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

John Herman

#### Abstract

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

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

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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).



Though players of *Valhalla* have free choice to make Eivor either male or female, Ubisoft's addition and confirmation of Eivor being female signifies a shift in focus from male-dominated Viking cultures and stories.

Ubisoft also does a great job of showing that Viking culture is not only about raiding and pillaging, but it can also be intricate and diverse. Through mini games of "flyting" and "Orlog," players can earn monetary rewards and a new charisma skill that opens up new dialogue options in-game (*Valhalla* 2020). These mini games help to create a more diverse world than is often portrayed. However, Ubisoft's stereotyped implementation of the sensationalized cultural tropes often presented in popular culture (such as in the critically acclaimed television show *Vikings* [2013-2020] portraying Norse culture as being brutal and unforgiving) would seek to diminish their historical accuracy for the sake of game playability and aesthetics.

Raids on Christian churches and monasteries are central to the gameplay, seeing the player and their band of Jomsviking, or Viking mercenaries, sacking these locations to gain supplies for base building. This portrayal is largely accurate, and according to Anna Ritchie (2011) from the BBC in her article "Loot and Land," Alcuin in his letter to the King of Northumbria stated:

"Lo, it is nearly 350 years that we and our fathers have inhabited this most lovely land, and never before has such terror appeared in Britain as we have now suffered from a pagan race, nor was it thought that such an inroad from the sea could be made. Behold the church of St Cuthbert spattered with the blood of the priests of God, despoiled of all its ornaments; a place more venerable than all in Britain is given as a prey to pagan peoples...."

The letter being quoted from Alcuin perfectly shows the sheer veracity and fear factor Vikings held in the British Isles during the 700 to 800s. While *Valhalla* shows the signature surprise attacks Vikings were known for, the developers often drifted into

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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 dos 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.

As far as other narrative aspects go, I have never been fond of the inclusion of the present-day aspects in *Assassin's Creed* games. While I do realize that this aspect has been present from the very beginning of the franchise, that does not mean that it makes more sense. At times, I was ripped out of the immersion of the story in-game to be confronted with a *glitch in the Matrix* situation that would pull the story back into the present-day. Furthermore, the *tie-in* back to the present was because of a "coronal mass ejection from the sun in 2012 headed towards Earth" (*Valhalla* 2020), so a Viking from the 800s would *logically* have something to contribute to this, right? I am not convinced. If Ubisoft stuck to historical storytelling elements in these games and fleshed out more of the mythologies and beliefs of Norse peoples, the game could have felt more cohesive.

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