Vala's Runecast – Art/Design/Hypermovie

Maureen Thomas
Narrativity Studio
Interactive Institute
Beijerskajen 8
SE-205 06 Malmö, Sweden
+46 (0)40 665 7170
maureen.thomas@interactiveinstitute.se

ABSTRACT

Electronically supported interactive narrativity is so young and relatively unexplored, that experimental work like the *Vala's Runecast* hypermovie, produced under Studio research conditions (without insistent commercial pressure), is necessary to help build a bridge between traditional linear movie origination and production, and hypermovie/other interactive narrative in the digital en-vironment. This paper summarises how practice-based research identifies and formulates the functions of art, aesthetics and design in the processes of content-creation, production and delivery, as well as in the participative, creative enjoyment of digital interactive hypermovie. The example of *Vala's Runecast* suggests that both the production and the experience of interactors (users) con-stitute parts of a participatory design process for collab-orative dramatic narrativity; and that in content-led research the highest aesthetic standards must be observed in proof of concept prototyping for the results to be viable.

Keywords

Oral tradition, hypermovie production, digital media, interactive narrative drama, collaborative narrativity.

## Art and Design in Linear and Non-Linear Movie Pro-duction – Form & Content

The *Vala's Runecast* hypermovie project formulates and tests sustainable non-linear interactive narrativity, using leading edge digital video and sound techniques, designed for Digital Versatile Disk (DVD) or CDROM publication. *Vala's Runecast* moves in a different direction from the 3D animated computer adventure-games which at the opening of the 21st century were almost the only mainstream entertainment genre to exploit the possibilities of interactive digital arts and narrativity. These generally offer single-hero epic, adrenaline-driven 'shooters' or quest-based puzzle-games, rarely played more than once. Even the most story-like (such as Lucas Arts' *Grim Fandango,* Playstation's *Final Fantasy IX, Resident Evil,* and *Metal Gear Solid*, LionHead's *Black & White* or the online *Baldur's Gate)*

scarcely begin to satisfy the need for character-driven drama that affects you emotionally which theatre, cinema and TV traditionally supply. Dramatic characters are a powerful force for involving people di-rectly in a rich fictive or imaginative experience, and sus-taining their engagement over time. Unlike the imag-inative immersive experience of theatre or film, much interactive screen entertainment emphasises control as the participative mode of the interactor – pressing buttons or clicking the mouse determine the actions of something or someone within the storyworld. Playing on imagination rather than pure adrenaline, *Vala's Runecast* demonstrates alternative ways to involve interactors in a participative and collaborative storymaking process. It also seeks to minimise repetition with its corollary of boredom and loss of engagement. In control-based adventure games in the standard quest-format, if you click or press, the same thing happens - if you fail the first time, you can try again, and repeat a segment of the adventure. Modestly 'intelligent agents' have been introduced into gameworlds to try to counteract predictability; but *Vala's Runecast* seeks to identify and formulate other kinds of collaborative narrative practice and ways of generating engaging and satisfying interactive drama for the computer age. It develops and transforms cinematic and theatrical approaches to offer more poetic and artistic complexity than animated agent behaviour can at present achieve.

One of the great pleasures of expressive dramatic art is surely the interaction between the drama and the audience. People lose themselves in the fiction, and at the same time find a deeper self, and a unique experience, abandoning their everyday personas to identify with dramatic characters and situations, and exploring imaginatively many different roles and emotions in the course of the play, film, opera or ballet. In cinema and television - the traditional moving-image media of the 20th century - the performance and the audience's reactions are mediated by the language, conventions and aesthetics of the screen. If the artistic quality of the performance and/or audiovisual production are not sufficiently high, it will fail to engage or affect its audience. Interactive entertainment and in-formation are normally mediated by the computer, but high aesthetic quality remains crucial to providing an im-aginatively and aesthetically satisfying experience. The experimental
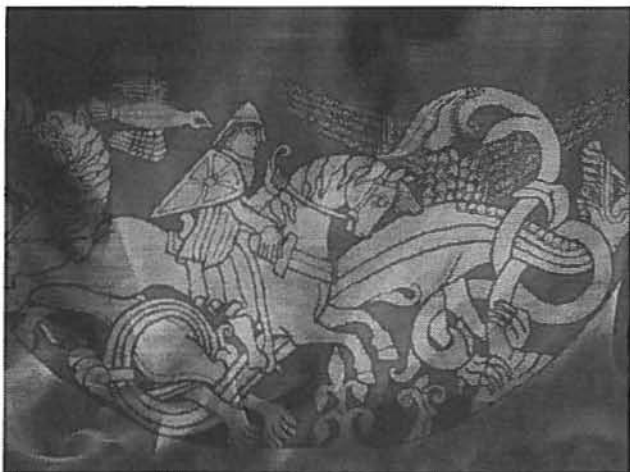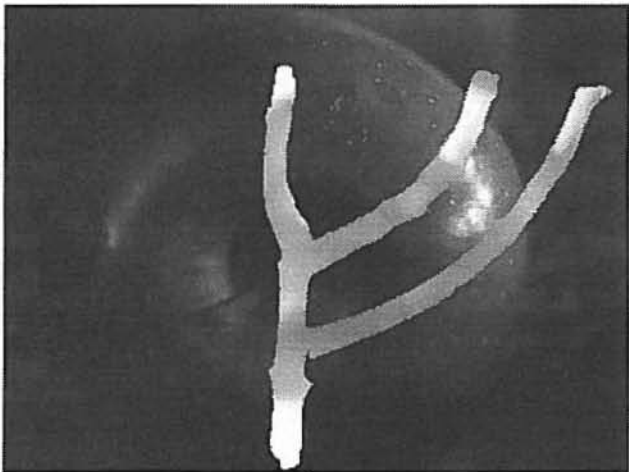
research production *Vala's Runecast* identi-fies and demonstrates the potential of deep narrative structures for hypermovie, and to realise them creates an appropriate expressive rhetoric of moving images and sound for the interactive environment, which can be adopted for purposes beyond *Vala's Runecast*. All the members of the research team are professional artists and designers, exploring and developing the medium from specialist perspectives. Although the version shown at the PDC Art/Work expo is only a proof-of-concept prototype, it could not have proved the artistic concept without attain-ing high dramatic and aesthetic standards, since without these the audience will not fully engage with the content.

Vala's visitors cannot make her do things by clicking - they can work with her, exploring to find a unique personal experience under her guidance. She will not engage with you unless you actively ask her to. The research asks: can such participatory movie experience be a dramatically satisfying process? What potential has it for further development? In order to answer these questions, Vala has to be a genuinely dramatic character, whose performance engages her visitors. Both the actor and singer who perform Vala are therefore professionals, like the production team - though the role of producer, in line with the policy of the Interactive Institute, was taken by the senior researcher as project manager, in addition to her professional creative role as writer/director.

Content as Interaction Design Metaphor
The poem, *Voluspaa (Song of the Seeress)*, on which *Vala's Runecast* is based, is the main storehouse of modern knowledge of the ancient Nordic Gods, and has inspired artists from William Morris and Richard Wagner through WH Auden to JRR Tolkien whose *Lord of the Rings* books (1937 – 1954) have been the genesis of many fantasy-fiction and role-playing games, as well as of Jackson's blockbusting movie, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001). This continual renewal of the myth-material in popular culture demonstrates its enduring value; *Vala's Runecast* brings it into the interactive arena, incorporating aspects of contemplative and poetic wisdom often omitted from action-adventure versions. In the manuscript, the poem is spoken, or sung, by 'Vala', a spirit-medium and keeper of knowledge. Vala evokes Nine Worlds, where gods, men, trolls, elves, giants, dwarves and other mythical beings dwell, situated at the roots of the great Ashtree, *Yggdrasill*, whose branches support the heavens. At the tree's foot, by the *Wellspring of Wyrd*, the Three Norns - *Was, Is* and *Shall-be* - carve on twigs, in runes (the writing of the pre-Christian North), the lifetales of humankind, to fall as they will. The Worlds at the roots of the Ash can be seen as 'parallel universes' accessible to the Norns, and through them, Vala, while Yggdrasill itself exists in a mythic space reachable only through poetry, music, song, dance, colour, form, or trance -

through Art, or through Magic. *Vala's Runecast* invokes the magic of interactive digital technology. Through her guides, the three Norns, Vala the Seeress can contact all the heroes, gods and otherworld beings of the Viking cosmos. In Nordic legend, the topography of the Mythological Realms is not linear in time or space, and the spatial and temporal organisation of the original poem, with its oral, pre-textual structure, provides a compelling model for non-linear interactive narrative in the digital environment. Content and form are inextricably interwoven. At the beginning of the 21st century, the hypermovie format has scarcely been explored, and as well as demonstrating a new structure, part of the research agenda for the *Vala's Runecast* experimental production was to help establish best practice in non-linear interactive digital movie production.

Traditional Linear Movie and Interactive Hypermovie
SLIDE 1: Linear Move Production Process:
Creating a linear movie (for cinema or television) traditionally involves ten well-documented stages:

1. Writing a concept and story outline (Art: Writer)

2. Attracting finance and production support for the project (Producer)

3. Writing a treatment of the story (i.e. a description of the way the story will be translated to the audience – through what action, in what arrangement of scenes, in what cinematic genre and style) (Art/Design: Writer, perhaps with input from Director/Producer)

4. Developing and writing a script which includes both action and dialogue, and taking it through as many drafts as necessary to achieve the required effect in the required number of minutes (Art/Design: Writer/Producer/Director)

5. Storyboarding and writing a shooting script which depict and describe exactly how the movie will be shot in order to translate the intentions of the script to the screen (Art/Design: Director/Cinematographer/Production Designer (storyboard artist)

6. Shooting the movie, when the Director translates the storyboard and script to the actors and crew, who interpret it using their individual professional skills and talents (Art: Director/Cinematographer (DoP)/Actors; Craft: Sound Recordist)

7. Post-production, where the sound and picture editors assemble the shot footage and recorded soundtrack, putting them together to make an engaging, properly paced and dramatic movie. At this stage, the 'first cut' would normally follow the script - but if sequences don't work as hoped, or if the performance of the actors cannot hold the drama as intended, movie can be rethought and edited in new ways to improve its impact. It is here that the composer normally starts to contribute. (Art: Editor/Sound Designer/Composer; Design: Director/Editor/Sound

Designer/Producer)

8. Marketing (Producer/Sales Agents)

9. Distribution (Producer/Sales Agents)

10. Exhibition (Cinema/BroadcastNetworks/Video/DVD)

Team:

Producer; Director (artist/designer); Writer (artist); Production Designer (artist /designer); Cinematographer (artist); Sound Recordist (craftsperson); Editor (picture) (designer/artist); Sound Designer (designer/artist); Composer (artist)

Since 1980, the entrance of digital media and the computer into the movie-making world has had significant effects on every stage of the production-process. By 1998, the fully digital movie was born, and by 2002 electronic distribution and delivery for big and small screens, including inter-active media, were a fact. *Vala's Runecast* identified a number of major differences between the traditional movie production process and the interactive digital process, especially in the new relationship between the art, design and craft components. These shifts are radical, including the introduction of interaction and interface designers, and a graphic designer, at an early stage in the process. *Vala's Runecast* also required a Visual Director/Animator with painterly as well as cinematographic and editing talent and skills, who was responsible for the final look of the production (including graphics and effects) - a different role from that of the traditional Director or Designer, and demanding a different skillset. While the Director deals with live-action shooting (directing both performers and crew) as well as overseeing the production-design, photographic, editing and sound-and-music teams, and was responsible for the overall style of the movie, the Visual Director and Editor needed excellent technical knowledge of the capabilities of digital media and standards used both in the production process and for delivery, as well as original creative talent and a full understanding of narrativity and story structure. As in all computer-based art, visual design carried a great deal of weight from an early stage, and the whole team began to collaborate closely, sharing skills and knowledge, much earlier on than on a traditional cinema or TV production. This artistically ambitious production was made by a small team of people working collaboratively from the outset, using modest (upper low-end) equipment, an approach set to spread in the 21st century. With the use of the computer both as tool and as medium, the balance between art and design within the whole sequence, from concept to delivery, altered significantly.

SLLIDE 2: Hypermovie Team Breakdown

Vala's Runecast production team role breakdown:

- Writer/Director (experience in screenwriting, music theatre writing, choreography and directing, stage and radio writing and directing) (Originated concept, wrote performance script, directed performance and overall work; also acted as producer)
- Visual Director (experience in painting, photography, animation, writing and directing for film, writing for radio, video art work) (Shot footage, manipulated images, created animations, edited sequences, interpreting script with full artistic license in close collaboration with writer/director)
- Editor/Graphic Designer/Interaction & Interface Designer (education, training and experience in film and video editing using both traditional and digital systems; shooting, and sound recording/ editing using digital media, theory and practice of interactive digital moviemaking) (edited material for interactive treatment; shot additional material where necessary; mixed sound for interactive treatment; designed screen graphics and combined digitally-captured images with computer graphics images; designed graphics for print and poster material; programmed using 'Director' where appropriate)
- Composer/Sound Designer (education, training and experience in composing for traditional and electronic instruments and media; use of algorithmic composition media; interactive games music composition) (Composed instrumental music; composed, performed and recorded songs; recorded spoken voice performance; designed sound effects and environment; mixed sound)
- 2 cinematographers in addition to the Visual Director (experience in photography, feature- TV- and art- movie making) (captured images of landscape, shot studio footage under direction of Writer/Director)
- Consultant Interactive Dramaturg, Interaction & Interface Designer (experience in theatrical performance theory and practice; Web interactive navigable sound-and-image story; avatar worlds) (worked with Writer/Director on the material to create appropriate navigation and interface)
- Interactive Programmer (and additional interactive programmer) (experience in programming using a number of languages but not, till this, Director) (programmed the interactive experience as designed by the Writer/Director with input from consultant Interactive Dramaturg /Interface Designer/ Interaction Designer, as well as Editor

Team (excluding performers)
Writer/Director/Producer (artist/designer) Maureen Thomas
Visual Director (artist/designer) Brian Ashbee
Cinematographers (artists) Ashbee, Gudmundsson, Wright
Editor/Post-Production Designer (designer/artist) Ludvig Lohse
Composer/Sound Designer (artist/designer) Karina Gretere

Consultant Interactive Dramaturg/Interaction Designer
(artist/designer) Mika Tuomola
Consultant Interface Designer/Interaction
Programmer(designer/artist) Gunther Heinrich
Programmers (designers) Anders Vedmar, R. Manton

SLIDE 3: Non-Linear Digital Interative Hypermovie Production:

Ten stages of *non-linear digital interactive movie* production:

1. Writing a concept and story outline (Art/Design: Writer/Director)

2. Attracting Finance (may involve arts funding, multimedia-production/publishing companies including those dealing with print, CDROM (music and moving image), DVD, entertainment, games, education, information; as well as movie/TV/Digital Broadcasting/ Netcasting organisations and mobile communications companies) (Producer)

3. Developing, writing and refining a script which includes both performance and structure (Art/Design: Writer, who has to be familiar with the potentials and limitations of interactivity and digitality, and may therefore need to work in consultation with the Interaction Designer/Producer)

4. Writing and Storyboarding a treatment of the story (Art/Design: Writer/ Director / Editor / Interaction Designer / Interface Designer / Graphic Designer / Producer)

5. (Storyboard and shooting script - this traditional stage *can conveniently be smoothly amalgamated with Stage 2 of the digital production process*)

6. Image and sound capture - including live action, photorealistic, graphics and computer-generated imag-ery; sound effects and music; (Art: Director / Cinematographer (DoP) / Actors; Sound Recordist / Designer)

7. Post-production - The Sound Designer and Picture Editor work using the same or closely related electronic equipment, and on a small production, may well be the same person, assembling the shot footage and recorded soundtrack to make an engaging, properly paced and dramatic movie. The Editor works with the Program-mer to ensure that the media assets are appropriately cut and where necessary looped and/or layered, correctly labelled and located for retrieval via the computer program (Director) (Art/Design: Editor (Digital Effects) / Graphic Designer/ Animator (Digital Effects) / Sound Designer / Composer / Interaction Designer / Interface Designer / Director / Producer)

8. Marketing (Producer/Sales Agents)

9. Distribution (Producer/Sales Agents) (May involve multimedia-publishing companies dealing with print, CDROM (music and moving image), DVD, enter-tainment, games, education, information; as well as movie / TV / digital broadcasting / netcasting organ-isations and mobile communications companies)

10. Exhibition (Artspace/Cinemas/Broadcast Networks/Web/Mobile Device/ CDROM/DVD)

Team (excluding performers)
Producer; Writer/Director (artist/designer); Visual Director (artist/designer); Editor/Post-Production Designer (designer/artist); Composer/Sound Designer (artist/designer) Interaction/Interface Designer (designer); Programmer (designer)

Production as Design Process

Vala's Runecast practice-based research revealed that for digital interactive hypermovie production, the traditional moviemaking team was best reduced from c.9 to 5, and then increased to 7 as an interaction designer and pro-grammer were added. At 6 out of 7 stages of the creative process, Art became inextricably intertwined with Design, while the talents and skills of each member of the team combine with those of each of the others throughout. The role of these team-members in the production tended to reduce the supremacy of the movie Director, redistributing responsibility and authority between the writer, editor, graphic designer, sound designer and interaction/interface designers, who all participate actively in the creative shaping of the final product. In short, the integration of digital sound- and image-capture, manipulation, and editing, with the computer as tool and medium, makes the interactive hypermovie production into a collaborative de-sign process rather than one dominated by a single director or author. Movie production has always been a team activity, but a linear process where the director is supreme. Algorithmic editing of the kind used in the *Vala's Rune-cast* experiment also brings the hypermovie closer to participatory design than to more traditional art-forms like cinema, in that it composes layers of pre-formed audio and visual elements (contributed by the team of artists author-ing the work) into complex sequences determined by the interactor (user/client), mediated by the program, and not solely by the director. Without the interactor's participation, there would be no narrative.

Collaborative Narrativity –
Associative, Episodic, Improvised, Ephemeral

In effect, in interactive hypermovie, the interactor functions as a member of the design team. Visiting Vala (or interacting with any other hypermovie instantiating the underlying system created for *Vala's Runecast*) requires interactors to make choices, to determine the way the spatially organised narrative content can be explored and finally expressed. The choice-points are designed, as far as possible, not to disturb the visitors' immersion in the fictive experience. The Viking-age practice of casting the runes, which is intrinsic to the content, makes explicit the relationship between Chance and Destiny underlying the algorithmic structure, and provides a simple interaction metaphor, a recognisable situational

relationship (fortune-teller/seeker) between the work and the interactor. It also inspires the system's mathematical use of sensitive dependence on initial conditions, which enables individual visitors to generate many new versions of the experience which all make associative narrative sense, though they cannot all have been foreseen by the authors of the content. Only digitality makes possible this open-ended framework. The interactor can choose the first condition (select a specific rune) which initiates the computer's random choice of five expressive narrative video landscapes (opened by 5 characterised runes). The six narrative layered sequences associated with the six runes of a single Runecast are all the visitor can explore in one session, and the whole narrative experience depends upon the interactor's setting of the initial conditions. When interactors enter any one of the runescapes, they can explore the content in an order they choose, or wander randomly. They cannot, however, repeat any part of the experience, because, in each session, the system (personified by Vala) removes material from the narrative landscape (database) once it has been activated.

The logic of the narrative content itself is associative rather than causal, a poetic structure used in linear movies from *Citizen Kane* (Welles 1941), *La Jetee* (Marker 1962), *The Phantom of Liberty* (Buñuel 1974), *Mirror* (Tarkovsky 1974), *Koyanisqatsi* (Reggio 1983), *Drowning by Numbers* (Greenaway 1988), *Orlando* (Potter 1992), *Short Cuts* (Altman 1993), *12 Monkeys* (Gilliam 1995) and *Mrs Dalloway* (Gorris 1997) to *Timecode* (Figgis, 2000) or *Mulholland Drive* (Lynch 2001), as it was in Viking-age oral poetry. The material in all Vala's runescapes is connected partly thematically (through Nordic Mythology and the relationships between its characters); partly formally (each runescape contains verses, tales and songs with matching metrical and stylistic characteristics); partly through relationship to a central situation and image (the 3 Norns at the Well beneath the World Ash, carving and casting the rune-twigs); partly through relationships to a central story (the myth of Baldur, Frigg and Loki); partly through aesthetic properties (music, visual style, voice-over) – and, to a great extent through the character of the storyteller, mediator, guide and presenter, Vala, and the way she activates each individual interactor's memories, dreams and imagination. The structure of *Vala's Runecast* is episodic, each individual runescape containing material focused round a particular hero, and this gives it great temporal flexibility - shared not only with Eddaic poetry, but also with many mediaeval compilations deriving from oral tradition, such as the stories of King Arthur and his knights, or Robin Hood and his merry men; a format which manifests on contemporary TV in relatively non time-specific space operas like *StarTrek, Stargate SG1,* or *Andromeda,* sitcoms such as *Friends,* and series like *Smallville* or *Xena.*

However, in *Vala's Runecast*, the interactor is a necessary part of the process of composing the narrative. Vala speaks (though in trance) directly to interactors, telling their personal - unrepeatable - fortunes, as well as offering stories and poems from her repertoire. This makes the dramatic narrative process a collaborative one, between visitor, performer and authors, mediated by the computer hardware and software. The interactor is not the artist, but functions as a member of the design-team, creating the final experience, working with the digitally-captured performer so that she can (with the help of the computer) improvise with her material - as jazz performers and improve actors as well as oral storytellers do. Only 6 runes of 22 can be accessed in any one visit, so stories, knowledge and understanding are built cumulatively over time by each individual interactor, as in oral cultures. Vala does not repeat lines according to a fully pre-determined script, at the prompting of a mouse-click. With the help of algorithmic editing, she gives a fresh performance for each visitor, as part of a collaborative process between visitor, system, artists/designers and digital performer.

Conclusions

The *Vala's Runecast* experimental hypermovie production shows that the whole process of computer-supported interactive digital production can become a satisfying creative collaboration between artists and designers; and that, through the use of the computer both as production tool and artistic medium, people who in the context of traditional linear movies are 'consumers', become active members of the design-team, composing the final dramatic experience in a process of collaborative narrativity. In order to determine whether this role produces genuine narrative satisfaction and aesthetic pleasures of its own, the prototype has to reach levels of artistic and aesthetic as well as technical, creative and skills-based achievement sufficiently high for the experience to compare with traditional screen entertainment and contemporary interactive art-installations and adventure-games. To test and formulate how interactors can move from the participatory enjoyment of storytelling with artists and designers to creating their own stories collaboratively through avatar-based role-playing, a Real-Time 3D Virtual Environment (RT3DVE) version of 'Vala's World' is planned, for which the *Vala's Runecast* hypermovie provides a necessary first step. Without knowledge of a cast of characters, and familiarity with story-models and expressive conventions, no-one, whether expert artist/designer or talented amateur, can generate effective narrative dramatic art. *Vala's Runecast* exemplifies one structural matrix for spatially organised narrative, which can enable new stories as well as new collaborative communicative and creative learning situations to emerge, as open-ended frameworks.