

Digitalisation for Preservation and Cultural Heritage Celebration

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Introduction:

In part, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, there was a large increase in the digitisation of heritage for archaeological study and understanding. The pandemic and the subsequent lockdown made traveling to archaeological sites and access to archaeological materials rather difficult. There has been a push for the digitisation of archaeological sites and materials before the pandemic, however, the pandemic had increased the need for digital resources availability for archaeologists. Access to these resources during the pandemic also limited avenues for the public to access their personal interest in history. COVID-19 affected museums, monuments and UNESCO heritage sites worldwide. Public health protection measures and restrictions on mobility resulted in decrease of tourism and tourist cash flow. These sites saw their attendance plummet and lost income. However, to stay connected with their audiences, many cultural heritage institutions increased the digital communication, online access to and experiences of, cultural heritage.(Geser, 2021)

In recent years, video games and televised period dramas on streaming sites have become increasingly popular as a stable usership platform for content and relevance in popular culture. For example, Netflix's *The Crown*, a period drama based on the life of Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom has been a popular insight into a historically rich yet recent period of British history.(BBC News, 2014) Researchers for *The Crown* are fortunate to have access to a larger abundance of recent materials to draw upon to serialize into a 10 episode television series. Researching for a video game of the breath and scale of Ubisoft's Phase 2 *Assassin's Creed* series has significant challenges for the researcher. For this essay, I will be focusing on recent entries into Ubisoft's award winning franchise; *Assassin Creed*, with emphasis on *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* and *Assassin's Creed Origins*.

Assassin's Creed Valhalla is an action role-playing game developed by Ubisoft Montreal and published by Ubisoft in Fall 2020. It is the twelfth major installment in the *Assassin's Creed* series and serves as the narrative successor to 2018's *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*. The game is principally set from 872 CE until 878 CE, recounting a fictional story during the Viking expansions into the British Isles.(Ubisoft, 2022) Players control a lightly-customizable Viking raider, Eivor Varinsdottir who serves as the primary protagonist of the story. The game received generally positive reviews, with praise directed towards the narrative, characters and world design, whilst criticism focused on the overall length, technical issues and repetitive structure. Ubisoft supported *Valhalla* extensively with two years of additional content, including free and paid story expansions and events. Ubisoft developed a free game mode for *Valhalla* that was released in October 2021. The gameplay mode, titled as *Discovery Tour: Viking Age* serves as the third installment of the *Discovery Tour* mini series.

In the *Discovery Tour*, players are able to free roam and explore the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, Norway to learn about both countries' histories. In addition the mythological realms of Asgard and Jotunheim are also explorable. (Creed, 2021) Unlike the previous *Discovery Tour* installments which employed the use of guided tours, *Discovery Tour: Viking Age* allows for players to assume the roles of various characters to take on quests with the aim of 'bringing them closer to the material by putting them at the center of it'.(Reparaz, 2021)

Discover in Discovery Mode

AC's Valhalla's Discovery Mode is a continuation of the subseries Assassin Creed's Discovery Modes. Beginning in Assassin Creed's Origins and continuing with Assassin's Creed Odyssey. AC Origins addressed Late Ptolemaic Egypt, whilst Assassin's Creed Odyssey's Discovery Mode focuses on the Peloponnesian War's Athenian and Spartan city states. In 2017, Assassin's Creed Origins was released. The preceding Assassin's Creed game Assassin's Creed Syndicate had been released to lukewarm reception due to the disastrous release of Assassin Creed Unity in 2014. 2017's Assassin's Creed Origins was billed to be a soft reboot of the franchise in terms of story and gameplay mechanics, swapping stealth based parkour for more roleplaying and leveling mechanics. Origins is the first installment to include a dedicated combatless mode designed to educate rather than for pure entertainment value. The Discovery update removed all combat, missions and story from the game, leaving [the player] free to explore its detailed recreation of ancient Egypt at leisure. (MacDonald, 2018) Assassin's Creed Origins's Discovery Mode added seventy-five interactive tours. These were written in collaboration with international Egyptologists to be like 'one of those audio guides that you can pick up at museums' (MacDonald, 2018). The concept of the educational version of the game occurred in 2009. At the time, the series was dedicated to the Renaissance Florentine and Venetian setting, however, budgetary and technological constraints impacted on the full discovery mode being implemented. Focus on the additional educational information at the time was directed into the in-game encyclopedia. (MacDonald, 2018) The tenth anniversary of Assassin's Creed was in 2017, for which Ubisoft designed to celebrate the milestone with the inclusion of Discovery Mode in Assassin's Creed Origins. During the research period, some themes became so large in terms of material that the twenty initial tours that were originally created evolved into the seventy-five tours that can now be found in the game. The seventy five tours are built around five main themes; Egypt, Romans, the Pyramids, daily life, and Alexandria.

One of the strengths of the Discovery Tour is the museum documentation that one can look at while going through this immersive tour. Players can see what the actual objects were from. The Ubisoft artistic team took its inspiration in order to recreate the accuracy of the landscape and the daily life environment.

Ubisoft succeeded in having the collaboration of some of the most famous museums of the world such as the Louvre, the British Museum, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. These institutions willingly shared dozens of pictures of archaeological objects that were then used to illustrate in 2D an element of the 3D tour. (Poiron, 2021) Furthermore, one of the main particularities of the Discovery Tour is giving the visitor an immersive experience, both visually and aurally. Some tours were particularly created for such an experience, such as the Artisans Tour, which shows colorful drawings, paintings, sculpture, and reliefs from different parts of Egypt all in one place. (Poiron, 2021) Ubisoft wanted to use the Assassin's Creed: Origins world to welcome such a tour, even if they were not always historically accurate, to give the audience a general impression of the time period.

For Assassin's Creed Valhalla, the choice of a Viking setting is partly determined by the cultural interest and relevance of Norse Mythology and Viking culture. The United Kingdom and Ireland have a rich history of Viking settlement due to their close geographical location

to Norway, Sweden and Denmark. A mythological understanding of Vikings and greater Norse Mythology are ingrained into popular culture, which generally triggers interest and curiosity with the general public. This can be seen in the popularity of the History Channel's historical drama: Vikings; the Marvel's Cinematic Universe's depiction of Thor and Asgard and recent entries in the God of War franchise. Furthermore, during this particular period of human history, two famous personages of Viking history lived; King Alfred the Great of Wessex and the Great Heathen Army's commanders; Bjorn Ironside, Ivar the Boneless and Ubba Ragnarson. These are the sons of the quintessential Viking, Ragnar Lothbrok.(Lewis, 2023) However, this period of history has a lot of unknown and contradictory information, for both historians and the general public. This period of history is also mythologised as Ubisoft drove to 'let the player write [their] own Viking Saga'.(Ubisoft, 2022) Therefore, Ubisoft decided to use this to create the narrative of the videogame and a subsequent detailed Discovery Tour experience.

Immersion into Assassin's Creed Valhalla

For player's to recognise their surroundings easily, developers wanted to create a clash between the English and Norwegian maps. Norwegian landscapes are covered with ice and snow, with little road to travel by land. This was a gameplay decision to subconsciously encourage the player to continue the story. (Ubisoft, 2021) Ancient Scandinavia was not as barren as it was implied to be. The harshness of the uninviting land depicted in AC Valhalla is meant to push the players towards England and continue the narrative . Level Artists, Tech Artists, and Level Designers used the Lofoten Islands as a visual reference to emulate its rough landscapes. (Poiron, 2021) Through shapes and outlines, the designers made the world feel uninviting in contrast to England's lush and vivid flora.

Jorvik (present day York) is depicted in Assassin Creed Valhalla. It is an example of how Anglo-Saxon and Norse civilization have merged together. The city is represented by the inclusion of multiple docks and narrow streets filled with trade, industry and religious interests. A recreation of the fabled York Minster is also present. Level-artists and game designers used Coppergate as one of the city's landmarks. It was known as the 'Cup Street' and was a major trade center in the York cityscape. Within the game, the wooden houses and stalls are built tightly together. Other locations such as Winchester and London in the game are depicted as stone built towns. (Reparaz, 2021)

To replicate England's diverse flora and fauna, the developers wanted to be accurate to help players navigate the game. To achieve this, the World Design and Development teams created a season's map. England was divided into four areas and allocated a season. Each season had its own variety of vegetation and background fauna. This was diverse to each area from grass to trees with its own humidity layer. This helped determine the type of soil in each area. Either lush, dry or wetland. This guided the Level Artists and Designers in what could be implemented. Such as the right type of flora in the world, creating different landscapes using rocks and trees. Therefore, each region has diverse but coherent scenery, engaging players to explore the map meticulously. For York/Jorvik, being in the north of England, the city is in deep midwinter.(Ubisoft, 2021) Therefore it is coated in snow and ice. York is considered one of England's most haunted cities, the deep midwinter setting adds to the mystical and otherworldly atmosphere of the city. Level Designers used this to justify

their decision to place an underground location, reusing Roman abandoned sewers. (Ubisoft, 2021)

The early medieval and Viking eras were full of color. To break a preconception about this time period, the artist, modeler and texture teams took care to implement vivid colors to the in-game worlds. However, there is a fine line between the historical accuracy and the needs of the gameplay. In certain cases, the developers chose to use one color for an item. For example, pigs and carrots in AC Valhalla are pink and white respectively; although pigs at the time were brown in complexion and carrots had a wide range of colors, from white to purple. This choice helps with comprehension of the world, but also for consistency when certain objects are used in gameplay, such as the explosive red oil jars. Hence, one distinct color makes certain items easily identifiable.

Assassin Creed Valhalla is set during a tense political climate, where English kingdoms were interfought and against Viking attacks. To add to the immersion, maps are displayed in the game as battle plans. To help players visualize friends and foes, chess pieces were designed. (Ubisoft, 2021) The 3D Modeling team created items inspired by an early Scandinavian chess set, the Hnefatafl, which was combined with the Lewis chess pieces. The Hnefatafl was found in Scotland and was crafted out of walrus tusks and whale teeth in the 12th century. This design merged Britanic and Scandinavian traditional designs into a unique item.

Music forms part of the core of AC Valhalla's experience, used to define territories and moods. To create an acoustic dichotomy between Norsemen and Angles, Norway's music borrows sounds from rituals and daily life, while England's music revolves more around the Church. (Ubisoft, 2022)

Partnerships: Out and In

The Discovery Tour Team has always worked with a wide variety of partners, from experts to historians. The immersive approach of Discovery Tour: Viking Age collaborated with museum partners resulting in contributions of images of real artifacts within the experience. (Tessier, 2021) These partners include:

The Hampshire Cultural Trust (HCT) is Ubisoft's main partner for Discovery Tour: Viking Age. They manage twenty three museum and art attractions across Hampshire. The Discovery Tour provides a unique glimpse into the lives of ordinary people in and around Winchester through a selection of rare objects. This includes the exceptional Winchester Reliquary, the sole surviving holy relic in Britain from the time. (Tessier, 2021) **The British Library** is the national library of the United Kingdom and has a vast collection of items including artifacts from the Anglo Saxon and Viking era. A partnership with the British Library allowed Ubisoft to give players the best access to medieval manuscripts and illustrations directly linked with the Viking Age. (Tessier, 2021) The **York Archaeological Trust** operates the Jorvik Viking Centre in the UK. This trust has interpreted the archaeology of York's Coppergate archaeological dig. The Discovery Tour has allowed Ubisoft to present some of their finds and adds authentic period detail to the immersive environment of the Discovery Tour. This demonstrates the importance of the city during the Viking Age as a commercial, religious and political hub.

Conclusion:

The developers of the Assassin's Creed franchise have developed a game world full of historical artifacts, cultural icons, remediations of previous works, and a representation of a culture that existed more than one thousand years ago. This is a culture and historical landmark which has formed much of British and Scandinavian history and folklore.

It is one thing to experience history in the form of film or literature, but it is different to be able to be immersed in history with an individual's own choices playing a part in deciding what happens in the video game. Through Assassin's Creed, players are put in an historical time period, a period far away from our current civilization.

They are then expected to interact with this game world as if it was their own world. They get to plunder and raid settlements, and they explore how the people of the early Medieval Norse world might have lived. The wonder of playing video games will come down to wanting to traverse the vastly detailed landscapes while listening to the accompanying music. For others, the enjoyment of Discovery Mode will be to experience the Tour and learn more about the shared world history. These are questions partially or fully answered in the Assassin's Creed video games and their accompanying Discovery Tours.

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