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narrative

A Review of *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla's* Sensationalized

History

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Abstract

Review of the video game *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* (2020).

Keywords: Valhalla, Vikings, Norse, England, Ubisoft, Anglo-Saxon, Pagan, Danes, Odin, gameenvironments

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Narrative

Ubisoft Montreal's newest installment of the *Assassin's Creed* franchise, *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* (2020), sees players taking to the shores of England during the year 873. The story largely follows the Viking invasion of the British Isles during the mid to late 800s, firmly within the Medieval time period. Following the trend set with *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (2018), *Valhalla* once again presents a rich open-world area with many secrets for players to explore. Despite whether or not players choose the male or female protagonist, the character the story follows is named Eivor. Driven from their homeland in Norway, Eivor and her clan of Vikings sail west to England to carve out a new home for themselves in the British Isles. Once the clan claims a foothold in England, the player is given a plethora of opportunities in the main story as well as side questing objectives, free to create their own path in game. As the game is a continuation of the *Assassin's Creed* series, one main storyline follows the group of assassins known as the "Hidden Ones" in pursuit of their goal in driving out

the “Order of the Ancients” from England (*Valhalla* 2020). The rest of the main story follows the Viking conquest of nearby kingdoms of Mercia, Northumbria, Wessex, and East Anglia with the sons of the legendary Viking Ragnar Lothbrok.

Religion and History

While Ubisoft normally does a fairly good job at representing historical and religious accuracy alongside gameplay mechanics, *Valhalla* sees a shift in focus towards a more sensationalized *Viking* world view alongside tropes throughout the Viking age blended together. Despite the game’s incredibly gorgeous visuals, specific aesthetic choices were made to amplify gameplay experience rather than historical or religious accuracy. Ubisoft’s installation to the series *Assassin’s Creed: Origins* revolutionized the franchise with its *Discovery Tour* (Ubisoft 2021, Politopoulos et al. 2019). This new feature allowed for players to visit what Ubisoft (2021) presents as “‘virtual museum’ without threats but instead with guided tours and historical sites to discover.” From the exquisitely designed Ancient Egyptian historical sites, to what Politopoulos, Mol, Boom, and Ariese (2019, 319) propose *AC: Odyssey* as being a miniaturized version of Homer’s *Odyssey* with its compressed scale. Ubisoft’s choices to revert its games from being museum-worthy recreations into wildly sensationalized ethnic and religious portrayals of characters and locations in *AC: Valhalla* diminish the level of historical accuracy seen in other *Assassin’s Creed* games.

To the credit of Ubisoft, the inclusion of a canonically female Viking protagonist is historically accurate to current anthropological knowledge (*Valhalla* 2020). According to the *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, current archeological and genomics data taken from individuals buried in Birka, Sweden, show that female Viking warriors were just as common as their male counterparts (Hedenstierna-Jonson et al. 2017).

sensationalized versions of raiding heavily secured forts and castles. Historically, Vikings were feared for their ability to strike anywhere at any given time, meaning that if an area was too heavily fortified, they would likely choose easier targets where victory was guaranteed (Ritchie 2011). Furthermore, *Valhalla* shows through the main storyline that Eivor’s clan of Vikings are kind to those they have subjugated, after stealing their wealth and land (*Valhalla* 2020). While raids on heavy fortresses in game merely act as an aspect to make the game more interesting for the player, creating sympathy for Vikings as *kind rulers* is dangerous in the sense of painting an image of Vikings as liberators rather than invaders.

Conclusion

Overall, I have enjoyed playing *Valhalla*, for the most part. Despite some glaring historical inaccuracies, Ubisoft has created a picturesque version of the Viking Medieval period that is pleasing on the eyes. The previous installment of the franchise, *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey* (2018), was a personal favorite of mine and is the game that got me hooked back into the franchise. As suggested by Leonie Glauner (2020) in her *Gamevironments* review, “The stunning love for details is everywhere, some so small, that one does not even notice them at first, e.g., the tiny colorful decorations in the temples and historical buildings” (Glauner 2020, 175). I too felt this admiration for *Odyssey*, instantly falling in love with the vast open Greek world. *Valhalla*, though, feels different. While the overall level detail and care put into the buildings is there, *Valhalla* feels hollow – like something important is missing. This is most noticeable in Eivor’s psychedelic journey to Asgard, the mythical realm that was home to the Norse gods (*Valhalla* 2020). In Asgard, the inclusion of the usual suspects of Thor, Loki, Tyr, and Freya was present, but the purpose of *why* Eivor was in Asgard, especially as Odin’s consciousness, is questionable.

