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In Memorium
Alicia McKenzie (1976-2022)[1]

How (Not) to Design a Progressive Viking:
"Desynchronized" Morality in *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*[2]

So, I seem to be making a habit of presenting on Scandinavian-themed medievalism in video games at this conference; this is the second year in a row! What keeps me coming back is I'm honestly fascinated by how game designers are trying to grapple with the inherent challenges of using this kind of source material. As we all know too well, representations of medieval Scandinavia and the Viking Age have a long history of being co-opted into the service of white supremacist ideology. I still believe very strongly that video games using this material are particularly vulnerable to this appropriation, partially because of the immersive nature of the medium, but also because of the romantic nature of the medievalism involved. E. R. Truitt called it the "Fantasy North," inhabited by manly, heroic, generally blond and blue-eyed warriors who often fit the traditional Aryan ideal just a little too well.[3] This sort of mingling of history and fantasy makes this type of northern medievalism feel authentic to the general audience even when it's not, because we are so familiar with its themes, tropes, and visual language. Given that in many cases, the historical understanding of the average gamer is at least partially formed by such games in the first place, this makes it especially critical for game designers to understand what messages they're sending when they engage with northern medievalism.

My paper last year talked about two examples, *God of War* and *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, that, in my opinion, hit it out of the park when it came to challenging audience preconceptions and de-romanticizing their take on northern medievalism.[4] My example this year made a valiant effort but fell short. The ways in which it fell short are actually very interesting, and so that's what I'm going to talk about today. My focus is obviously on the 2020 release, *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*, which takes the franchise to ninth century Norway and England during the time of Alfred the Great.[5] The protagonist is Eivor, who

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[1] For a detailed tribute at *Medievalists.net*, see https://www.medievalists.net/2022/04/alicia-mckenzie-passes-away/.

[2] This essay is the (lightly edited) presentation script prepared for the 36th Annual Conference on Medievalism, "Medievalism Today," hosted by Delta College via Zoom from November 4-6, 2021. The editors of *The Year's Work in Medievalism* have constructed footnote references and clarified phrasing; we believe that Alicia McKenzie's own words serve as a fitting and engaging memorial to her life and work.

[3] See E. R. Truitt, "Fantasy North," *Aeon Media*, February 15, 2016, https://aeon.co/essays/what-lies-beneath-the-ice-of-our-fascination-with-the-north.

[4] Alicia McKenzie, "The Antiheroic North in *God of War* and *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*." Paper presented at the 35th Annual Conference on Medievalism, "Impossible Pastimes," hosted by Old Dominion University via Zoom from November 12-24, 2020.

[5] Darby McDevitt, *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*. Ubisoft, PlayStation/Xbox/Windows/Stadia, November 10, 2020.

can be played as either male or female (and there is actually a narrative explanation for this choice!). But the canon Eivor is the female version, so I will use female pronouns for the sake of this paper.

Eivor's clan, the Raven clan, chooses to leave Norway to maintain their independence from Harald Fairhair and to settle in England, specifically in Mercia. This happens around 872 CE, so the setting of the game is several years after the arrival of the Great Army in England. The Raven clan heads to Mercia in particular to hook up with the Sons of Ragnar (so, yes, we already have saga material being wound into the narrative here). But given that most of the game is about Eivor making alliances with different Danish and English leaders, this is a really interesting point at which to set the beginning of the action because everything is up in the air; the maps are being drawn and redrawn.

Ubisoft, the studio responsible for the *Assassin's Creed* series, has for the length of the franchise introduced each game with a disclaimer. *Valhalla*'s version is as follows:

> Inspired by historical events and characters, this work of fiction was designed, developed and produced by a multicultural team of various beliefs, sexual orientations and gender identities.

This reflects the studio's stated commitment to diversity and implicitly claims a degree of sensitivity in how the product, the game, uses its historical inspirations. You might notice it does not make any claims to historical accuracy. That is deliberate; Ubisoft has always been quite firm about that, to its credit. Especially in media interviews, they are constantly acknowledging that the history that's being used is being adapted and reimagined and that compromises are being made in order to ensure an enjoyable gaming experience.[6] Does that message filter through to the fans? Having spent a lot of time on various fan forums researching for this and other pieces, I don't honestly think it ever really did. The myth of Ubisoft's commitment to historical accuracy is pretty bulletproof, to the point where they had to come and make a public statement that no, their three-dimensional modelling of Cathédrale Notre-Dame de Paris for *Assassin's Creed: Unity* (2014) was not actually going to be used to help rebuild the cathedral after the 2019 fire.[7] What has

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[6] See, for example, Youssef Maguid, "Discover the Real History Behind Every Assassin's Creed," *Ubisoft*, April 2, 2020, https://news.ubisoft.com/en-us/article/6d4zQXyH0VF6z75Ab7jfss/discover-the-real-history-behind-every-assassins-creed; the second sentence of the article states that "While each Assassin's Creed game is heavily inspired and influenced by history, they are still works of fiction."

[7] See, for example: Simone de Rochefort, "Assassin's Creed Unity Can't Help Rebuild Notre-Dame, and That's OK," *Polygon*, November 24, 2021, https://www.polygon.com/features/22790314/assassins-creed-unity-notre-dame-restoration-accuracy; Naomi Rea, "Can 'Assassin's Creed' Help Rebuild Notre Dame? How Restoring the Cathedral Will Rely on Both New Tech and Ancient Knowhow," *Artnet News*, April 18, 2019, https://news.artnet.com/market/how-technologies-old-and-new-will-be-needed-to-rebuild-notre-

happened is that since the reboot of the franchise with *Assassin's Creed: Origins* (2017), which has taken the series back into premodern history and turned it into an open-world RPG (role-playing game), is that you see resistance from fans to what they consider "woke" influence on narrative and world-building choices, such as the option to play a female version of the main character in *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* (2018). Never mind that the main character was effectively a demigod—the idea of a female warrior in classical Greece was still appalling to many.

This brings us back to *Valhalla* (2020). I have not seen as many complaints about the female Eivor, I suspect because the concept of a shieldmaiden is pretty familiar to the general audience, especially after several years of watching Katheryn Winnick act circles around her male co-stars as Lagertha on the *Vikings* TV show.[8] There's been some snappish comments about non-white Vikings and the presence of characters of African and Asian origin in ninth-century England, but it's been fairly minimal. The reason for that is, I think, not a particularly positive one: in many ways, *Valhalla* still gives its audience a very traditional image of the Vikings. At first glance they are warlike, they are fatalistic, they are ferociously masculine, swaggering predators—"wolves," as Eivor tends to call her longship crew during raids. (It should be noted that there is effectively nothing feminine about Eivor herself; she is utterly interchangeable with her male version, even down to the romance options the game provides.) In contrast to the Vikings, the Saxons tend to be depicted as sheep fleeing the wolves, or at best, callow youngsters who need to learn from the Northmen how to be warriors and leaders. Is this what was intended? I don't think so; it is, however, the impression that comes across to the audience most strongly. Still, there are enough moments of greater nuance to suggest that at least some of the writers were trying to do something different and perhaps more progressive.

In the course of gameplay, Eivor tends to come across as relatively open-minded in terms of religion. She is a firm believer in the Norse gods, with no interest in converting to Christianity, but nor is she depicted as hostile towards Christians or their beliefs. As the Raven clan sails their longships upriver into Mercia, she even tries to reason with one of her crew, Dag, who scoffs at the Christian practice of displaying the cross that killed their god; Eivor points out that the Norse also "carve idols of our gods and make wishes before them, like our sacrifices to Odin the One-Eyed." She has positive encounters with English Christians, including everyday people. One of the game's world events, which are small side quests that the player encounters while traveling, involves Eivor assisting a monk whose applecart has overturned. When she helps him carry his apples back home, she discovers that "home" is a sanctuary to Saint Guthlac, whose devotees are having a small

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[8] *Vikings*, created and written by Michael Hirst, original release dates March 3, 2013 – December 30, 2020, on The History Channel and Amazon Prime Video.

festival in his honor. Eivor can take part in apple-bobbing and read documents that talk about the saint's life, as well as interact with the friendly NPC (non-player character) inhabitants of the sanctuary.

Her more significant encounters are with the Saxon lords with whom the Raven clan seeks alliances. There are a few worth mentioning among the major story arcs, but for the sake of time I'm going to focus on Ceolbert of Mercia.[9] The son of Ceolwulf, the king put onto the Mercian throne by the Sons of Ragnar in the first major story arc of the game, Ceolbert is depicted as a naïve, somewhat sheltered, but nonetheless intelligent and likeable young man. His father sends him to live with the Raven clan for a time to ensure his safety, as well as to toughen him up a little—in a safer way, one that doesn't involve him learning from Ivar the Boneless.[10] Ceolbert is perhaps the least stereotypical of the young Saxon lords Eivor encounters; he holds to his Christian faith and his belief in the value of diplomacy, but also grows as a warrior, although he rejects the bloodthirsty approach of characters such as Ivar. Eivor finds herself fighting alongside Ceolbert in two separate arcs, including a late-game story where the Norse allies are attempting to install him as ealdorman of one of the shires where, sadly, the young man is murdered by Ivar the Boneless to destroy the peace talks with the Welsh. There is a genuinely touching optional moment, after this, where Eivor finds Ceolbert's grave while visiting Tamworth Fortress. She takes comfort in the fact that he is with his god, but mourns his absence from her life.

The most striking example of the game's willingness to subvert the Viking stereotype comes in the form of one of its historical NPCs, Guthrum. One of the leaders of the Great Army, the historical Guthrum did come to terms with King Alfred and converted to Christianity, changing his name to Athelstan and settling on the land as part of his agreement with Alfred.[11] The game's version of Guthrum is an older man, clearly weary of fighting, and beginning to question the way the Norse and Danes have approached their time in England. In the final main story arc, when the attempt to capture Alfred fails and Eivor and Guthrum's troops are ambushed, killing a number of key NPCs, there is a stunningly effective scene with Guthrum and Eivor.

Standing in the church at Chippenham, staring at the cross, Guthrum speaks in wonder about Alfred's commitment to Christianity and speculates rather wistfully if a peaceful afterlife wouldn't be preferable to Valhalla. Eivor herself is badly shaken by the death of so many friends, especially following on the heels of a pre-battle warning from her clan's seer that pursuing Alfred would lead to disaster. Afterwards, Eivor presides over the funeral pyres of her friends, both Christian and Viking, and the game's previously cheerful

[9] "Ceolbert," *Assassin's Creed Wiki*, https://assassinscreed.fandom.com/wiki/Ceolbert.

[10] "Ivar the Boneless," *Assassin's Creed Wiki*, https://assassinscreed.fandom.com/wiki/Ivarr_the_Boneless.

[11] "Guthrum," *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guthrum.

colonial overtones start to feel rather ghoulish. This is only hammered home after Eivor's final confrontation with Alfred when she discovers a battlefield where another of her friends and allies, Ubba Ragnarsson, lies dead along with his men. Although it was an English victory, they won nothing by it; the deaths on both sides, and the violence, are depicted as pointless. Eivor takes refuge with her family and friends back at Ravensthorpe, but there is a melancholy awareness that what had been presented as their great English enterprise came with a far higher cost than they had originally imagined.

It is actually a very convincing bit of writing . . . or would be, if there weren't other things going on throughout the game that continuously undermine this nicely designed narrative arc. Let's talk about monasteries. Visually speaking, the monasteries of Valhalla are absolutely dazzling. I could walk around in them forever, basically; once I download the Discovery Tour, I probably will. (Discovery Tours are educational add-ons that allow you to explore the settings without needing to do any fighting.)[12] The landscape is littered with monasteries and, on the visual level, they are depicted as the thriving communities they would have been at the time. But that is *only* on the visual level. You cannot actually interact with these communities because the monasteries exist for one main reason: to give you someplace to raid (sometimes they are the location of information or a hiding place for someone you're hunting, but that's much less common). Usually, what Eivor does is rock up to the front gates with her longship, blow her horn, and raid the place. Usually setting it on fire, of course.

This is a key game mechanic. What you're looking for when you raid these monasteries are treasure chests. Now, they do not hold gold or other precious objects or anything you might imagine Viking raiders would be looking for; no, they hold building materials. You raid monasteries to find supplies and raw materials in order to upgrade your settlement, Ravensthorpe. Literally, the monasteries become the ninth-century version of Lowes or Home Hardware. What's also puzzling are the sheer number of soldiers the monasteries contain. What are they doing there? Eivor and her crew can fight them, but monks and other civilians are designated as noncombatants. If you attack more than a couple of non-combatants, you will desynchronize from the Animus; this is a reference to the science fiction aspect of the game, the device that the modern-day protagonist uses to explore the past. Functionally speaking, it means that you die. Something else you cannot do is take prisoners, because these Vikings do not trade in slaves. Now, to be fair, no one probably would have been lining up to play a Viking hero who also happened to be a slave trader, but between this and not being allowed to harm non-combatants—and sometimes it's really hard, because they mill about like terrified sheep trying to run away from you,

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[12] Discovery Tours are promoted by Ubisoft to teachers and students for classroom use; see https://www.ubisoft.com/en-us/game/assassins-creed/discovery-tour.

and the game's AI doesn't always point them in the right direction—the whole raid mechanic feels tremendously inauthentic. What really made me sigh, though, is how bloodthirsty Eivor is sometimes depicted as being during these raids. It's automatic dialogue; you don't choose the words you use to rally your crew for raids, but it does tend to create a sense of whiplash when in one moment, Eivor's having a thoughtful discussion with a monk about his favorite saint, and ten minutes later, she's running into a monastery with a torch screaming "Kill Christ and burn his church!"

So, what we've got going on here, clearly, is a clash between narrative goals and game mechanics. In some ways, this is very characteristic of the *Assassin's Creed* series, even post-reboot,[13] and it is certainly a broader problem in the medium. I think it's going to remain inevitable, because game designers still need to appeal to what the audience thinks is authentically medieval. That's always going to challenge attempts to introduce greater nuance or to subvert historical stereotypes. Another difficulty is that games like this are simply so large: *Valhalla* in particular was the product of fifteen different Ubisoft studios working together.[14] Too many cooks in the kitchen? You've got a lot of things at work here—a concern for playability, the desire to give the audience what it wants, and the desire on the part of Ubisoft to play with history responsibly, which has always been a priority for them with the *Assassin's Creed* series. It's why they bring in so many outside scholars as consultants.[15] Personally speaking, I give them credit for trying. When I look back on the game, I'm going to remember moments like Guthrum in the church and Eivor bidding farewell to her dead friends, even as she questions whether any of her battles were worth these losses. Even if the game loses its focus from time to time, it does matter that the writing asks these questions because it complicates player perceptions of the so-called Viking way of life and that is only ever going to be a good thing.

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[13] *Assassin's Creed: Origins* (2017) is considered a franchise "soft reboot" with increased focus on role-playing.

[14] Ubisoft Montréal (@UbisoftMTL). 2020. "Exciting! An immense congratulations to our studio warriors for all the good work and passion building to that reveal. We'd also like to thank the 14 co-dev studios all around the world. You know who you are, and we're thankful for your dedication! Skàl!" *Twitter*, April 29, 2020, 4:30 p.m. https://twitter.com/UbisoftMTL/status/1255610392283418626?s=20.

[15] See, for example, an interview with Dr. Stéphanie-Anne Ruatta, regarding her experiences as a consultant for *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* (2018): Andrew Reinhard, "Consulting for Ubisoft on Assasin's Creed: Odyssey," April 19, 2019, https://archaeogaming.com/2019/04/19/consulting-for-ubisoft-on-assassins-creed-odyssey/.