



EAT. SLEEP.
RAID.
REPEAT.

Images courtesy of Ubisoft

The Norsemen
Cometh



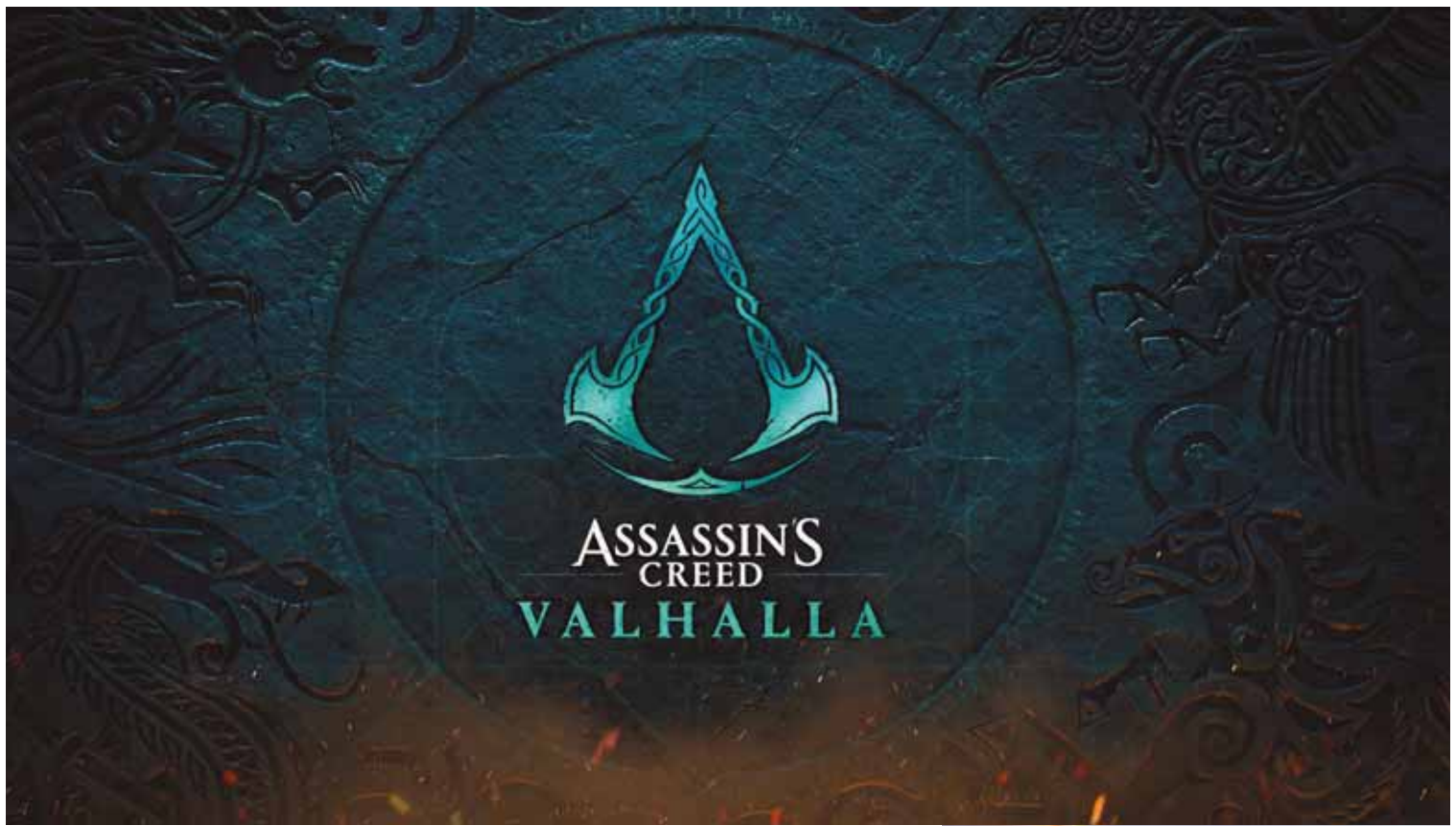
A tranquil village ripe for a pillage



Images courtesy of Ubisoft

From the upcoming Marvel film *Thor: Love and Thunder* to *The Last Kingdom* on Netflix, Vikings have invaded pop culture. Games developer Ubisoft jumped on the bandwagon, or rather, onto the longship, in *Assassin's Creed Valhalla*. Ricky Kingshott explores how the game appeals to a range of audiences.

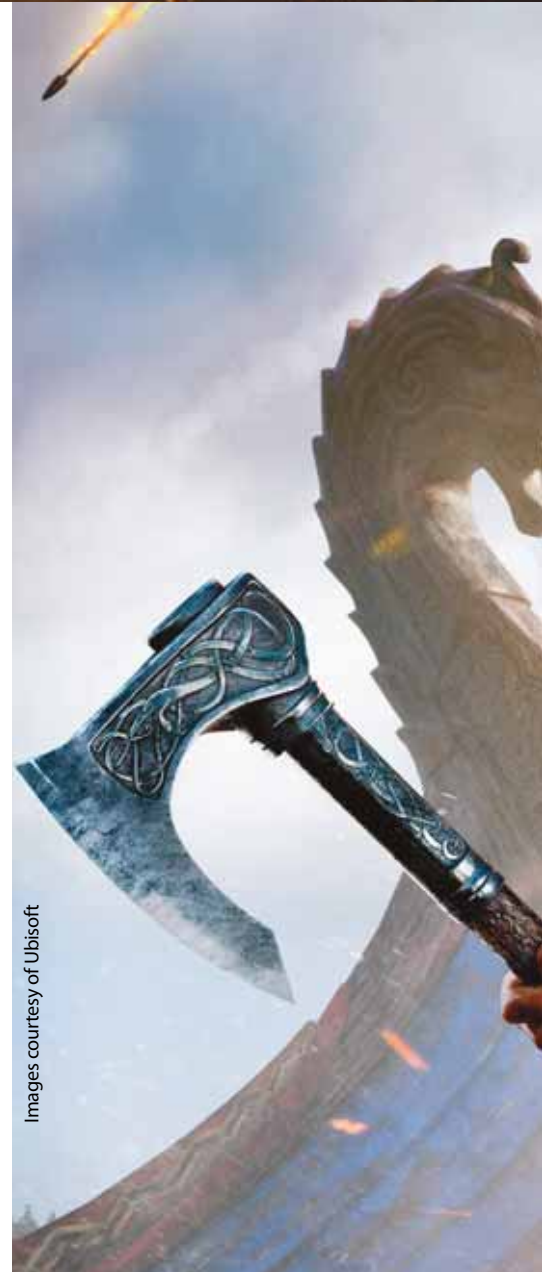





Assassin's Creed Valhalla sold 1.7 million copies at its launch in November 2020, giving Ubisoft its most profitable financial quarter ever. The game reached the top of the UK retail charts at Christmas, providing some much-needed Viking-themed escapism for gamers in the midst of lockdown. Ubisoft's elaborate marketing campaign struck a balance between appealing to loyal fans of the series as well as a broader audience. The campaign kicked off with an eight-hour-long art demonstration by concept artist BossLogic. The event was live streamed on YouTube, revealing the highly anticipated Viking setting. While this event was aimed at established fans of the transmedia franchise, other elements of the marketing campaign, such as the cinematic TV advert, were aimed at more casual gamers. In the advert, the main character, Eivor, breaks the fourth wall, addressing the camera directly as he casually hops off his longship and ransacks an Anglo-Saxon settlement. He nonchalantly cuts down his foes with dual axes before helping himself to their golden goblets and jewellery. As he swaggers out with his companions, like a scene out of *Reservoir Dogs*, the text 'live, think, fight, conquer like a Viking' hammers onto the screen, appealing to gamers who may not have played an *Assassin's Creed* game before but share culture's current preoccupation with all things Norse.

Pillage in the Village

While many gameplay elements are carried over from previous titles, including stealth tactics and the iconic hidden blade, *Valhalla* is a major leap forward for the series. This is largely due to the enhanced capabilities of the PlayStation 5 and the Xbox Series X/S, released at the same time as *Valhalla*, which was a flagship title for the new consoles. One of the main improvements is the expanded size of the open world to explore. The map of England alone covers 94km² of territory, dwarfing the original *Assassin's Creed's* city of




Images courtesy of Ubisoft



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Damascus, which covered a mere 0.13km². In *Valhalla*, players can explore the immense landscapes of 9th century Norway and England at their leisure. Many hours can be whiled away traversing the giant map and marvelling at the scenery, from Norway's snowbound tundra to England's lush forests and rolling hills. The game doesn't simply consist of rambling through the countryside and admiring daisies, though. The PEGI 18 rating is fully earned as villages are raided, houses set ablaze and hordes of hapless Anglo-Saxons are dispatched with a range of weapons.

When *Valhalla* begins, the player must select the gender of the main character, Eivor. Whether you opt for a male or female Eivor, the narrative is the same, with two different voice actors providing dialogue. The player can also seamlessly switch between playing as the male or female Eivor mid-game. The introduction of dual protagonists creates a refreshing sense of balance – both versions of Eivor have the same personality, pursue the same romantic interests and are equally bloodthirsty, making the choice of gender arbitrary. This is a refreshing step forward for video



Assassin's Creed Valhalla: big maps and even bigger axes

games. Female characters have often taken archetypal roles, from the *Mario* series' Princess Peach as a damsel in distress to early versions of *Tomb Raider's* Lara Croft as an object of the male gaze. *Valhalla* seeks to address the criticism Ubisoft have faced over their alleged view that 'women don't sell games.' It is notable, however, that Ubisoft kept the option of playing as a male Eivor in the game. This could be seen as a get-out clause for male gamers unwilling to play as a female, suggesting there remains a spectre of misogyny which haunts the video games industry – a final boss which has yet to be defeated.

Ragnarok and Roll

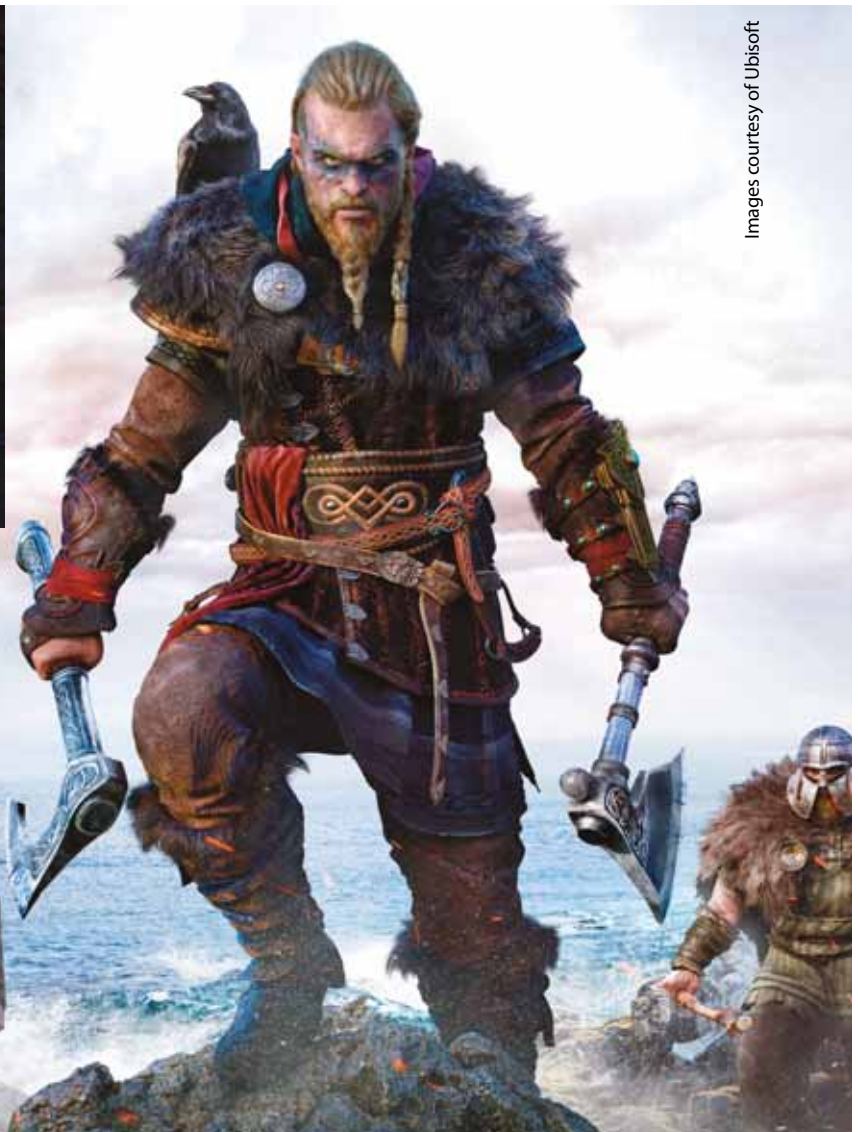
Valhalla is an immersive history lesson thanks to Ubisoft's meticulous research and commitment to historical accuracy. The inclusion of a female Eivor was influenced by references to female warriors in Viking legend. According to Thierry Noël, historian and content advisor on *Valhalla*, 'sagas and myths from Norse society are full of tough female characters and warriors.' To add to the historical veracity, players explore all four kingdoms of Anglo-Saxon England: East Anglia, Mercia, Northumbria and Wessex, interacting with real-life figures such as the villainous Alfred the Great.

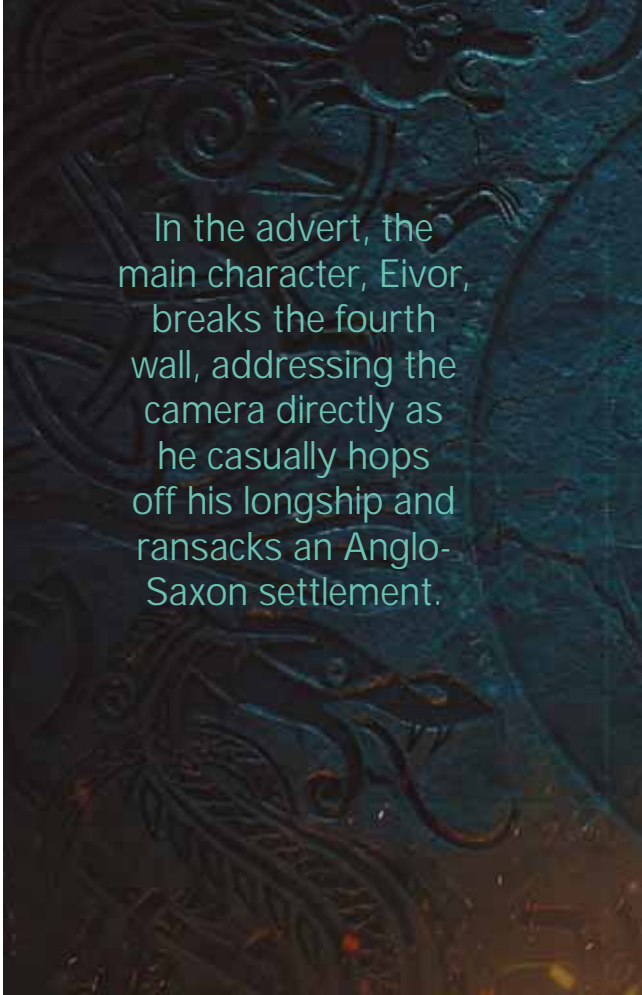
The game confronts the historical conception of Vikings as godless barbarians, painting them in a sympathetic light and positioning the audience to root for them as outsiders. Ubisoft's commitment to historical accuracy also extends to the gameplay. The player can engage in activities such as flying, verbal contests of wit which were the Norse equivalent of modern rap battles. The game's soundtrack was produced using authentic instruments from the time period such as lyres, bone flutes and goat horns. The producers refused to portray the Vikings with horns on their helmets when in battle, such was their commitment to historical reality and rejection of inaccurate stereotypes.

Valhalla serves *Assassin's Creed's* loyal fanbase in many ways. In the timeline of the series, *Valhalla* slots in before *Assassin's Creed Origins* and after the first instalment, *Assassin's Creed*. The game is full of hidden references to previous games in the form of Easter eggs. The three cities explored in *Valhalla*, London, Winchester and York, echo the three cities in the original *Assassin's Creed* game and contain similar characters. Satisfying the fanbase is important to Ubisoft, as they support the franchise and are active in their fandom, illustrating Henry Jenkins' concept of participatory culture. YouTuber devinsupertramp uploads parkour videos inspired by the games, a cosplay group in Italy create their

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The Vikings have landed





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own *Assassin's Creed* costumes, and there are countless guides and walkthroughs on YouTube uploaded by fans. When *Valhalla* launched on November 10th 2020, over 285,000 fans watched live streams of the game being played by fans on Twitch. Gamers can also connect with each other through Ubisoft Connect, Ubisoft's vertically integrated distribution and communications service. Video games were once regarded as a solitary activity, but *Assassin's Creed* shows how a series can create a thriving community and a real sense of belonging and connection amongst its fans.

Ricky Kingshott teaches Media Studies and English at The Bedford Sixth Form.



from the MM vaults

Aveline: Merchant, Slave, Assassin
– Laurence Russell, MM65



Playthrough – The Swan-Road Home

The Swan-Road Home takes place early in the game, after Eivor leaves Norway and arrives in England for the first time. The quest is available to watch on YouTube.

England, 873 CE. After a gruelling ocean voyage of several days, you and your Norse companions set your eyes upon British shores for the first time. As your longship cuts through the waters of your new home, a swell of non-diegetic strings captures the wonder of the moment. The shoreline of East Anglia is rendered in beautiful 4K detail by the sweeping panoramic camera and the 60 FPS graphics. You discuss the strangeness of what you see on the shores – the unusual religious iconography on the churches and the people you see being baptised, which you mistake for ritual drowning. You soon discover the first challenge to overcome. Your longship's route is blocked by a naval chain across the river. You hop off the boat and discover a nearby Anglo-Saxon settlement. Stealth would be a useful tactic here, but the subtle approach is abandoned as you quickly engage in hand-to-hand combat. You swiftly dispatch your foes with a combination of arrows and your hand axe. You pounce on one unfortunate enemy from above, assassinating him with your hidden blade. Not the best way to endear yourself to the locals, but there's looting to be done. You search the area for precious ammunition, food, and silver to sustain you in your later adventures. It's time to destroy the chain's mechanisms with a pair of well-placed arrows and clear the path for the longship. Now you can jump back into the boat and rejoin your companions. Your brother Sigurd offers a quick history lesson as he discusses the legacy of the Romans, whose 'ruins dot the landscape'. You arrive in a new territory, Grantebriðgescire, or modern-day Cambridgeshire. You have gained two skill points, which you can use to improve your stats and learn new abilities. You arrive at a settlement, which you will soon make yours after making its current residents acquainted with your axes and arrows. Then you can begin to build your settlement, explore and make alliances. Your journey towards conquering the four kingdoms has begun.