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and the use of virtual worlds in historical research**

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***From Voss to New York. Norwegian Transmigration to America and the Use of Virtual Worlds in Historical Research***

ABSTRACT

The discipline of history has embraced the research opportunities offered by the rapid development in digital humanities over the past decade or so. Computer technology has enabled text mining and the analysis of large bodies of data to an extent that would have been impossible a generation earlier. The latest generation of interactive applications and user-generated content ('Digital History 2.0'), however, allows for a different approach to presenting and researching the past. In the research project which underpins this article we use an online 3D virtual world not only to portray emigration from Norway to America but also to pioneer a new approach to historical research.

Freely available virtual world software (Open Sim) was used to recreate the journey of an emigrant travelling from Voss to New York in the early 1880s. The Voss farm and the port of Bergen are included in the virtual world, as is New York. A particular emphasis, however, is the lesser-studied 'England leg' of the journey, via Hull and Liverpool, which had become the standard emigration route by the 1870s, and we describe this journey in some detail. We also describe the experience of creating a historical virtual world to guide others interested in this means of historiography.

Aside from official records, there is frustratingly little evidence of the experience of Norwegian migration, despite the fact that hundreds of thousands of individuals were involved. Just as fictional accounts have gained credibility as valuable sources of information 'from below', we make the case that the "indirect personal stories" of descendants and their contribution to microhistory need to be given proper consideration as potential sources. Given how widely dispersed the informants are, we argue that online interactive spaces are an essential tool for historians, and we should not be put off by current technological limitations and challenges.

*Keywords*

Emigration, Norway, England, Virtual Worlds.

The principal aim of this article is methodological: to assess the value of 3D virtual worlds for historical research on the one hand and for the dissemination of history on the other (section 7). The case study (section 4) is a virtual world portraying migration from Voss to New York in 1882 via the ports of Bergen, Hull and Liverpool

(section 3). The historiography of 19<sup>th</sup>-century migration has tended to emphasise the Norwegian and American ends of the journey (section 2), but the virtual world discussed here focuses on the lesser-studied middle stage of that journey: the *transmigration* across England (section 5). The second aim is to assess (and to champion) the value of microhistorical materials (specifically indirect personal stories) as historical sources (section 8).

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## 1 INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

«Past migrations live on in the imagination»,<sup>2</sup> writes Harald Runblom, and the pioneer spirit of those Europeans who made the journey across the Atlantic in the 19<sup>th</sup> century has a powerful resonance for the emigrants' descendants as well as for those without any personal stake in that «unparalleled event in the history of humanity».<sup>3</sup> The statistics behind the transatlantic emigration are dramatic, and amidst all the data it is easy to lose sight of the millions of individual dramas and personal stories, the history from below. Donald Harman Akenson states on the one hand that the Great European Migration «was one of the truly freak phenomena in human history», and that the «sea of information» we have about it is vast, but on the other hand emigration was «an everyday and integral part of the way each nation functioned: something that had to be lived with, year in, year out».<sup>4</sup> So while the emigration to the USA lives on as something statistically enormous, something phenomenal, its individual instances were unremarkable, its personal manifestations part of ordinary life.

The principal research question posed here, then, is a methodological one. Can the technological opportunities available in the 21<sup>st</sup> century allow historians to

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<sup>1</sup> I thank all those audiences at conferences, universities and non-academic presentations in Norway, the UK and the USA for their comments and suggestions. Special thanks are extended to Professor Jan Eivind Myhre of the University of Oslo for invaluable comments on an earlier draft as well as to the two reviewers for *Norsk historisk tidsskrift*.

<sup>2</sup> H. Norman and H. Runblom, *Transatlantic Connections: Nordic Migration to the New World after 1800*, Oslo 1988: 143.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*: 3.

<sup>4</sup> D. H. Akenson, *Ireland, Sweden and the Great European Migration 1815-1914*, Liverpool 2011: 4, 5, 21.

present the personal and the ordinary in more engaging ways? And more ambitiously, can that technology facilitate enhanced *access* to «the personal and the ordinary», to enable such material to supplement the vast data pool already well plundered by researchers?

This article is based on a research project which aimed to bring personal histories into the foreground in two main ways. Firstly, it used 3D virtual world technology to present an *individual emigration journey*. The software used for building the virtual world (OpenSim<sup>5</sup>) allowed users to customise their avatars and to build their own experience of the historical migration, but the more serious object of the exercise was to use computer technology not traditionally associated with historical research to animate the process of emigration in ways which traditional archival material or static photographic images fail to do. Secondly, using this pioneering method, the project sought to *access personal accounts* of the experience of emigration which might not normally be accessible to professional historians. From the point of view of historiography, therefore, the project's aim was to investigate whether an on-line virtual world and associated social media could function as a research tool, allowing for the collection of otherwise invisible historical material, first and foremost those received narratives of the emigration experience which survive outside the traditional research environment. Could the method of dissemination be simultaneously the method for research?

The case study was a peasant from the Voss region of western Norway, departing in 1882 when the tide of migration was at its highest. This nameless emigrant (Ola Nordmann, or the Norwegian Everyman) travels from his home to Bergen where he embarks on a North Sea ship and travels to Hull, across the north of England by train to Liverpool, and from there on board another ship bound for New York where his journey ends. Investigating Norwegian emigration in this way led to a more fundamental consideration of how *historical* research involving *living* informants is carried out and of the value of informal and indeed indirect sources as historical evidence, and we discuss these issues below.

The present article is in six main sections. We begin by siting the research in the context of Norwegian emigration historiography and in section 3 set out the relevant historical background informing the virtual world of «Ola Nordmann». We then present contemporary conditions in Norway and in section 4 focus on the two

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<sup>5</sup> [opensimulator.org](http://opensimulator.org)

principal locations included in the virtual world: Voss and Bergen. In section 5 we consider the specific (and under-researched) process of *transmigration*, travelling across England to get from the North Sea to the Atlantic, a route which by the later 19<sup>th</sup> century was the preferred one for the majority of emigrants leaving Europe. In section 6 we describe the *Ola Nordmann Goes West (ONGW)* virtual world, on which this article is based, in more detail, its aims, objectives, methodology and practical operation. Finally, this article assesses the value of such computer methods in historical research, and of the historical sources they can provide, and presents some of the lessons learned and perspectives for future research (section 7) before making a case in the final section for indirect personal stories of migration as a significant genre. (We will not be dwelling on technological details or the techniques of digital humanities, as these are covered elsewhere.<sup>6</sup>)

## 2 THE HISTORIOGRAPHICAL TRADITION AND COMPUTER TECHNOLOGY

There is a substantial literature stretching back as far as the 1860s on the history of migration from Norway to the United States.<sup>7</sup> This developed into a more serious scholarly enterprise at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the study by Norwegian-American linguist George T. Flom of the earliest Norwegian communities in the USA.<sup>8</sup> The first major study of more extensive historical scope was Theodore C. Blegen's *Norwegian Migration to America*, which came out in two volumes in 1931 and 1940, respectively.<sup>9</sup> Although, like Flom, the son of Norwegian immigrants, Blegen was born in the USA, and his study, adopting a «source, host and integration model»,<sup>10</sup> focuses predominantly on the American end of the story, especially in the second volume, *The American Transition*. Blegen's main concern is the westward spread of the Norwegian immigrants and how Norwegian-American communities were organised and developed. This work was published by the Norwegian-American Historical Association (NAHA), of which Blegen was himself publications editor until 1960. NAHA was founded in 1925 on the centenary of the first emigrant boat leaving Norway for the Promised Land and has championed and supported the cataloguing

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<sup>6</sup> L. M. Sørensen, *Ola Nordmann goes west: virtual worlds as historical research tools*. In preparation.

<sup>7</sup> I. Semmingsen, *Veien mot vest II: Utvandringen fra Norge til Amerika 1865-1915*, Oslo 1950: 9.

<sup>8</sup> G. T. Flom, *A History of Norwegian Immigration to the United States. From the Earliest Beginning Down to the Year 1848*, Iowa City 1909.

<sup>9</sup> T. C. Blegen, *Norwegian Migration to America*, Northfield, Minn. 1931; 1940.

<sup>10</sup> N. J. Evans, *Aliens en route: European Transmigration through Britain, 1836-1914*. PhD thesis, University of Hull 2006: 7.

and study of Norwegian immigration ever since. Since its inception NAHA has produced the journal *Norwegian-American Studies* and has published over seventy books on the history of Norwegian America, the most recent being a translation and edition of America letters,<sup>11</sup> which were so crucial not only to the maintenance of links between the Old Country and the New but which also fuelled emigration zeal within Norway. The NAHA archive, maintained at St Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota, constitutes a substantial material collection allowing the historians of future generations to continue to investigate the process by which Norwegians arrived and established themselves in the USA. Even a century ago Flom was writing that:

No one who has never been engaged in a similar undertaking can have any conception of the difficulty of the task and the labor involved in the collecting, weighing and sifting of the vast amount of detail [sic] material.<sup>12</sup>

So the «America transition» has been thoroughly studied and there are the resources to allow for continued contributions to this history. Despite all this activity, however, and the richness of the sources, as well as the prolific output of some US scholars of the «Midwest School<sup>13</sup>» (notably Odd S. Lovoll<sup>14</sup>), Nils Østrem maintains that it is in following Norwegian emigrants once they had reached America that Norwegian emigration research still has the most work to do.<sup>15</sup>

The Norwegian tradition of emigration research began somewhat later than across the Atlantic,<sup>16</sup> and it has tended, perhaps inevitably, to focus on the process of emigration as an end in itself, to focus on the Norwegian aspect. This was particularly true of the dominant school in emigration historiography, the «Semmingsen School», whereby «most of what had been done [up to 1977] had been carried out either by [Ingrid Semmingsen] or with her as guide, supervisor and inspiration».<sup>17</sup> This resulted in numerous dissertations and other studies of the emigration from particular communities or regions, supported by substantial amounts of

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<sup>11</sup> O. Øverland, *From America to Norway: Norwegian-American Letters from 1838-1914. Volume One 1838-1870*, Northfield, Minn. 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Flom 1909: 9.

<sup>13</sup> Ø. T. Gulliksen, Korleis skal ein lese norsk utvandringshistorie?, *Historieblogg* 2014: <http://www.historieblogg.no/?cat=17>.

<sup>14</sup> E.g. O. S. Lovoll, *The Promise of America: A History of the Norwegian American People*, Minneapolis 1999; O. S. Lovoll, *The Promise Fulfilled: A Portrait of Norwegian Americans Today*, Minneapolis 2007.

<sup>15</sup> N. O. Østrem, *Norsk utvandringshistorie*, Oslo 2006: 114.

<sup>16</sup> Østrem 2006: 39.

<sup>17</sup> E. Niemi, Norsk emigrasjonsforskning siden Ingrid Semmingsen. Veien videre? in O. S. Lovoll (ed.), *Migrasjon og tilpasning. Ingrid Semmingsen. Et minneseminar*, Oslo 1998: 12.

demographic and economic data: lots of «counting».<sup>18</sup> Although the Semmingsen approach underpinned Norwegian research in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Gunnar Thorvaldsen claims that emigration research nonetheless lacks standardized research methods and a unified theory.<sup>19</sup> This may be regarded as a positive factor, allowing for innovative types of research to be pioneered in the pursuit of a richer understanding of migration history.

Ingrid Semmingsen herself understood and explored «the possibilities of modern computer techniques» in handling the large quantity of data her historiographical approach relied upon,<sup>20</sup> as indeed did another leading 20<sup>th</sup>-century scholar, Charlotte Erickson.<sup>21</sup> The historiography of migration from the Nordic countries has also reaped the benefit of, for example, oral history techniques. Janet E. Rasmussen's 1993 book was the first investigation of immigration to the USA from Scandinavia to be based on oral testimony, and she notes that this represents a methodological sea change from studies based on «'hard' indicators like census, tax, and church records».<sup>22</sup> More recently (2012), NAHA has launched a crowd-sourcing oral history project to collect the testimonies of Nordic immigrants who have arrived in the USA since the Second World War.<sup>23</sup> *ONGW* has sought to further develop this vein of methodological innovation. While Semmingsen and Erickson responded to the possibility of using computer applications to handle «hitherto unmanageable bodies of data»,<sup>24</sup> *ONGW* investigated the research potential inherent in the *second generation* of web applications (Digital History 2.0<sup>25</sup>), allowing users to connect with each other and share in a common experience, no matter where in the world they are. The recording and collection of oral accounts of the historical experiences «of groups

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<sup>18</sup> L. Aase, *Migrasjon, misjon og mammon: en nærstudie av sørlandsk utvandring til sør-afrika i perioden 1849-1920*. Masteroppgave, Universitetet i Agder 2010: 11.

<sup>19</sup> G. Thorvaldsen, Teorier fra historisk migrasjonsforskning: sosialpsykologi eller økonomi, *Tidsskrift for samfunnsforskning* 1996, 37(4): 479.

<sup>20</sup> I. Semmingsen, Family emigration from Bergen 1874-92. Some preliminary results of a statistical study, *Americana Norvegica* 1971, 3: 38.

<sup>21</sup> C. Erickson, Explanatory models in immigration and migration research. In: I. Semmingsen and P. Seyersted (eds.), *Scando-American Papers on Scandinavian Emigration to the United States*, Oslo 1980: 7-26.

<sup>22</sup> J. E. Rasmussen, *New Land—New Lives: Scandinavian Immigrants to the Pacific Northwest*, Northfield, MN 1993: 5.

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.naha.stolaf.edu/oralhistory/>

<sup>24</sup> Erickson 1980: 7.

<sup>25</sup> J. Mussell, Doing and making: history as digital practice. In: T. Weller (ed.), *History in the Digital Age*, London 2013: 79-94. Mussell (p. 80) defines this second generation as «predicated on a shift from documents to data», but *ONGW* exemplifies a further shift from data to visualization.

of people who might otherwise have been ‘hidden from history’»<sup>26</sup> (oral history) is a well-established methodology, although not without its critics and detractors. However, collecting *received* accounts, the *indirect* stories of emigration is, as far as we can tell, an innovative approach, and one which goes some way towards addressing that challenge for research into the Great Emigration of around 60 million Europeans in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, expressed by Dudley Baines:

It is not surprising that research has tended to emphasise the economic and social causes of emigration – in so far as they can be identified [...] Emigration may have been the most important single experience that many of them would face. But it is an experience about which we have little direct evidence.<sup>27</sup>

Indirect evidence may have the taint of impurity as historical data, but, as the saying goes, «beggars can’t be choosers», and historical research needs to learn to accommodate the imperfections of such sources and not simply to dismiss them.

### 3 HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Emigration from Norway to America is, as noted above, a process characterized by dramatic statistics, and the striking nature of those statistics means that they are oft repeated and, as a consequence of that repetition, tend to lose their rhetorical force. In 1909 Flom wrote very precisely that «the total emigration from the Scandinavian countries to America between 1820 and 1903 was 1,617,111»,<sup>28</sup> while Joranger makes reference to around 513,000 Norwegians crossing the Atlantic between 1846 and 1900, and Bævre et al. provide a figure of 780,000 persons between 1865 and 1930.<sup>29</sup> The dustcover of Mørkhagen’s 2009 *Farvel Norge*, intended for a more popular audience, opens with the bald statement that «a million Norwegians emigrated to North America in the period 1825-1975» [en million Nordmenn utvandret til Nord-Amerika i perioden 1825-1975].<sup>30</sup> Mørkhagen’s figure certainly has rhetorical power, but it is disingenuous as it extends the period of migration well beyond the 19<sup>th</sup>-

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<sup>26</sup> R. Perks, and A. Thomson, Introduction. In: R. Perks and A. Thomson, *The Oral History Reader*, London and New York 1998: ix.

<sup>27</sup> D. Baines, *Emigration from Europe 1815-1930*, Basingstoke and London 1991: 7, 16.

<sup>28</sup> Flom 1909: 31.

<sup>29</sup> T. M. H. Joranger, Multiple identities? Ethnic identity formation among Norwegian immigrants in the USA 1850-1900. In: C. F. Ax and N. O. Østrem (eds.), *Nordic Migration: Research Status, Perspectives and Challenges*, Stamsund 2011: 80; K. Bævre, C. Riis and T. Thonstad, Norwegian cohort emigration, *Journal of Population Economics* 2001, 14: 474.

<sup>30</sup> S. Mørkhagen, *Farvel Norge: Utvandringen til Amerika 1825-1975*, Oslo 2009.



century flow which had largely abated by the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>31</sup> Indeed by the 1880s there was a strong current flowing back towards Europe, with as many as one-quarter to one-third of European immigrants to the US in the period 1880-1930 returning home,<sup>32</sup> and this wasn't necessarily a once-and-for-all process; 10% of Finnish remigrants, for example, made the journey across the Atlantic more than twice.<sup>33</sup>

The reasons for leaving Norway were various and have been the subject of considerable discussion in the literature: «there is, of course, no general explanation».<sup>34</sup> Some of the reasons why individuals and families opted to leave their Norwegian homes were *push factors*, such as massive population growth (it more than doubled from 883,603 in 1801 to 1,813,424 in 1875),<sup>35</sup> the lack of cultivable land under a system of primogeniture where the eldest son inherited a farm in its entirety, religious intolerance (at least in the earliest years), escalating taxes in the wake of independence. These combined with *pull factors*, notably the promise of cheap and fertile land in the Midwest and the accounts offered by agents<sup>36</sup> and in the letters of those who had already migrated. Of these factors George Flom opined that the most compelling was «the prospect of material betterment and the love of a freer and more independent life»,<sup>37</sup> and indeed quality of life in Norway was not obviously worse than elsewhere in Europe, suggesting that the pull factors were the more compelling. More recent accounts suggest that the inherent mobility of Norwegian rural populations meant that there was already a propensity for a migratory lifestyle. Movement for a range of reasons was the norm for pre-modern societies,<sup>38</sup> and in the final decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century mobility was reinforced as manual workers travelled in response to engineering and building work.<sup>39</sup> Sune Åkerman writes that «the rural society of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Northern Europe was migratory, sometimes showing

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<sup>31</sup> Semmingsen 1950: 513.

<sup>32</sup> M. Wyman, *Round-Trip to America. The Immigrants Return to Europe, 1880-1930*, Ithaca and London 1993: 6; Baines 1991: 39.

<sup>33</sup> Norman and Runblom 1988: 108.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid: 112.

<sup>35</sup> *Statistics Norway*, [http://www.ssb.no/a/fob2001/nos\\_d316/](http://www.ssb.no/a/fob2001/nos_d316/)

<sup>36</sup> For a study of Danish emigration agents, see K. Hvidt, *Emigration agents, Scandinavian Journal of History* 1978 3(1-4): 179-203.

<sup>37</sup> Flom 1909: 88.

<sup>38</sup> J. E. Myhre, *Historiske perspektiver på flytting*. In: O. S. Lovoll (ed.), *Migrasjon og tilpasning. Ingrid Semmingsen. Et minneseminar*, Oslo 1998: 68.

<sup>39</sup> E. Bull, *En vandrerkultur*. In: S. Langholm and F. Sejersted (eds.), *Vandring. Festskrift til Ingrid Semmingsen på 70-årsdagen 29. mars 1980*, Oslo 1980: 235-252.

rates of mobility on the same level or even higher than our own time»,<sup>40</sup> and migration should not be seen simply as a response to changed economic or social circumstances.

Emigrants came from all over Norway and tended to follow the call of migration in waves.<sup>41</sup> The first boat to depart, and an icon of Norwegian emigration, was of course the *Restauration*, which sailed from Stavanger in the summer of 1825 with 52 people on board; this topos has become a mantra, and it is not surprising to find it as the opening sentence of even a scholarly account of Norwegian emigration.<sup>42</sup> During the following decade emigrants came primarily from other south-western districts of Norway, and little by little other regions began to feel the impact of America fever.

A virtual world is just one world and so has to take one migration journey as its case study. The starting point for «Ola's» journey was Voss in 1882, and there are several reasons for this choice. Emigration was at its peak in the 1880s, when eleven out of every thousand Norwegians were leaving each year,<sup>43</sup> and in particular the first part of that decade witnessed the most intensive migration activity with around 7000 leaving in each of the months of April and May in the record year of 1882, when 106 Vossings travelled to the USA via Bergen.<sup>44</sup> (It should be pointed out, however, that econometric studies have suggested that net emigration by *birth cohort* during the period 1846-1886 was strikingly consistent, even though different cohorts may have emigrated at different ages.<sup>45</sup>) Migration levels from the Voss region, described in 1888 as «one of the more difficult and disadvantageously placed regions in the fjord-districts»,<sup>46</sup> were among the most intensive during this period, and Eirik Røthe

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<sup>40</sup> S. Åkerman, Aspects of migration as behaviour and phenomenon: reflections from the high tide of Nordic migration research. In: C. F. Ax and N. O. Østrem (eds.), *Nordic Migration: Research Status, Perspectives and Challenges*, Stamsund 2011: 18.

<sup>41</sup> I. Semmingsen, Norwegian emigration in the nineteenth century, *Scandinavian Economic History Review* 1960, 8(2): 151.

<sup>42</sup> Østrem 2006: 7.

<sup>43</sup> O. S. Lovoll and K. O. Bjork, *The Norwegian-American Historical Association 1925-1975*, Northfield, MN 1975: 1.

<sup>44</sup> Semmingsen 1950: 153; *Digitalarkivet: emigrantar over Bergen frå Voss kommune*, <http://www.digitalarkivet.uib.no/cgi-win/webcens.exe?slag=visbase&filnamn=0128emig&spraak=n&metanr=1317>

<sup>45</sup> Bævre et al. 2001.

<sup>46</sup> K. Langeland, *Norwegians in America. Some Records of the Norwegian Emigration to America*, trans. O.-S. Dybvad Raneng, Waukon IA 2012 [1888]: 82.

describes it as «a migration without any parallel in Norwegian history».<sup>47</sup> In the practical terms of building a virtual world, the journey from the home farm to the port of departure at Bergen was relatively straightforward to depict, since Voss is a mere 100 kilometres inland from Bergen, and the route to the port is well understood.<sup>48</sup> The case study was of a single male emigrant rather than a family, partly again for practical reasons, but partly also because the 1880s saw the end of the period of substantial family-group migration and the «first big wave of single-person emigration».<sup>49</sup>

Nils and Torbjørg Røte and their three children were the first family to leave Voss for the United States in 1836, which means that emigration from Voss began early, and the following year 75 Vossings prepared to emigrate.<sup>50</sup> (*The First Chapter of Norwegian Immigration* by Rasmus B. Anderson contains a detailed description of the first Vossings to settle in the States.<sup>51</sup>) The reasons for leaving appear to have been the usual mixture of factors, and debate about their relative importance for emigration in general conceals the fact that every emigrant had his or her own reasons (and some who emigrated lived to regret the decision<sup>52</sup>). 1836 was a particularly disastrous year for agriculture in the Voss region, but there is also evidence of poor relations between the ordinary working people and the officials as another push factor.<sup>53</sup> Voss was also one of the regions where religious dissent was rife, particularly among followers of the lay-preacher, Hans Nielsen Hauge (1771-1824); the first Norwegian place of worship in the USA was built by a Haugean from Voss, Elling Eielson (1804-1883).<sup>54</sup> Rene writes animatedly of the historical tendency of Voss people to move within Norway in search of work, and this is borne out in

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<sup>47</sup> E. Røthe, The emigration from Voss to America in a nutshell. In: E. Røthe, J. Gjerdåker and E. K. Finne (eds.), *Gamalt frå Voss. Utvandring frå Voss til Amerika. Eit 150-års minne / Emigration from Voss to America. The 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary*, Voss 1985: 118.

<sup>48</sup> E. Røthe, Frå Voss til Chicago for 150 år sidan. In: S. Dyrvik and N. Kolle (eds.), *Eit blidare tilvere? Drivkrefter og motiv i den tidlegaste utvandringa frå Hordaland og Sogn og Fjordane*, Voss 1986: 164-193.

<sup>49</sup> Semmingsen 1971: 40.

<sup>50</sup> K. A. Rene, *History of Emigration from Voss, and the Vossings in America. With Description and History of Voss, Maps and Pictures*, trans. S. J. Nuland, Brookfield, WI 2003: 103-104.

<sup>51</sup> R. B. Anderson, *The First Chapter of Norwegian Immigration (1821-1840), its Causes and Results with an Introduction to the Services Rendered by the Scandinavians to the World and to America*, Madison WI 1895: 327-334.

<sup>52</sup> S. Mørkhagen, Norsk identitet på fremmed grunn. In: R. Svellingen (ed.), *Utvandring til Amerika—på godt og vondt*, Bergen 2011: 7-18.

<sup>53</sup> Rene 2003: 102.

<sup>54</sup> Rene 2003: 144-145; E. Røthe, J. Gjerdåker and E. K. Finne (eds.), *Gamalt frå Voss. Utvandring frå Voss til Amerika. Eit 150-års minne / Emigration from Voss to America. The 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary*, Voss 1985: 15.

historical studies by Johannes Gjerdåker and others.<sup>55</sup> In 1844 the linguist Ivar Aasen visited Voss on his journey through Norway in search of linguistic data, and he commented in his diary that migration was in full flow. This contemporary commentator considers the tendency of Voss people to emigrate, and he concludes that the principal reason is:

in part the innate propensity for travel and for restlessness, in part and above all the hope of coming into possession of great and easily won possessions, a hope nourished and strengthened to a great extent by a considerable number of letters from those who had previously emigrated.<sup>56</sup>

In 1836, when the first Vossings left, there were around 9,400 people living in the region,<sup>57</sup> and only a very small number of them lived in the regional centre at Vangen, whose topography Haukenæs, looking back a generation from the 1880s, described as consisting of no more than a few small buildings. Tourism caused Voss to grow in size and in prominence, and Haukenæs notes that the English in particular are flocking to the region by the middle of the century in search of salmon from the rivers, which brought new commercial opportunities for farmers.<sup>58</sup> While it would have taken an emigrant many hours to travel the 30 kilometres on foot to the transport interchange at Bolstadøyri, from where it was possible to embark on the six-hour boat journey (but only after 1864) down the valley to Bergen,<sup>59</sup> the arrival of the railway line at Voss in 1883 meant that travel time for those who could afford it was reduced to four hours in total. So while local people were departing in considerable numbers, Voss was growing in prosperity, which demonstrates the complexity, even illogicality, of their motives. By 1884 Haukenæs could report that «Vossevangen is now beginning more and more to take on a town-like appearance [...] It makes me think of the burgeoning factory towns in America».<sup>60</sup> Between 1837 and 1845, however, c. 670 of those c. 9400 inhabitants departed (7.13%), although

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<sup>55</sup> B. Gjerdåker, Emigrasjon og nordlandsflytting frå Voss fram til 1850. Bakgrunn for ulike strategiar. In: S. Dyrvik and N. Kolle (eds.), *Eit blidare tilvere? Drivkrefter og motiv i den tidlegaste utvandringa frå Hordaland og Sogn og Fjordane*, Voss 1986: 73-84.

<sup>56</sup> I. Aasen, *Brev og dagbøker III: Dagbøker 1830-1896*, Oslo 1960: 89. Translations are by the present author, except where otherwise stated.

<sup>57</sup> J. Gjerdåker, Life and development in Voss 1836-1986. A survey. In: Røthe et al. 1985: 64.

<sup>58</sup> Th. S. Haukenæs, *Natur, Folkeliv og Folketro paa Voss og Vossestranden, belyst ved Natur- og Folkelivsskildringer, Eventyr, Sagn, Fortællinger o.s.v.* Hardanger 1887.

<sup>59</sup> J. Gjerdåker, *Ålmenn søge for Voss. Frå 1800 til vår tid*, bd. 2, Voss 1991: 11.

<sup>60</sup> Haukenæs 1887: 85-86.

these numbers are hard to pin down accurately.<sup>61</sup> It is the impact, the personal reality of such upheaval that a virtual world can bring to the fore by allowing 21<sup>st</sup>-century folk the chance to go on that (virtual) journey for themselves. Massive documentary evidence and static 19<sup>th</sup>-century photographs tell their own story, but can virtual world technology add to these traditional sources in terms of creating more of a sense of living out and sharing in the migration experience?

#### 4 VIRTUAL 19<sup>TH</sup>-CENTURY NORWAY

Voss was the landing point in the virtual world where visitors arrived once they had logged on. The farm depicted is based on Mølstertunet, a collection of farm buildings from two farms now forming part of Voss Folk Museum. The oldest of these buildings date from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, while the most recent are from the period in question, the 1880s. Travellers in the virtual world were free to move around the virtual farm and enter some of the buildings as well as to interact with any other visitors who happened to be online at the same time. Visitors could also customise the world, so a resource like this needs to be monitored: the project team had to remove oddly located gates and trees. The farm was populated with contemporary artefacts, and these were clickable in order to access additional information about the location and personal narratives relevant to this stage of the emigration journey. One of the domestic buildings contained, along with digital models of furniture and household goods, an America letter which, when clicked, provided more information about that phenomenon, and also an emigrant handbook (Ole Rynning's 1838 *Sandfærdig Beretning om Amerika*<sup>62</sup>), the sort of guidebook which few would have been able to read but which formed part of the physical paraphernalia of emigration. This house included a photograph on the wall of Haakon and Brita Thormodsæter, whose son, Abel, emigrated from Bømlo, south of Bergen, in 1893. That story and associated pictures were contributed by an American descendant as part of the research. Abel was neither from Voss nor emigrating in the 1880s, but it is an example of how the accounts of emigration were integrated into the virtual world to help dissolve the boundary between the virtual and the real worlds. To this end also, the countryside around the Voss farm, like the other locations in the virtual world, incorporated photographs and pictures (contributed by informants) which were

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<sup>61</sup> Mørkhagen 2009: 132-133.

<sup>62</sup> O. Rynning, *Sandfærdig Beretning om Amerika: til Oplysning og Nytte for Bonde og Menigmand*, Christiania [Oslo] 1839.

blended with the 3D background. The use of this *billboarding* technique helps overcome one of the major challenges of developing a historically credible virtual world. The 3D models — the buildings and their contents and later on the ships — need a lot of computer power to render, and so there was a limit to the number of polygons that could be used in rendering a 3D model without slowing down the functionality of the world to unacceptable levels. 2D images as part of the background overcome this but do entail the problem of integrating 2D and 3D material. As well as the historically informed models, the Voss farm included a static avatar of Ola and of a woman («Kari Nordmann») both dressed in generic period costume. There were also modern signposts and large blue information boxes dotted around the locations to help guide visitors through what can be an unfamiliar experience. Technologically and historiographically the most important objects were the traditional red Norwegian mailboxes located throughout the world. Clicking on these allowed visitors to go to the upload page and to contribute their stories.

From the Voss farm visitors were directed to travel (in a virtual world you can choose to walk, run or fly) down the valley towards Bergen. It is perhaps when in transit between locations that the sense of fiction is strongest, and not only on account of flying. The distances between the regions were necessarily shortened. The clickable signpost by the farm tells visitors that it is 100 km to Bergen and 5,660 km to New York, but moving from location to location in the world can be circumvented entirely by clicking on the relevant place name and *teleporting* there direct.

Voss was the first location to be built and was based closely on real world models from the Voss Folk Museum. The harbour at Bergen presented more of a challenge. The Hanseatic buildings are an iconic location and a very well-known vista. Here again extensive use of billboarding was a helpful means to provide detail without overloading the capabilities of ordinary desktop computers, and the harbour-front buildings had to be more generic than would have been desirable. Bergen was simply the embarkation point for the North Sea ship waiting at anchor and which was the next location entered by the virtual emigrant. Emigrant traffic across the North Sea was significant business by the 1880s. In 1880, sixteen emigrant ships left Bergen for Hull, and in the same year 93 emigrant ships from all

Norwegian ports arrived in Hull, making this traffic even more significant on the other side of the North Sea.<sup>63</sup>

## 5 TRANSMIGRATION IN THE VIRTUAL WORLD

By the time «Ola Nordmann» emigrated, two key changes in the character of the migration journey had occurred. Firstly, steam had completely replaced wind power. In 1867 only 10% of Norwegian emigrants departed from Norwegian ports for America on board steamships, but just eight years later it was 100%, and that rapid shift was mirrored across Europe.<sup>64</sup> As Semmingsen puts it, «steam had conquered»,<sup>65</sup> and the driver for this was speed. The long Atlantic crossing was uncomfortable and passengers were prone to sickness (typically measles, cholera and dysentery) in the often unpleasant conditions in steerage, though it was the North Sea crossing to England which was the subject of most complaints: «the roughest part of the whole journey».<sup>66</sup> Hvidt reports on complaints by Danish transmigrants travelling to Hull, Lext makes the same point about Swedish emigrants travelling through Liverpool, and Landa provides a graphic contemporary account of the conditions experienced by steerage passengers arriving at London from various continental ports.<sup>67</sup> Crossing the Atlantic by sailing ship in the early 1870s took 44 days while a steamship could make the same journey in less than fourteen,<sup>68</sup> resulting in a dramatic reduction in the death toll from as much as 10% to virtually none in the era of steam.<sup>69</sup> The other major shift in the character of the emigrant traffic in the later 19<sup>th</sup> century was towards *transmigration*, passing through another country (typically the United Kingdom) en route to America. The term «transmigrants» is a contemporary one, although one which alternated with the more pejorative «aliens in transit», and, according to Nicholas J. Evans, who has made the most extensive study of this group to date, 20% of the total number of

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<sup>63</sup> Mørkhagen 2009: 395.

<sup>64</sup> See, e.g., T. Feys, *The Battle for the Migrants: The Introduction of Steamshipping on the North Atlantic and its Impact on the European Exodus*, St John's Newfoundland 2013.

<sup>65</sup> Semmingsen 1950: 141.

<sup>66</sup> W. Mulder, Mormons from Scandinavia, 1850-1900: A shepherded migration, *Pacific Historical Review* 1954, 23(3): 237.

<sup>67</sup> K. Hvidt, *Flugten til Amerika eller drivkræfter i masseudvandringen fra Danmark 1868-1914*, Århus 1971: 361; G. Lext, *Studier rörande svensk emigration till nordamerika 1850-1880. Registrering, propaganda, agenter, transporter och resvägar*, Göteborg 1977: 237; M. J. Landa, Alien transmigrants, *The Economic Journal* 1906, 16(63): 357-358.

<sup>68</sup> Norman and Runblom 1988: 115.

<sup>69</sup> Mulder 1954: 237.

immigrants to the United States in the period 1836–1914, i.e. up to five million people, passed through the UK. As with the shift to steam, the change in migration route was rapid and total. In 1871, one-third of emigrating Norwegians sailed direct from a Norwegian port, but only four years later there were no direct emigrant sailings.<sup>70</sup> The route via Hull and Liverpool rapidly became the most popular route for commercial reasons to be discussed in a moment.

This massive number of transmigrants (more than 50,000 per year passing through Liverpool by the 1880s<sup>71</sup>) begs the question of why they didn't simply continue to sail direct to their destination. Why undergo the hardship of disembarkation and re-embarkation in a country whose language they did not speak and in which they intended to spend as little time as possible? Why put up with the unpleasant and insanitary conditions described fully and publicly in reports written for the Board of Trade and the Local Government Board in 1881 and 1882?<sup>72</sup> The overriding rationale was convenience and price. Norwegian Law from 1869 required agents to provide tickets for the whole journey, so everything was arranged for the emigrants, and by 1880 more than one-third of Norwegian emigrants were even travelling on tickets which had been pre-paid for them. The stages were entirely integrated. A Finnish emigrant wrote in a letter of 1903:

The whole trip from Hanko [the principal port of departure for emigrating Finns] on was led and shepherded so that you could not escape except into the sea [...] interpreters always met us where ever [sic] we touched land and commanded us as a warring host from the ship to the train and the train to the ship [...] so that no matter how much of a dunce you are you will surely be brought to the place shown on your ticket [...].<sup>73</sup>

The integration and subsequent near monopoly of the transmigration route was above all the work of Hull ship-owner Thomas Wilson.<sup>74</sup> Up to 1859 Wilson serviced the route from Gothenburg to Hull, but by the 1860s Wilson had spotted the opportunity to bring emigrants to the UK en route to America, and his business

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<sup>70</sup> O. S. Lovoll, "For people who are not in a hurry": The Danish Thingvalla Line and the transportation of Scandinavian emigrants, *Journal of American Ethnic History* 1993, 13(1): 52.

<sup>71</sup> R. Lee, *The Scandinavian Seamen's Church in Liverpool*. Liverpool 2008: 6.

<sup>72</sup> <http://www.norwayheritage.com/articles/templates/voyages.asp?articleid=40&zoneid=6> and subsequent reports.

<sup>73</sup> R. Kero, *Migration from Finland to North America in the Years between the United States Civil War and the First World War*, Turku 1974: 203-204.

<sup>74</sup> M. Dunge, Wilsonlinjen och emigrationen. In: Paul Pålsson, Mats Sjölin and Göran Sundström (eds.), *Unda Maris 1989-1991*, Göteborg 1992: 133-171.



expanded rapidly as he reached a trading agreement with other key stakeholders in the transmigration process (though further research on these trading relations is needed<sup>75</sup>). The Wilson Line became in its day the largest private shipping line in the world, and the statistics are dramatic.<sup>76</sup> Wilson's primary collaborators on the provision of a through ticket from the Northern countries to America were the North Eastern Railway Company, operating out of Hull's Paragon railway station, and the Liverpool-based Inman Line (for the Atlantic route), who were together able to trade at a rate so competitive that other operators couldn't keep up.

Although other ports received transmigrants from Scandinavia, Hull became the principal port of entry from 1850 onwards, and «for most of the period she handled a greater share of the trade than every other British port combined».<sup>77</sup> One transmigrant arriving in Hull was impressed by its imposing railway station,<sup>78</sup> and indeed the experience of a town the size of Hull would have been new to the majority of transmigrants. In 1900 the population of Bergen was 94,485, while Hull could boast a population of 236,772. Hull could also boast a not insignificant Norwegian population. In 1881 there were 192 Norwegians residing in Hull, a figure which had risen to 326 by 1891.<sup>79</sup> These were smaller numbers than for Liverpool (at least prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century), but they do indicate an ongoing link between these port cities and Norway, independent from, though in part based upon, the transmigration business. By the time of Ola Nordmann's journey in 1882, the North Eastern Railway provided transit for transmigrants arriving on the North Sea ships into Hull's Victoria Dock, and they also provided a purpose-built waiting room at Paragon Station, a facility which had been extended in 1881 and used until the provision of a new dockside terminus in 1907. This waiting room is highly symbolic of the transmigration experience, together with its own railway platform accessed via the rear exit, such that it was used as a key location in the virtual world to display a collection of images, submitted by informants, and linked through to their narrative accounts. The waiting room still stands, as of 2014 as a bar for Hull City football supporters.

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<sup>75</sup> N. J. Evans, Work in progress: Indirect passage from Europe via the UK, 1836-1914, *Journal for Maritime Research* 2001, 3(1): 74.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Evans 2006: 80.

<sup>78</sup> F. E. Woods, The tide of Mormon migration flowing through the port of Liverpool, England, *International Journal of Mormon Studies* 2008, 1: 66.

<sup>79</sup> L. M. Haakenstad, *Slektgranskerens guide til utvandringen 1825-1930*, Oslo 2008: 46.

The North Sea ship in the virtual world struggled to replicate the much reported discomfort of the North Sea crossing, and inevitably, despite the use of some billboarding to depict a crowd huddled in steerage, it felt somewhat sanitised. This is true of the entire journey. There was no sound, and a sense of hustle and bustle would only be possible if a large number of account holders were to log in at the same time. On disembarking in virtual Hull, Ola Nordmann proceeded from the dock to the railway station, passing several iconic buildings on the way, notably the grand headquarters of the Hull Dock Company, built in 1872, and now housing the Hull Maritime Museum, with the Wilberforce Monument erected on this site in 1834, though moved elsewhere in 1935. Virtual travellers could also visit Harry Lazarus's hotel (the 1881 census evidences 19 Nordic transmigrants as being resident in his house)<sup>80</sup>, before making their way to the railway station and the emigrant waiting room for the onward journey. As noted above, the number of models, particularly complex ones of ornate Victorian architecture, had to be limited in the virtual world. The aim here was to provide enough models to create a clear sense of place and to provide inspiration for informants to share their stories. The project did receive a number of stories relating to the place of Hull in emigration history. These were submitted after an article appeared in the *Hull Daily Mail* and the project director was interviewed on BBC Radio Humberside in July 2013. One story was of the five Abrahamson sisters from Mandal in the 1890s, three of whom moved to Hull and two to New York. This story was not a direct contribution to personal histories of transmigration as such, but it exemplifies the variety of material an open-ended bid for informal sources like this tends to generate.

If Hull dominated the trade on the eastern side of England, Liverpool certainly dominated the Atlantic route. The first vessel from Liverpool with a Norwegian on board left England in 1846, although regular use of this route by third-class passengers (emigrants) only really got underway from the 1850s.<sup>81</sup> While it is true that the journey was increasingly tightly controlled by the officers of the various companies which managed the transmigration journey, the emigrants had greater freedom to roam in Liverpool than in Hull, and there are a number of tales of Norwegian travellers getting into difficulties in Liverpool but also of being impressed by what they saw. Ole Blindheim remembered that «we came to Liverpool and boy

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<sup>80</sup> Evans 2006: 124.

<sup>81</sup> Semmingsen 1950: 88-89.

that was an odd thing too – all those different people [...] The ship was so big that it really changed the landscape of Liverpool». <sup>82</sup> The overriding impression of Liverpool, as reported by Mormon travellers in Fred E. Woods's study, is, however, one of dirt and poverty. As with Hull, the Liverpool stage of Ola Nordmann's journey comprised several buildings which would have been of iconic significance at the time. For example, the port area would have been dominated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by the Custom House, damaged during the Second World War and demolished in 1948, but reconstructed in the virtual world.

Trains generally left Hull on Monday morning, and by the 1880s the journey which had originally taken around seven hours from Hull now took less than five. Nonetheless, the surviving testimonies from those travelling on the cheapest tickets are predominantly unfavourable. A letter from the Swedish Baptist minister, Theodor Truvé, written in 1865, notes the long tunnels and the dark smoky towns which gave the English a dark grey complexion, <sup>83</sup> and a Mormon convert travelling by train in 1854 described the experience simply as «bad» <sup>84</sup>. In the virtual world it was a short walk (or flight) over the hills of central England via a necessarily foreshortened railway track. One bit of evidence about the railway journey submitted as part of *ONGW* is a piece on «emigrants' specials» forming an appendix to an 1884 Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway working timetable, where it is noted that the only scheduled stop to be made between Wakefield in West Yorkshire and Liverpool was at Smithy Bridge station, north-east of Rochdale (Lancashire), «for accommodation of emigrants», when buckets of drinking water would be provided; the carriages did not have toilet facilities in the 1880s.

At the end of his study of transmigration through England, Evans notes that one of the gaps in his study is «a greater discussion of what happened to the aliens who remained in Britain or who subsequently remigrated within a few years of their arrival». Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century there were Nordic citizens living in Hull and Liverpool, as we have seen, in response to the passage of so many of their compatriots through those cities. One of the ambitions of the research underpinning this article was to unearth cases of transmigrants who somehow came adrift in England and decided to stay, to open up a route into such microhistories of Norwegian transmigration. The reality was, however, that transmigrants had few

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<sup>82</sup> Rasmussen 1993: 96.

<sup>83</sup> Lext 1977: 247-248.

<sup>84</sup> Woods 2008: 65.

opportunities to get separated from the crowd. Even when they left the port to get something to eat or to sleep in Hull, they remained under close watch. The shortage of British personal narratives of transmigration (at least using the digital methodology we adopted) bears out the received wisdom that the transmigration stage, when it was at its height, was effectively a closed operation designed to impact as little as possible on the communities through which the migrants passed. In his report on «alien transmigrants» for the *Economic Journal*, Landa noted that the transmigrants «were guarded like convicts» on the trains «lest they escape»,<sup>85</sup> and so they were literally sealed off from the communities on their route. In this case there is a clear explanation for the view of Åkerman that migration studies of population movements suffer from a lack of information about migrating individuals by contrast with the wealth of statistics.<sup>86</sup> This is precisely what *ONGW* sought to address.

## 6 USING A VIRTUAL WORLD TO DO HISTORY

*ONGW* was at heart a methodological experiment, a way of doing the microhistory which could add up to a form of *collective biography*, revealing «aspects or layers of social reality which would otherwise remain invisible».<sup>87</sup> This experiment was itself pioneering in several ways, and it was hard to predict at the beginning of the research what the outcomes would be.

Virtual worlds have typically been developed for social and leisure activities, allowing users an escape from day-to-day reality, even in some cases a substitute for real life and real relationships.<sup>88</sup> The best-known virtual world is the commercially available *Second Life*, created by Linden Lab in 2003, which during the course of the following decade has seen over 37 million user accounts created worldwide. In order to keep costs under control within the context of an academic research project, and to exercise greater control over the development of the virtual world, *ONGW* opted to use the open source *OpenSimulator* (*OpenSim*) platform instead. 3D interactive virtual worlds have been used for training and for educational purposes but have not been widely employed in serious attempts to animate the past or to undertake scholarly research. There are some examples of virtual worlds being used to depict

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<sup>85</sup> Landa 1906: 362.

<sup>86</sup> S. Åkerman, Towards an understanding of emigrational processes, *Scandinavian Journal of History* 2008, 3(1-4): 131.

<sup>87</sup> S. Langholm, On the scope of micro-history, *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 1976, 1(1-4): 14.

<sup>88</sup> R. A. Kolotkin, M. M. Williams, C. D. Lloyd and E. W. Hallford, Does loving an avatar threaten real life marriage?, *Journal of Virtual Worlds Research*, 2013, 5(3): 1-40.

historical times and places, such as *Virtual Rosewood*,<sup>89</sup> but these are typically intended for pedagogical purposes rather than for primary research, and there are also examples of research being carried out within *Second Life*,<sup>90</sup> but not on historical topics. This is still rather new technology, and the use of virtual worlds in humanities research is in its infancy. A 2012 overview of research in the digital humanities makes no mention of virtual worlds or *Second Life*,<sup>91</sup> and an even more recent book on *History in the Digital Age* only mentions *Second Life* as a future possibility.<sup>92</sup> We are unaware of previous attempts to treat Nordic migration in this way, certainly with respect to the transmigration route.

The second objective was to develop a social network within and alongside the virtual world in order to solicit information which could be used to enhance the historical record. The community of stakeholders in the century of emigration from Norway is massively dispersed. According to the United States Census Bureau data,<sup>93</sup> there are over 4.6 million US citizens of Norwegian descent across the United States, and many of them are expert and dedicated students of their families' histories. Celebration of Norwegian ancestry is supported by a range of societies which bring together descendants of immigrants from particular regions of Norway. A valued collaborator on *ONGW*, for example, was Vosselaget, a US member society dating from 1909 to support the interests of those with family from the Voss region, and a very strong emphasis of their activities today is family history research. Could a virtual world, as a shared space linking modern-day Norwegian-Americans with the emigration experience of their ancestors, serve as a place to share stories, images, audio clips etc., and so generate a multimedia archive of the personal experience of migration, mediating between genealogy on the one hand and prosopography on the other? Other stakeholders in research of this sort include emigrants' descendants living in Norway, local historians in Norway and the North of England, as well, potentially, as family history enthusiasts, transport historians and so on. Here was the potential to marshal a substantial community of informants who could bring

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<sup>89</sup> *Virtual Rosewood*, <http://www.virtualrosewood.com/>

<sup>90</sup> E.g., S. Minocha, M. Tran and A. J. Reeves, Conducting empirical research in 3D virtual worlds: Experiences from two projects in *Second Life*, *Journal of Virtual Worlds Research* 2010, 3 (1): 3-21.

<sup>91</sup> D. M. Berry (ed.), *Understanding Digital Humanities*, London 2012.

<sup>92</sup> D. J. Bodenhamer, The spatial humanities. Space, time and place in the new digital age. In: T. Weller (ed.), *History in the Digital Age*, London and New York 2013: 34.

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[http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS\\_10\\_5YR\\_B04003&prodType=table](http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_10_5YR_B04003&prodType=table)

their specialist insights and otherwise inaccessible memories and collections to the historiography of Norwegian emigration. Again, of course, this hadn't been tried before, and there was no way of knowing in advance whether or not informants would respond as expected, whether the enthusiasm expressed by the stakeholder groups in the development stage would turn into genuine engagement once the project was launched.

There were no a priori plans as to what we or the community of historians more broadly might actually *do* with such a collection of materials, if it were forthcoming, since we had no idea what it would look like, how substantial it would be and how extensive or representative the coverage would be. Creating an open virtual world is playing god and necessitates launching into the unknown. *Second Life* «depends on unanticipated uses by its consumers»,<sup>94</sup> and, although not within *Second Life* proper, Ola Nordmann's world was one we could build but whose use we could not predict. A further challenge was the fact that the interviewer of oral history would not be present, so informants would be contributing information generated entirely by them rather than steered by the interviewer. On the other hand this method should obviate the «observer's paradox», and there should be no concerns about those contributing their material being constrained by the presence of an interviewer and a microphone.

Although the findings of this *methodological experiment* are the important thing here, the biggest challenges lay in setting up and running the virtual world, in carrying out the research. Consequently, it may be helpful for other researchers interested in using a similar technique if we discuss some of the practical challenges faced by the researchers on *ONGW*. The project website at <http://www.olanordmann.co.uk> remains live. The website exists in parallel English and Norwegian-language versions. It was assumed that the overwhelming majority of potential informants would use English unproblematically. However, ethically the project needed to demonstrate its commitment to the history it sought to represent and to the public it sought to engage. A project based in neither of the two principal stakeholder countries might be viewed with suspicion or with some incredulity (Why do you want to know about *our* history?), and committing to a Norwegian-language outward face could help mitigate this concern. The website allows visitors to interact with the history of Norwegian emigration in various ways. One option is *A journey*

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<sup>94</sup> T. M. Malaby, *Making Virtual Worlds: Linden Lab and Second Life*. Ithaca and London 2009: 8.

*through images / En reise via bilder*. In this part of the website, the different stages of the journey from Voss to New York are presented through contemporary photographs and accompanying text, describing the experiences of the migrant Norwegians in an accessible way. The combination of images and descriptive text is of course a traditional means of presentation, exemplified by, e.g., Lovoll's *The Promise of America* and does not capitalise on the multimedia capabilities of online presentations. The *Tell us your stories / Fortell din historie* section allowed visitors to make their own contributions to these accounts of the history of emigration from Norway. Informants could write free text in the text box or upload text, image or audio files. Ideally of course all uploaded material would have been submitted from within the virtual world, but data collection needs to be as straightforward as possible for those providing the data, and an interface whereby files are attached and then the submit button clicked is a familiar one to most internet users. For ethical reasons, this page included two checkboxes, the first one reading «I consent to my contribution being made publicly available, subject to project review», and the second «I confirm that all content provided belongs to me and I have read and agreed to the privacy policy». All contributions to the project were made entirely voluntarily by the contributors and have been used on the terms and conditions set by their owners. Nonetheless, in research like this, explicit and robust policies intended to safeguard contributors and their materials are essential: a) to provide reassurance and thereby to encourage people to contribute; and b) because any research project must of course adhere to and be seen to adhere to academic good practice, especially in historical and literary disciplines which on the face of it do not necessarily seem to be prone to the challenging ethical issues facing research in the medical or social sciences.<sup>95</sup> One of the informants wrote movingly in one of her contributions of what can go wrong when family historians engage providers of external services to help support their work.<sup>96</sup>

Despite the presence of mailboxes in the virtual world, none of the contributions were actually provided via that route. One lesson learned is that the general public, at least those encountered in this project, feel more comfortable with tried and tested means of online interaction, i.e. completing online forms or sending attachments. Given the case study of Voss, it was inevitable that those with a vested

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<sup>95</sup> A. R. Linn, Research ethics in book-based, historical research. In: N. McLelland and A. R. Linn (eds.), *Flores Grammaticæ: Essays in Memory of Vivien Law*, Münster 2004: 21-32.

<sup>96</sup> *Read Your Stories*, <http://readyourstories.blogspot.co.uk/2013/08/piecing-together-past-part-2.html>.

interest in this region would respond most warmly. The *Read your stories / Les din historie* section of the website thus contains, for example, an account entitled *Ancestors from Voss: the Story of Odd Jonson Himle*, the thoroughly researched history of an emigration pioneer from that region in 1837 who sought opportunities throughout the Midwest before settling in Spring Prairie, Wisconsin, having returned to Voss in 1844 in order to marry. Another Voss story is that of Klas Knutson Mosafinn who left Voss in 1844. Although a brief account, this latter narrative is one touched by personal loss and happiness; having lost his would-be bride to cholera, Mosafinn later married a woman he stopped to help after her husband was mortally wounded by a horse. Such received stories are likely to be a combination of historical fact and the sort of colour which sticks to any historical account, no matter how sober: «the ‘voice of the past’ is inescapably the voice of the present too».<sup>97</sup> It is unlikely that this form of narrative will contain material which could substantially alter the received view of the general record of migration, but it does locate the human at the heart of this history and provide valuable material for the investigation of the experience and the impact of that emigration. Historians are rightly cautious about interpreting oral testimony, and the more historically remote the events referred to, the greater the level of caution. In due course we will make the case for the value of these received narratives as historical sources per se, but, even if treated sceptically (for good reason) as historical data:

[...] if the subtle modifications by which ordinary people re-interpret their individual life experience provide insight into the formation of historical consciousness, how much richer must the evolving oral tradition of an entire community be as evidence of how the past can be manipulated for social ends.<sup>98</sup>

These narratives are partial and they are subjective, but they are part of a historical whole, and «migration can be studied with many different methods».<sup>99</sup> Taken individually the narratives may be isolated anecdotal observations, but collected as an archive they take on an altered significance, especially since they are unified in their thematic content. *ONGW* studied the total emigration via the North of England, so we were pleased to receive narratives with different starting points as well. *My*

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<sup>97</sup> J. Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History*, revised third edition, London 1999: 304.

<sup>98</sup> Tosh 1999: 316.

<sup>99</sup> Thorvaldsen 1996: 479.



*Bestemor and Bestefar that came to America and some of their families in Norway* is a brief account of immigrants from the Agder region of South Norway, and *My Norwegian Uncles* is a recollection of northern Norwegian immigrants from Bø i Vesterålen in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Most of the stories contributed by immigrants' descendants were attractively illustrated with photographs of people and places and copies of documents and other artefacts, but the project team didn't receive any audio clips or more unusual media.

7 VIRTUAL WORLD TECHNOLOGY AS A RESEARCH TOOL FOR 19<sup>TH</sup>-CENTURY HISTORY —  
DISCUSSION AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

So, does this method of presenting history and collecting historical data work? Did the project in question deliver what was hoped, and, more importantly, what lessons can it teach those engaged in historical research about the value of this sort of technology as a research tool?

The numbers were certainly encouraging. Between March 2012 and December 2013 the project website ([www.olanordmann.co.uk](http://www.olanordmann.co.uk)) had 2,442 unique visitors. Of these, almost half were from the UK, a third from Norway and 12% from the USA, so interest in the project per se would appear to have been greatest within its immediate research environment. Of the individual pages on the site, the homepage inevitably received the most hits, but the second most visited page was, promisingly, the user registration page, which received 17% (1761) of the website's total number of page views (10,584). These figures do suggest that visitors were attracted to the idea of the virtual world and considered registering for it. From this point on, however, the attrition rate was significant. Around 140 visitors requested and were provided with user accounts in the virtual world: 38 of these (27%) completed the process, downloaded the necessary software and entered the world; 12 spent more than 10 minutes exploring the world; and 16 users visited more than once. The further along the journey, usage statistics suggest, the less time was committed to exploration, partly because the later parts of the journey were developed later (when the virtual world went live, only Voss and Bergen were built), but partly because maintaining the interest of visitors and would-be informants is challenging, especially when they are operating in an unfamiliar environment, using unfamiliar controls. To help understand the reasons for the limited engagement, two user surveys were carried

out in the Spring and Autumn of 2013, but responses were insufficient to allow any concrete conclusions.

Recent studies of *Second Life* suggest that the chief impediment to more extensive engagement is likely to have been the nature of virtual world technology at its current stage of development. Many of those who engaged with *ONGW* make regular and productive use of social media. Several contributors have well-developed and actively maintained family history blogs (e.g. Dianne Enger Snell's *Genealogy is an Obsession*<sup>100</sup>), and are prolific users of *Facebook*. Those are effective ways of pursuing interest in family history and staying in touch with family and friends as part of a family history project, but, as researchers summarising studies of the use of *Second Life* in education found, one of the limitations is the «steep learning curve» required of users.<sup>101</sup> Love et al. in their study of business education via *Second Life* also note the «steep learning curve» facing new users as well as further technological barriers to the use of this technology in a serious context.<sup>102</sup> When working online, people expect immediacy, and anything which slows down progress is likely to result in the activity being curtailed or abandoned, such that, according to a journalist who has been studying *Second Life* since its inception in 2003,<sup>103</sup> it turns out that the majority of *Second Life* users abandon the experience after the first attempt. There is a clear lesson here. Any online tool for historical research, particularly one which seeks to engage the general public, i.e. where the good will of contributors is being relied upon, must be effortlessly easy to use and/or must deliver clear benefits.

At the end of the project, once it was clear that traditional virtual world technology posed these challenges, a pilot study was carried out using an even more recent form of 3D virtual world technology — WebGL (Web Graphics Library) — which allows access to a 3D virtual world direct from most web browsers and without any log-in. The interior of a North Sea ship which resulted from this experiment may be seen at [www.olanordmann.co.uk/webgl/index.html](http://www.olanordmann.co.uk/webgl/index.html). It is our contention that 3D virtual worlds remain an engaging way of animating historical events (see, for

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<sup>100</sup> <http://dianne-enger.blogspot.co.uk/>

<sup>101</sup> C. Inman, V. H. Wright and J. A. Hartman, Use of *Second Life* in K-12 and Higher Education: A review of research, *Journal of Interactive Online Learning* 2010, 9(1): 44-63.

<sup>102</sup> E. Love, S. C. Ross and W. Wilhelm, Opportunities and challenges for business education in second life. In: C. Wankel and J. Kingsley (eds.), *Higher Education in Virtual Worlds: Teaching and Learning in Second Life*, Bingley 2009: 74.

<sup>103</sup> <http://gigaom.com/2013/06/23/second-life-turns-10-what-it-did-wrong-and-why-it-will-have-its-own-second-life/>

example, the augmented reality projects of Gunnar Liestøl and his team in Oslo<sup>104</sup>) and of drawing the wider public into experiencing and contributing data to historical research, but ease of accessibility is crucial, and WebGL provides a way forward in this respect. Experienced web developer Florian Bösch, opines that WebGL, though still a very young technology (the Khronos Group only launched it in March 2011), «is the best shot we have to bring 3D everywhere».<sup>105</sup> A further technological development likely to open up new opportunities for scholars in the future is the *Oculus Rift* virtual reality headset, though this will still present a technological barrier between users and the historical world.

On a more positive note, *ONGW* has established that there is a strong interest in the sharing and reading of the narratives of Norwegian migration, and that the co-creation of an archive of emigration stories is feasible. The *Read your Stories* blog received 2,059 page views from 795 unique visitors, almost 50% of whom were from the USA, compared with the 12% of US visitors to the website. Further research which seeks to draw on the wealth of family history research in such a way that it can inform the study of Norwegian migration is likely to find a responsive community of informants, provided that the benefits to engagement are clear and the technology familiar.

## 8 THE VALUE OF INDIRECT PERSONAL STORIES

The pioneers may be dead and their personal recollections may have died with them, but the link, however imperfect, is still there, though weakening with each passing generation. The «serious lack of empirical evidence»<sup>106</sup> bemoaned by Åkerman will become more serious still if these imperfect surviving fragments are not taken seriously and effectively garnered by historians as a meaningful resource,<sup>107</sup> much as immigration literature — another example of a mediated source — has been championed over the course of several decades as a valuable link in the chain of

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<sup>104</sup> G. Liestøl, *Situated Simulations (SitsimLab): Designing a Platform for Mobile Augmented Reality Genres*, [www.sitsim.no](http://www.sitsim.no).

<sup>105</sup> <http://codeflow.org/entries/2013/feb/02/why-you-should-use-webgl/#the-future>

<sup>106</sup> Åkerman 2008: 131.

<sup>107</sup> See R. Blakemore, Finding fragments — the past and the future. In: M. Hailwood and B. Waddell (eds.), *The Future of History from Below: An Online Symposium*, 2013, <http://manyheadedmonster.wordpress.com/history-from-below>.

evidence.<sup>108</sup> Historians of Africa, in particular, have developed a more fluid treatment than historians of Europe of the relative value of oral and written testimony and of a range of what Elizabeth Tonkin calls *genres* as sources of information.<sup>109</sup> John Tosh, also a historian of Africa, takes the view that the historian of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is particularly well placed to exploit the plurality of traditions surviving from that period, not least those «extended personal recollections», «an intermediate category between first-hand testimony and oral tradition proper». For the history of Norwegian emigration that genre exists in abundance. The technology to harness this resource may be imperfect at the moment, but it is our contention that *ONGW* has demonstrated that there is a way forward, and it is worth pursuing.

«What is the point of preserving so many personal stories?» asks Gordon Read, replying, «emigration [...] is essentially this, the adventure of everyman».<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> D. B. Skårdal, Problems and promises of immigration literature in social history. In: I. Semmingsen and P. Seyersted (eds.), *Scando-American Papers on Scandinavian Emigration to the United States*, Oslo 1980, 142-152; Øverland 2012, Translator's introduction.

<sup>109</sup> E. Tonkin, *Narrating our Past: The Social Construction of Oral History*, Cambridge 1992: esp. ch. 3.

<sup>110</sup> G. Read, Indirect passage: Jewish emigrant experiences on the East Coast – Liverpool route. In: A. Newman and S. W. Massil (eds.), *Patterns of Migration, 1850-1914*, London 1996: 279.

