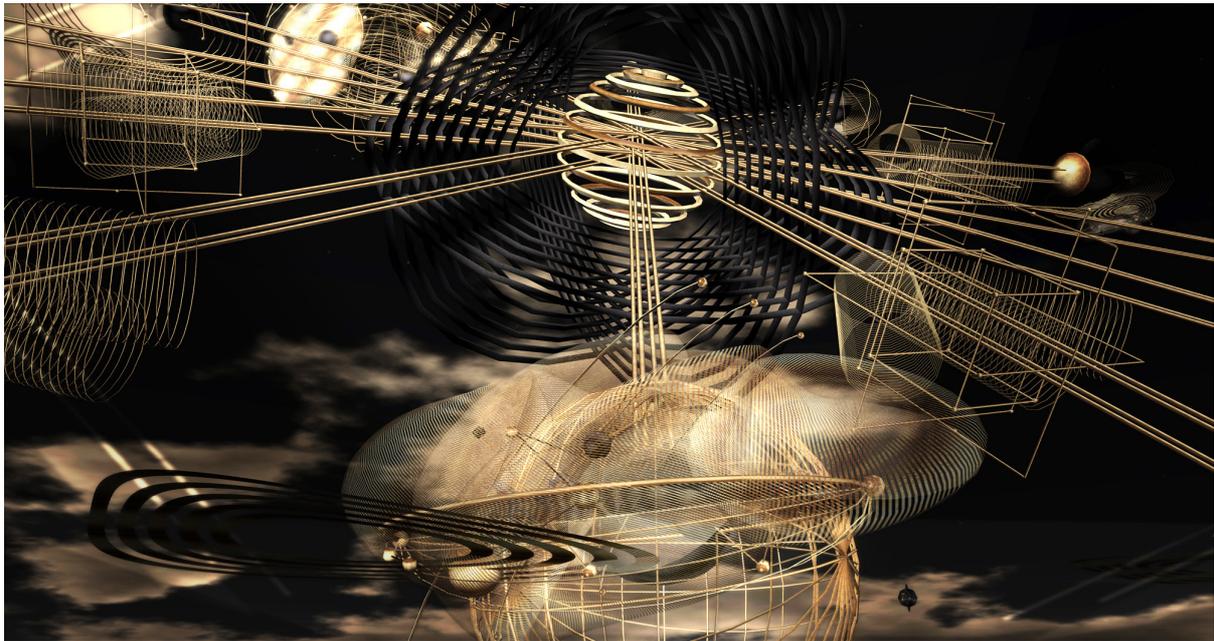
Since the challenge was to create a ‘story-world’ in which the tale would predominantly be told visually, i.e., in the absence of an oral storyteller, the most important tasks revolved around a translation of concepts such as ‘parallelism’ and ‘spatial paralinguistic features’ from a verbal into a visual domain. Parallelism was achieved through visual variations which modified a wireframed, circular construct that formed the basis of all twelve stages through which the tale was to be enacted. A further binding element was also the seafaring vessel, already discussed above. These similar yet differentiated spaces, in which the enveloping architecture had consistencies but all the inner details/furnishings changed as the tale progressed from one stage to another, helped achieve a sense of both continuity and rhythm that followed Bauman’s findings of the importance of repetition as well as change within that repetitive framework.

A further important element that Baumann also notes upon is called “*special paralinguistic features.*” (Bauman 1997: 19) This includes instruments such as tone, pitch, tempo, pauses, and volume which the storyteller uses in a performance. To this end, the primary tool that was used for a translation from the oral to the visual medium was space itself, which was used in lieu of pauses, volume, tempo and so forth: The architecture of the project was created on a very large area of virtual land and furthermore it used this space not only horizontally but also vertically. This allowed the placement of the twelve stages of the tale at considerable distances from one another. What is also important is that these distances were joined by ramps and bridges that visiting avatars were expected to use in order to not to get lost as they walked or flew from one location to the next. While the distances between the stages were hoped to provide eloquent pauses between one part of the tale and the next, the ramps and bridges were hoped to give visual clues as to volume and tempo: As one approached or departed from a stage the telling of the tale would recede or pick up in tempo and volume – not through auditory means but through visual ones.

### **Building a ‘Story-World’**

The architecture was based upon a well-known diagram of the journey of Campbell’s Hero with a Thousand Faces in which the different phases of passages are arranged upon a clock-like interface. Many variations of this diagram can be found online – their common characteristic is that the journey commences at the point corresponding to one o’clock, and ends at 12 o’clock.<sup>x</sup> Following this format the installation was built as a gigantic, clock-like structure made out of stages that were attached to long spokes which converged at a central sun. This big construct was then tilted vertically, at a roughly 45 degree angle, in order to facilitate a navigational system for visiting avatars which was comprised of the

aforementioned bridges and ramps connecting the 12 stages, arranged at locations which corresponded to their placements on the Hero's Quest diagram.



*Figure 4: "The Story of Volund – Overview of Architecture." Second Life, 2014. Photograph by Elif Ayiter.*

The installation was built several thousand virtual meters in the sky of Second Life, away from neighboring builds or terrain formations, in order to achieve a sense of being suspended in a timeless, ever expanding, mythical space in which nothing but the world of Volund and his tale existed. This world was constructed out of a golden architecture aimed to instill a sense of splendor and a mythical time long-gone-by. However, at the same time this architecture consisted of wireframes that would emphasize the here and now, the technology that helped bring this mythical time into being in 3D format – the underlying code of the virtual world. This wireframed, golden architecture rested on bodies of golden water from which arose golden sea vessels populated with dark grey passengers that were frozen in dramatic, indeed oftentimes traumatic, poses that helped accentuate the perils of the passage.

This setting was displayed against a sky that also helped illustrate a journey starting from the light, dipping into the darkness of the abyss at its lowest point and then moving back up into the light again as the passage reached its conclusion. Since the architecture favored the vertical axis advantage could be taken of recent improvements made to metaverse skies whereby different lighting conditions can be displayed at different sky levels. Thus, when Volund's journey started at the one o'clock position at the top of the architecture, the lighting was one of a golden sunrise. As the tale progressed visitors reached increasingly lower levels of the clock interface where lighting changed to a deep indigo that also picked up on the metaphor of the 'Belly of the Whale,' marking the onset of the deepest, hardest point of the sojourn. Continuing the journey upwards brought avatars back up to the golden world of a sunset that marked the end of the tale.

All of these visual components – skies, lighting, architecture and objects revolved around the figure of Volund, indeed were only there to emphasize this central character and his quest; as aids to becoming entangled into the role of this central character. As mentioned previously, Volund represents both the light elves and the dark elves –he is both predator and prey; beautiful, intelligent and skilled, whilst yet also ruthless and cruel. The tale therefore holds dichotomies, contradictions and alienations that come to the fore through the very persona of its protagonist. One of the tasks was to depict this sense of ‘otherness’ or ‘strangeness,’ of being both ‘man’ and ‘alien,’ both ‘good’ and ‘bad.’ To this end an androgynous avatar that visitors could transform themselves into by wearing the provided apparel, shape and skin was created – a beautiful and yet unsettling creature, who as the tale progressed kept being endowed with new garments, new tools, new jewelry, devices, gadgets and behaviors/animations with which he either succumbed to or overcame his antagonists.

A systematization aiding the analysis of narrative – one which may also come in handy as a guide of the present visualization of the tale of Volund – can be found in Roland Barthes who introduces five codes with which he says that the structuration of narratives might best be accomplished. These are: 1) the semic (the code of connotations, wealth, power, luxury, evil, etc), 2) the cultural (the code of social, cultural and other commonly held knowledge), 2) the proairetic (the code of actions, of behavior), 3) the hermeneutic (the code of enigmas, their formulation and subsequent development, delay and final solution), 4) and the symbolic (the code of antithesis, of binary oppositions: good and bad, rich and poor, old and young) codes. (Fencott 2003: 158)

The first two of the five Barthesian codes can easily be applied to Volund’s virtual tale: The story unfolds in a mythical space and during a mythical time – resulting in a set of conditions that gave great imaginative leeway in creating a world filled with artifacts, architecture and attire which reflected the splendor of such a milieu. Beyond these, there were also behaviors implemented through animations that implied a whole plethora of cultural attributes, ranging from power to wealth to evil and many more, which could be associated with a locale and a time that existed outside of the bounds of everyday experiences.

The hermeneutic is yet another of the Barthesian codes that found correspondence in the project. The tale of Volund is a story of transformation in which events take many unexpected turns, dangers are encountered and overcome, and puzzles that have to be resolved are set. However, what is possibly the most compelling aspect of the tale appears to also fall under this code – namely the transmutations that affect the protagonist’s appearance and his body language: Attire is added onto as well as taken off. As the hero progresses from stage to stage belts, rings and masks are worn as well as taken off to be replaced by heroic helmets and cloaks. Thus, the appearance of the protagonist can be considered to become a visualization of the enigmas and puzzles that he is confronted with, that he is expected to solve and overcome, in order to complete his quest.

Similarly, the symbolic code of binary oppositions, of good and evil, of young and old, of power and defenselessness, of courage and fear, have been told through visual aids that relate

to Volund's appearance in the virtual world, as well as the animations with which these opposing states are enacted. Thus, as an example, during the early stages of the tale, the young Volund, in accordance with Joseph Campbell's corresponding stage, (1973, pp. 51-63) refuses the 'Call to the Adventure.' The state of mind is displayed with a mask that conceals eyes, ears and mouth to symbolize a mind-state that has fully drawn in on itself, refusing to establish contact with any stimulus from without. (Figure 6) In binary opposition to this are the magic belts, the heroic helmets and the swords with which this mask is replaced soon after as the Hero starts out on his journey.



*Figure 5: "The Story of Volund – Refusal of the Call." Second Life, 2014. Photograph by Elif Ayiter.*

What may be most relevant when it comes to the virtual nature of the project is Barthes's second code – namely the proairetic, since this may well correspond to Agency, without which the immersion required to experience the tale by participating in it, in fact by 'becoming it,' would probably not be all too easy to attain.

An important part of achieving agency, a realization of the Barthesian proairetic code for the visiting avatar enacting Volund, were the representations of the antagonists (and sometimes victims) of Volund. These were displayed as the 'silent actors' whose importance to the project, especially in terms of how they helped solo visitors to attain 'presence,' has already been delved into above: The first three stages were populated with a tribe of dwarfs, with Volund's father in a prominent role in the first of them. Similarly, in the fifth stage, visitors encountered a magnificently attired sculpted female – the Valkyrie whom Volund imprisoned and wedded. Moving further along the tale, the visitor would encounter Volund's big antagonist 'The King,' as well as his daughter whom Volund raped and impregnated.



*Figure 6: “The Story of Volund – The Dwarfs.” Sculpted figurines take on the roles of ‘silent actors.’ Second Life, 2014. Photograph by Elif Ayiter.*

In addition to these specific characters that were found at distinct locations set in correspondence to the progression of the tale, a silently tragic corps de ballet – the ever diminishing passengers of Volund’s boat, who have also been discussed above – was also provided. All of these figurines were frozen in body motions and expressions that helped Volund tell the tale. Beyond their immediately apparent expressive contributions, many of these characters also held animations that the visitor could trigger in order to form group poses/animations in which the silent actor and the one endowed with performative agency, i.e., the wearer of Volund, could become part of one single expressive tableau in which a particular set of events in the story were told solely through visual means.

## **Conclusion**

In this article the relationship between two very different media, the oral and the visual, have been explored. These were brought together in a virtual world project, enacted by an avatar who was surrounded by an architecture and a cast of ‘silent actors,’ in order to tell a tale from Norse mythology which has as its protagonist a vastly complex character of light and dark characteristics that are sometimes displayed simultaneously.

Johan Hoorn and Elly Konijn say that fictional characters should be possessed of four functions that contribute to the workings of the psyche: They should teach us how to behave, through them we should be able to explore our emotional lives, they should satisfy the need for emotional experiences and they should have an entertaining and relaxing function. Furthermore the authors say that fictional characters should be sophisticated enough to be experienced both at an ethical and an aesthetic level. (Hoorn & Konijn 2003: 250-268)

One way of how the four functions above may be brought into effect could be through the avatar as storyteller and protagonist: The project did not ask its visitors just to follow the journey of Volund – instead visitors were asked to become Volund and experience the tale through a first order process of involvement: The aim was to intensify the potency of the objectives that Hoorn and Konijn propose above by taking advantage of the capabilities that an online virtual world presents us with when it comes to creating compelling ‘story-worlds’ that can extend the experience oral tradition of storytelling into a visually, sonically, and behaviorally immersive novel format. In these worlds, the roles of storyteller and audience will in all likelihood be redefined: In this new phase of oral storytelling, the storyteller may no longer necessarily be on-stage as the hands-on performer who brings together the visual, the auditory and the behavioral through a performative act. More likely, as has been the case in this project, the storyteller now working in virtual worlds will be the silent organizer behind a ‘Gesamtkunstwerk’ which will guide the audience to assume the role of both storyteller and hero.

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<sup>i</sup> In Norse mythology, a valkyrie is a female figure who chooses those who may die in battle and those who may live. Selecting among half of those who die in battle (the other half go to the goddess Freyja's afterlife field Fólkvangr), the valkyries bring their chosen to the afterlife hall of the slain, Valhalla, ruled over by the god Odin. Valkyries are attested in the Poetic Edda, a book of poems compiled in the 13th century from earlier traditional sources; the Prose Edda and *Heimskringla* (by Snorri Sturluson), and *Njáls saga*, a Saga of Icelanders, all written in the 13th century. They appear throughout the poetry of skalds, in a 14th-century charm, and in various runic inscriptions.

<sup>ii</sup> Elder Edda: An anonymous collection of Old Norse pagan poems, compiled by Saemund Sigfusson. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14726/14726-h/14726-h.htm>

<sup>iii</sup> Translation of ‘riddersagaer’ = ‘knight sagas’

<sup>iv</sup> Translation of ‘skald’ = ‘poet’ or ‘bard’

<sup>v</sup> *Norrøne gude- og heltesagn*: A compilation of Norse mythology; legends of gods and heroes. <http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/007914245>

<sup>vi</sup> The Poetic Edda is the modern attribution for an unnamed collection of Old Norse poems. While several versions exist, all consist primarily of text from the Icelandic mediaeval manuscript known as the *Codex Regius*.

<sup>vii</sup> A fairy tale in the Germanic tradition

<sup>viii</sup> Church, D., (1999), *Formal Abstract Design Tools*, *Games Developer Magazine*.

<sup>ix</sup> Laurel, B., ‘Placeholder’ [http://www.tauzero.com/Brenda\\_Laurel/Severed\\_Heads/CGQ\\_Placeholder.html](http://www.tauzero.com/Brenda_Laurel/Severed_Heads/CGQ_Placeholder.html)

<sup>x</sup> Diagram of the Hero’s Journey by Lisa Paitz Spindler: [http://www.lisapaitzspindler.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/myth\\_quest\\_model\\_04.jpg](http://www.lisapaitzspindler.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/myth_quest_model_04.jpg)