

# "Kill all the Christians!": Representation of religion within AC Valhalla

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines how religion is framed and represented within videogames, taking the game Assassins Creed Valhalla as a case to study. This game has been chosen for its rather unique representation of Christianity through the perspective of both an extinct religion (the Old Norse religion) and a fictitious religious framing (the Isu), developed by the studio Ubisoft. By applying a textual analysis my play sessions have been documented and used in order to analyze the representation of religion within this game. The interrelation between these religions is problematic as the violent nature of the Norse is in a direct conflict with the innocent nature of the Christians. Additionally, Christianity is barely represented within the narrative as the fantasy driven polytheistic Norse religion takes the front seat. Religion is often used instrumentally in order to fit the formula that the Assassins Creed series has developed throughout dozens of games within the series. Progress within the game has been heavily framed through religious narrative, the player has to raid and pillage in order to grow. This leads to churches and abbeys serving no other purpose than being places for the player to plunder. The use of the Old Norse perspective creates conflicts with the Western-Christian view which is embedded within the design of this game. This results in the Christian religion being respected too much, at the cost of a limited representation of the Old Norse and their warmongering ideals.

## **Keywords**

Christianity, Old Norse, religion, videogames, Assassins Creed, representation, textual analysis

# Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Religion in videogames</b>	<b>6</b>
2.1	Adding play to religion . . . . .	6
2.2	Religion in videogames . . . . .	7
2.3	Representation of Old Norse and Christian religion within popular media . . . . .	8
<b>3</b>	<b>Method</b>	<b>10</b>
3.1	Textual Analysis . . . . .	10
<b>4</b>	<b>Innocence</b>	<b>12</b>
4.1	Exploring Britain . . . . .	12
4.2	Monks and peasants in saint Albanes abbey . . . . .	13
4.3	NPC interaction in Medeshamstede abbey . . . . .	13
<b>5</b>	<b>Glorifying battle and Valhalla</b>	<b>14</b>
5.1	Encounters with mythical creatures . . . . .	14
5.2	Meeting the Drengr . . . . .	15
5.3	Raiding the wealthy Christians . . . . .	16
<b>6</b>	<b>Religious gameplay</b>	<b>18</b>
6.1	Mechanized religion . . . . .	18
6.2	Seahenge . . . . .	19
<b>7</b>	<b>Alternative religious narrative</b>	<b>20</b>
7.1	The Isu . . . . .	20
<b>8</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>22</b>
8.1	Conclusion . . . . .	22
8.2	Discussion and Future Research . . . . .	22
<b>9</b>	<b>Appendix</b>	<b>27</b>

# 1 Introduction

Whilst wandering the lush landscapes of 9th century Great Britain I came across a church. This church symbolised Christianity through the flag posts and statues which contained the cross, to represent Christ. The building and surrounding architecture resembled Roman architecture, through the use of large marble statues and pillars. This church did not seem to be the location of religious practices however, as it was built like a fortress, containing guard towers and heavily armed guards. The gameplay steered heavily towards battle and raiding. This made me wonder, can the representation of religion be shaped through gameplay mechanics?

Within media studies videogames are seen as the successor of movies in the way they help illuminate the religiosity of the 21st century, similar to the way movies did in the 20th century (Campbell and Grieve 2014, p. 2). Videogames, in specific the larger AAA titles of the past decade, are considered as a relatively new medium filled with potential for new insights into place, presentation and the impact of religion within popular culture (Campbell and Grieve 2014, p. 2). De Wildt argues that games, due to their popularity among youngsters, are more likely to make these youngsters encounter religiosity than the actual places of worship like mosques, churches or temples do (Wildt 2020, p. 8).

De Wildt states that most games use a Western view on religion (Wildt 2020, p. 100). However, as games have to remain approachable and acceptable by large worldwide audiences, the studios have to constrain certain conventions of religion in contrary to their own beliefs (Wildt 2020, p. 106). These design choices, or marketing choices, result in a specific representation of religion. When a representation of a religion or ideology has to be designed, certain choices have to be made as to how the religion will be represented. Due to this, religion is often used instrumentally, based on conventions which are typically embedded in Western-Christian game design traditions (Wildt 2020, p. 106).

Bogost uses the term procedural rhetoric to explain how rule based systems, games being one of them, can be used to make strong claims about how real life works (Bogost 2007). In order to design a game, certain design choices have to be made. These choices are mostly built upon ideologies or standpoints the game designers either purposefully or unconsciously add to the game (Bogost 2007). These ideologies can also influence the representation of religions that are practiced more in the countries where games are developed, such as North America.

An example of the Western perspective is the representation of terrorists in relation to the Islam in modern shooters such as *Call of Duty Modern Warfare I (InfinityWard 2007) and II (InfinityWard 2009)* (Ibaid 2019). These games perpetuate Islamophobic ideas through American popular culture (Ibaid 2019, p. 3). They allow the player to take on the role of an American soldier who has to kill dozens of Muslim terrorists in order to succeed in his/her mission.

Another example of the Western perspective is found in "pro" Christian games. Two often used examples regarding Christian representation are the games *Guardians of Ancora* (Ltd 2018) and *Left Behind: Eternal Forces* (InspiredMediaEntertainment 2006), both of which were used to represent Christianity in different ways (Hutchings 2019, p. 162-164). *Guardians of Ancora* is a game that has been launched by a charity which actively tries to introduce people to Jesus and Christianity, it has clear representations as its sole purpose is to introduce people to this religion. *Left Behind* however is a game that allows the player to play a military game of sorts in which the player has to battle forces of the Antichrist. Following the logic of de Wildt and Bogost, the game tries to represent religion, but fails to do so by oversimplifying the representation of religion as "religion takes a back seat to military strategy" (Bogost 2007, p. 291).

If the Western-Christian view is truly embedded within popular gaming culture, how would religions that are no longer practiced be represented? And how would a game represent Christianity from the perspective of another religion? A popular example of a religion that is barely practiced in contemporary culture is the Old Norse religion. Norse religion has had many representations in popular media, not only games, but movies and series as well. The hit series *Vikings* (Hirst 2013) for instance represents the raiding and warmongering Norse in detail, including their clash with Christianity at that time (Saunders 2014; Poniewozik 2013). Additionally, many games portray the violent nature of the Old Norse; through representations of their fierce gods, Odin, Loki and Thor or through battles with various mythical creatures that were depicted in the folkloristic tales of that time, glorifying Valhalla and battle (Koshkina 2020; Taggart 2015).

Christianity can be represented in two ways. The first being a focus on the religious narrative, as described in the Bible. The second would be focusing on artefacts and other representations of the actual practise of

the religion such as prayer and the architecture that is used to facilitate prayer, being churches. Within my research of the game *Assassins Creed (AC) Valhalla* (Ubisoft 2021) I will focus specifically on the latter, as I am not trying to research the truthfulness or accuracy of the representation of the religions at play.

The Old Norse religion, also known as Norse paganism is an extinct religion as it has largely been converted by Christianity. The religion however, was mostly known for its heavy focus on ritual practice, transmission through oral culture and its relation to the warmongering vikings at the time (Andrén, Jennbert, and Raudvere 2006, p. 12-14). The religion was based mostly on their polytheistic beliefs, cosmology and various mythical tales. Within these mythical tales the wilderness mythology is often used, the wilderness is a space for encounter between humans and the supernatural (Feldt 2012, p. 2). In this paper I will analyze how the different facets of this paganistic religion are used to support the narrative and gameplay and how these frame Christianity.

This thesis could be used in order to start research on other videogames that represent Christianity as well. In order to see how the Christian background of both the Western studios and a large part of the Western player base influence the representation of Christianity within the Western videogame industry. Both religious marketing as well as the Western studio's own religious convictions might be the reason for the Western gaming industry to handle the Christian religion with kid gloves. It is important to critically assess religious representation in the fast expanding videogame medium in order to see if all religions are represented equal or if the Western perspective favors Christian representation. In order to start this research I will choose a specific case that allows for a great insight into religious representation as it does not only represent Christianity, but does so through a perspective outside of Christianity.

*AC Valhalla* is rather unique for its representation of both a monotheistic religion (Christianity), a polytheistic extinct religion (Old Norse religion) and a fictitious religious framing (The Isu). As the player takes on the role of Eivor, a Norse warrior, the game is framed from the Norse perspective. In order to analyze how the game represents Christianity and the Old Norse religion and how Christianity is perceived through the antagonistic Norse perspective as well as a fictitious religious framing, the following questions will be posed:

How does *AC Valhalla* represent Christianity through a perspective of extinct and fictitious religions?

This question is posed to see how the unique triad of religions shape the representation of a religion that is still practised. *AC Valhalla* features a wide variety of possible representations of these religions. As explained before, wilderness mythology and vocal culture were staples of the paganistic culture of the Norse in the 9th century. Whilst the Isu is represented in more obscured and embedded ways. In addition to this, the ways in which the actual religious practice of both the Old Norse and Christians are represented has to be analyzed. In order to answer how Christianity is framed through the perspective of these other religions, the religions themselves have to be studied, this results in the following subquestions:

How are the Isu represented in the embedded narratives of *AC Valhalla*?

How are the various Old Norse rituals and cultural traits such as warfare and wilderness mythology represented within *AC Valhalla*?

How do both non player characters and religious architecture shape the representation of Christianity within *AC Valhalla*?

In order to answer these questions I will apply a textual analysis method, which will be further explained in the third chapter. This method allows me to analyse the game in great detail, through my own extensive play sessions of the game. Within my textual analysis I will research how NPC's (Non player characters) act within the game environment, as well as analyzing architecture and nature within the game. I will add extensive notes to my play sessions, monitoring the NPC's behavior.

To justify these sub and main questions I will firstly create a theoretical framework to create a grounding for my own analysis, based on literature and research from researchers before me. Through the textual analysis that follows I will conclude how religion is represented and how this frames both the Old Norse religion and Christianity, as well as their interrelation.

## 2 Religion in videogames

This chapter will explain the relation between videogames and religion in general. The following sections will focus on specific aspects of religious representation. Additionally, the representation of both the Old Norse genre and Christianity have to be explained in more detail. The representation of the Old Norse religion has seen an uprising in its popularity, and has seen studies written about adaptation in popular culture such as film and literature (Kuusela 2014; Sanacore 2014). Norse culture and its representation in videogames however, still lacks the necessary research, which this paper tries to contribute to.

### 2.1 Adding play to religion

The digital age has sparked revolutions in our ideas around identity, authority, authorship and authenticity. According to Anthony it is "no wonder that gaming - a chief space of engagement in the digital age - has extended these to religion" (Anthony 2014, p. 39). Anthony describes a variety of ways in which religion can be represented in games, one of which is the digital didactic game (Anthony 2014, p. 34-35). The digital didactic game is described as a game which uses the divine as lesson, educating players about religious ideas or themes. Additionally Anthony describes the allomythic game (Anthony 2014, p. 39-40). These games offer an exploration of nonexistent traditions. Most of the time these are based on shallow representations of practice of these rituals, such as the use of a shrine to heal an in-game character. However, they can also completely redefine a named religious narrative, which is the case in the *Mass effect* series (BioWare 2007), in which the protagonist named Shepherd dies and is reborn to save humanity (Anthony 2014, p.40).

*AC Valhalla* possesses features of both kind of games as it tries to represent both the Norse religion and Christianity, but does so by adding its own religious narrative. Adding religion within games poses two main problems, one of which is that religious representation, if done wrong, can harm the playability of the game as the player base might become offended. Secondly, games have to be commodified in technical terms as well, as the addition of mysterious narratives or the addition of the unexplained has to be explained in some way, as the code that a game consist of does not allow for vagueness, ambiguity or mystery.

According to Schut, video games "kill mystery" (Schut 2014, p. 263). With killing mystery Schut aims at the designing process of a game, in which everything has to be quantifiable, which is at odds with the great deal of religious narrative and theology which emphasizes the uncontrollable, unpredictable and incomprehensible nature of the divine (Schut 2014, p. 264). Anything that cannot be modeled in a way that can be measured or understood by the system has to become a side narrative or decorative addition to the game (Schut 2014, p. 264). Schut calls this the modeling of mechanically restricted religions (Schut 2014, p. 263).

Does this mean that games do not possess the ability to represent religion and the mystery it beholds? Or does this mean that game designers need to find different ways in order to represent and use religion within their games, as they are merely mechanized representations? Schut poses two ways in which games can be perceived differently than just a mechanized experience, which are the fiction of a game and emergent play (Schut 2014, p. 276). These two factors can help de-mechanize the experience of a game. According to Salen and Zimmerman, games can create emergence from simple rules, as these systems can generate complex and unpredictable patterns (Salen, Tekinbaş, and Zimmerman 2004). These can even be sought after explicitly by trying to transgress the implied play patterns (Aarseth 2014). This again emphasizes the importance of the player perspective within the game experience. Furthermore, the narrative possibilities within games offer more than the simple rule based representation, further allowing games to represent religion through means other than the rules which the game consists of. Or as Juul poses, games are "spaces ripe with narrative possibilities." (Juul 2011).

When connected to Bogost's procedural rhetoric and de Wildt's notion of marketable religion, it is still visible that the design process does not allow for a true representation of religion as it is described in the Bible for instance (Bogost 2007; Wildt 2020, p. 106). Not only do the designers have to take into account that some representations could harm the marketability of the game, they do have to consider how their rule based programming translates religion to something that is quantifiable and understandable.

Additionally, games have the tendency to focus on the sociological impacts of religion, whilst religious practitioners might believe that faith has much more meaning outside of this (Schut 2014, p. 264). This again is due to the fact that religion and its effects have to be measurable in games like *Civilization* (Firaxis

2010). In this game the player has to construct a civilization, considering economy, politics and religion. When religion is acquired, the game system has to attribute points that are awarded because religion has a sociological impact on the civilization. This point system makes the effect of religion measurable in the space of the game (Schut 2014, p. 256-264). *AC Valhalla*, is a Role playing game (RPG) and not a Real time strategy game (RTS), which Civilization is an example of. The game genres typically use different systems in order to track progression. However, does this mean that *AC Valhalla* possesses the same issues regarding the quantification of results of religion? Or to put it on other terms, does *AC Valhalla* frame religion through progression models made within the game?

## 2.2 Religion in videogames

In order to understand and explore videogames in relation to religion, Ferdig proposed a framework that can be used to divide different concepts which games are built from, as can be seen in figure 1 (Ferdig 2014). These concepts do not only describe the game and its content, but also add the importance of the player perspective and previous knowledge as part of the representation of the game. This framework can be used in order to understand and underline the different concepts a game consists of, in relation to the representation of religion. I will not directly use this framework within my analysis, but I will use the concepts this framework references to indirectly, making it a useful theoretic grounding for my own analysis.

<b>Concept</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Game Content	This concept refers to games whose purpose is to instruct about a specific religion or to teach characteristics that match desirable traits of one or more religions.
Game Context	This concept refers to the environment, symbols, rules, and characteristics (of players and worlds) that represent explicit or implicit religious tones in a game.
Game Challenge	This concept refers to the challenges that are presented in a game such as undertaking a god role, being good or evil, and representing characteristics of a religion's deity (e.g. creating or redeeming).
Player Capital	This concept refers to the moral beliefs, the explicit and implicit feedback from others, and the religious essentials that a player brings to a controller regardless of the game play.

Figure 1: A framework for the analysis of religion within games

Game content is explained as the part of the framework that most directly helps those who are interested in teaching and learning. This can either be explained through teaching the principles, skills or knowledge associated with a certain religion, or through teaching the players certain morals, ethical behavior or attitudes (Ferdig 2014, p. 71-72). This distinction can mostly be made between religious games that try to portray religion and games that promote awareness, the so called "games for change" (Ferdig 2014, p. 71-72). In this framework however, Ferdig does seem to neglect the largest amount of games, which are entertainment games. Are entertainment games not a useful source for learning about religion? Perhaps Ferdig thinks most entertainment games lack the depth or do not intend to fully represent religious practice. I will analyze how and if *AC Valhalla* does represent religious practice as part of its game content.

Game context refers to the story, environments and situations within the game that explicitly or implicitly reference religion, as well as religion directly impacting the rules of the game (Ferdig 2014, p. 73). Ferdig does use more popular game examples when discussing game context. It seems as though religion is used as game context in entertainment games more often, whilst religion as game content is mostly added by games which have a more explicit religious message. Wilderness mythology and religious architecture are related to the game context within *AC Valhalla*, as they implicitly and explicitly reference religion. However the

NPC's can be placed under both game content and game context, as they have certain traits which can teach the player how religious practice takes place.

Game challenge consists of the goals the game possesses, Ferdig describes an example of games that try to teach about religious knowledge. The game would challenge the player with questions and puzzles which would test the players' religious knowledge (Ferdig 2014, p. 74-75). However, according to Rejack, representation of religion in games is displayed by a constant negotiation between any credible kind of reenactment and an enjoyable game experience (Rejack 2007, p. 419). If a game like *AC Valhalla* has to be commodified to be entertaining as well as representative of both Norse and Christian religion, will these goals conflict and create challenges within the game that perhaps hurt the representation of one or both of these religions? For instance, does the goal of the game and gameplay to be entertaining, create misrepresentations of both, or one of the religions that are displayed?

Player capital is everything a player him/herself brings to the table when playing a game, his/her own moral beliefs and the previous knowledge on the subject can change how the game is perceived as well. This relates to Chapman his notion of the historical resonance (Chapman 2016, p. 36). Chapman describes historical resonance as "the establishment of a link between a game's historical representation and the larger historical discourse as the player understands it." (Chapman 2016, p. 36). This historical resonance can also revolve historic religions, such as the Old Norse religion in *AC Valhalla*.

The historical resonance is important to take into consideration when playing and researching a religious/historical game, as both Fernández-Vara and Ferdig describe the importance of the player's background when analysing, as the player is part of the performance activity and makes up the player capital (Fernández-Vara 2019, p. 16; Ferdig 2014, pp.76-77). When answering the questions posed in the introduction, my own position as the player of the game partially forms the representation of religion, as I alone shape my gameplay. However, the gameplay can be nudged by implied play patterns, the patterns which the game designers develop to steer the players towards a certain form of playing (Aarseth 2014).

### 2.3 Representation of Old Norse and Christian religion within popular media

According to Mcdevitt, the lead narrative director of Ubisoft, the studio behind *AC Valhalla*. The Old Norse religion is typically depicted as a religion based on warfare, glory and honour. Whilst Christianity is mostly represented through virtue, sin and redemption (Ubisoft 2020). Due to this aggressive and action orientated narrative, the Norse religion lends itself well for an entertainment game (Wildt 2020, p. 74). The narrative of strong warriors battling through large amounts of varied enemies makes for a more "fun" game experience than living a proper life as a monk in a church. This might be why *AC Valhalla* does depict Christianity, but does so through the perspective of the Norse, in order to please the largest possible audience whilst still being able to represent the religions at play in this era (Wildt 2020, p. 74). In Videogames where the Norse are depicted, certain mythical creatures nearly always make their appearance, as well as the pantheon of gods, Thor, Loki and Odin amongst others, that have been popularized even more through representations such as those in the *Marvel's Avengers* movie series (Whedon 2012) in Which the personalities and physiques of the gods have been emphasized even more (Koshkina 2020, p. 28). According to Koshkina these changes to the view on Old Norse religion/gods can be perceived as truth by the large audience watching these movies, changing their historical resonance as described by Chapman (Chapman 2016, p. 36).

The resonance most people do have with Old Norse religion is its glorification of Valhalla, as it is added in virtually all narratives that regard Norse religion. Another hit series, *Vikings*, does exactly this as a journalist frames the series as: "The Norse people's religion ... is presented not as window dressing but as a driving force in their decisions-the notion of Valhalla and dying a good death, for instance, is everywhere." (Poniewozik 2013). Religion is seen as a key component of nearly every episode, fighting many battles, hinging on questions of faith (Saunders 2014, p. 135). Research on early Norse religion is mostly done through Christian documents of that time (Taggart 2015, p. 1). Research shows that Thor was not depicted as the god of thunder and lightning, but this image has gained popularity through recent representations such as the one of Thor in the *Marvel's Avengers* movies. Most people seem to associate Thor with thunder and lightning, next to his godlike strength because of this (Taggart 2015, p. 59).

Part of the storyline that explains religious events in games is based on narrative which the developers of the games created themselves. Within the narrative of *Assassins Creed* large parts of religion are explained through the story of the Isu, a superhuman species, explaining the origin of many gods (Veugen 2018, p. 5).

Assassins Creed is not the only game series that used self-designed religion to explain existing religions however (De Wildt et al. 2018, p. 30). Games such as *Fallout 3* (BethesdaGameStudios 2008) and *Horizon: Zero Dawn* (GuerillaGames 2017) use a religion that is based on our awe for technology. The games do however reflect aspects of real life as artificial intelligence is becoming an increasingly powerful force in our everyday lives (De Wildt et al. 2018, p. 30).

In addition, Christianity is reshaped in order to fit the narrative of the Isu within the AC universe. Adam and Eve for instance, were not the first sinners as they were according to the old testament, but they were the first rebels. Adam and Eve, according to the narrative within the series, rebelled against their creators, which were the Isu. The Isu were a highly advanced humanoid race that created mankind, which is AC's explanation for the existence of various gods of various religions (Bosman 2016, p. 70). How can a self-made framing of religion shape the representation of these religions within videogames? Perhaps it is part of the marketing as explained by de Wildt, as it adds an approachable narrative to these games, not harming the religious message the game portrays, as it is its own adaptation (Wildt 2020, p. 69-82).

The representation of Christianity could also be formed by the mechanization of religion, as posed by Schut. A videogame has to be coded, which is a precise and clear defined practice (Schut 2014, p. 255). Games don't allow for mystery or unexplained narratives. Any form of religious practice or narrative has to be explained or form logically from gameplay. To quote Schut, games "kill mystery" (Schut 2014, p. 255). This could partially explain why the Norse gods are represented more in games than the Christian God, not only because of the fact that Christianity has a large following which makes the representation a risky endeavour, but also because the Norse gods have received a more clear definition through a multitude of popular media representations as discussed before. The Norse gods all served a specific function and even received personality traits, whilst the Christian God is shrouded in mystery, and mostly embraces the traits Christianity itself received, being the embodiment of innocence and righteousness, as explained by Mcdevitt (Ubisoft 2020).

Schut his explanation of the mechanization of religion can be connected with the religious framework of Ferdig as well, as for instance the game context can be explicitly placed within the game environment, without it having to impact the gameplay directly. An example would be the placement of a mosque or church within a city as it part of the image of most cities. Not placing a church or other religious building would harm the typical image of a city center. Whilst placing a church that has no functionality other than "just being there" or decorating the city, does not harm the religious representation (Ferdig 2014, p. 73). The church is now part of the game context, whilst it has no specific quantified use or value attributed to the building within the code of the game.

The game challenge can connect the actual goal of the game to the subject of religion. *AC Valhalla* has multiple forms of progress that are directly related to religiosity, this turns the representation of religion into something that is tangible and quantifiable, whilst retaining the overall structure of the game.

Within my analysis I will show different ways in which the game offers challenges to the player in an attempt to represent both the Norse and Christian religion. In the next chapter I will explain exactly which features of the game I will analyze and how they relate to the theoretical framework.

## 3 Method

### 3.1 Textual Analysis

In order to analyze *AC Valhalla*, I will be applying a textual analysis. This is the in-depth study of a text, using the text as a sample or case study to understand a specific issue or topic (Fernández-Vara 2019).

Within my analysis the relation between the Old Norse religion, 9th century Christianity, the Isu and *AC Valhalla* will be investigated by using an exploratory form of play (Van Vught and Glas 2018, p. 220-222). Fernandez-Vara, Chapman and Ferdig all describe the importance of the player perspective within an analysis of a game, either because of the players previous knowledge of a game, or because the player is part of the performance activity (Fernández-Vara 2019, p. 16; Ferdig 2014, p. 76-77; Chapman 2016, p. 36).

The exploratory form of play will consist mostly of observing my surroundings whilst playing the game as intended. I will play the game as it is offered to me. However, as the game its gigantic size leads to parts of the world being unexplored whilst following the main narrative, I will have to purposefully search for certain representations of religion within the wilderness, architecture and NPC's, scattered throughout the large world. Many of the references to the Isu narrative are part of an embedded narrative, which cannot be found if not searched for consciously (Jenkins 2004, p. 126). Furthermore I will analyse how the game facilitates player progress and how this frames the representation of both Christianity and the Old Norse religion. In order to frame my analysis I will focus on three specific features which are most important to both religions.

When analyzing the NPC's I will analyze how they portray an image of their religion, e.g. how they worship their gods. I will do so by analyzing my environment, and disregarding my own playable character, not interfering with the NPC's. I will describe how NPC's interact with their environment and how they portray an image of religious practice, describing their exact activities during a prolonged period of time.

Furthermore, during this research I will analyse environments themselves. In particular I will analyze the religious architecture which is shown throughout the game. In specific both Norse and Christian buildings of religious nature will be analyzed. I will analyze the functionality of the architecture and how the buildings are used in order to support the gameplay and narrative. I will also analyze how the buildings are visually represented and if they correlate with either religion, through symbolism, used materials or other trademarks of both religions.

Lastly the various forms in which Old Norse religion is represented through wilderness mythology within *AC Valhalla* will be analyzed. These representations are either formed through divine powers the player can receive, such as Odin's view, as well as various representations of mythical animals that were described in folkloristic tales of the time. Again, by adopting an exploratory form of play I try to unearth how *AC Valhalla* represents religion through nature. I will discuss in-game notes describing the animals, as well as the godly powers that Eivor can receive. The way in which these phenomenon and creatures are represented can shape the way in which religion is represented, as they can form a power relation between man and the divine. These representations are an example of the mechanized representations Schut spoke of (Schut 2014, p. 263). The strength of these animals has to be quantified, any ludonarrative dissonances between gameplay and narrative can harm the religious representation.

In addition to these analysis, self-made religion, and how it frames the representation of practised religion, will be discussed. *AC Valhalla* uses an alternative storyline in order to frame the use of gods and religion within the game. The story of the Isu has progressed throughout the series as a whole (Bosman 2016, p. 63-64). This is why I have to do research outside of this game, in order to frame the story of the Isu and see how it changes the representation of religion within this installment of AC. I will specifically analyze the way in which gods are represented within this game, and if there are any differences between the representation of Christianity and Norse religion, regarding the representation of their gods.

In order to frame my analysis of the representation of these religions, I will loosely adapt my analysis to the work of Miller, she describes a digital form of ethnographic research which I will adapt in order to research how NPC's frame religion within *AC Valhalla* (Miller 2008). I will document my findings through the addition of comprehensive notes. Wolfinger describes the importance of comprehensive note-taking when doing ethnographic research. As my form of research draws from this method, I will approach my analysis in a similar fashion (Wolfinger 2002, p. 90).

Analysing these specific parts of both the gameplay, NPC's and environments will allow me to focus on

both religions in more detail. Based on my findings regarding these 4 topics, I can analyze how both the Old Norse and Christian religion are represented within this game, which, in turn, allows me to deduct how the Old Norse religion frames Christianity. Additionally I can analyze how *AC Valhalla* adapts religious narrative through the framing of the Isu, to see how this frames religious representation. Lastly analyzing how progress is tied to religion further allows me to analyze how religion is framed within AC Valhalla.

## 4 Innocence

The representation of Christianity through the perspective of the Old Norse brings a specific framing of Christianity. Whilst the Norse are portrayed as warmongering barbarians, the Christians are portrayed as innocent victims of religious crime. Within the following sub chapters I will discuss multiple examples of how Christians are framed as innocent.

### 4.1 Exploring Britain

After a narrative driven introduction, the player is introduced to the playable character and his ties with other characters in the game. Eivor, the main character, lost his parents during a raid and was adopted. After waging war with the murderer of his parents, he and his new brother Sigurd, set sail for Great Britain.

Upon the arrival of Eivor and his crew on the shores of Great Britain, the player can clearly recognize that this land is ruled by another religion, Christianity. The first representations of Christianity seem to be simple and subtle. During a story driven journey on the sailboat, various Christian rituals are explicitly shown. In one of the cutscenes Eivor and Sigurd sail past a child being baptised. Some of the Norse sailors express their confusion, it is made clear that the practitioners of both religions don't fully understand each others rituals. To answer the confusion, Sigurd replies with an answer that seems to accept and even respect the Christians ritual as can be seen in figure 2.



Figure 2: First encounter with Christian traditions

It seems as though this is part of the branding of religion, the baptism is a very recognizable tradition within Christian culture, known to many outside of the religion, (Wildt 2020, p. 69-82). As most of the player base of Assassins Creed series is from Western descent and male, the probability of this knowledge is even higher. Assassins Creed uses a standard formula for their games and adds a flavour to each new part of the series, in the case of *AC Valhalla* the studio added the raiding of Christian religious buildings in order to grow the player his/her town (Wildt 2020, p. 73). The expansion of the player his/her town is key as to why the player has to raid Christian buildings in the first place, as they contain wealth and supplies which are used to upgrade or build buildings within this town. The Norse framing does change the perspective on Christian religion due to this, as churches and abbeys are not seen as a place of religious practice, but are seen as locations to raid in order to acquire wealth and grow the player's town. No alternatives can be found in order to acquire these resources, whilst cities could easily contain building materials as well. The player is forced to play along to the raiding nature of the Norse and has to pillage various Christian locations in order to progress the main storyline, as most quests are bound to the growth of the city.

## 4.2 Monks and peasants in saint Albanes abbey

One of these religious places was the saint Albanes abbey, which had around 30 to 50 people wandering the streets or seemingly doing something. NPC's are often used to create an illusion of people living their independent lives within game worlds (Ogier 2020, p. 1). Within the direct vicinity of the abbey however these NPC's clearly weren't doing much but a pre-programmed routine which could easily be detected if the player would pay attention for 10 seconds or more. In my specific case I, or my playable character Eivor, stood still for a full in-game day, from sunrise till sunrise the next day. In this time I noticed some strange behavioral patterns of most NPC's "working" or "living" close by. First of all there were monks, seemingly praying or chanting something in holy language, there seemed to be a ritual of sorts in the cemetery, close to the abbey. When paying more attention towards these monks, it was noticeable that they chanted the same over and over again, they did not move, go to sleep or do anything else. When I walked along these monks, going closer to the abbey, I noticed some peasants strolling around. I noticed they were walking circles, not doing anything in particular. The same was the case for peasants sitting on the benches close to the abbey, all of which were just part of the game mechanic that allows the player to blend in with their surroundings, by seemingly conversing with another NPC or group of NPC's.

The use of holy language by the monks refers to the rites, rituals and ceremonies described in the Bible. These were probably used to honor the dead in some form. Although this resembles practices that were done in or around Christian churches, the fact that these NPC's would continuously perform the same ritual does interfere with the illusion of independence Ogier spoke of (Ogier 2020, p. 1). It does however give the player a glimpse of how Christian monks would honor their dead. The game, in this specific instance at least, does allow for an instruction about how Christianity is actually practised. The fact that this chanting happens repeatedly without any changes in the monks behaviour is an example of mechanized religion however, as this religious practice is not part of the monks daily routine but is its only occupation (Schut 2014, p. 255). The coding of the game limits the way religious practice can be represented in this instance.

## 4.3 NPC interaction in Medeshamstede abbey

Medeshamstede abbey, as can be seen in figure 12 and the notes in figure 10, was filled with peasants and monks, as well as guards. It seemed as though this was a standard representation of every abbey in the game. An important side note which I discovered whilst analyzing this specific abbey however, was that when I accidentally fired an arrow on one of the monks the game showed me the message that it would desynchronize if I were to kill more innocent civilians.

To explain what desynchronizing means, Assassins Creed Valhalla and the actual playable world in 9th century Norway and Britain are actually a simulation based on memories, which are shown to the player through the animus. "It is a projector which renders genetic memories in three dimensions" as was explained to the main character Desmond Miles in the original Assassins Creed game (AssassinsCreedWiki 2021a).

As it is against the creed of assassins to kill innocent humans, the memories in the system would desynchronize as I would not be faithful to these memories if I were to kill monks for instance. This however does not explain why civilians would remain unharmed from me as well as my crew when the pillaging would commence. This might be purposefully made to prevent the practitioners of Christianity to be murdered in this game, as this could harm the playability for players with an affinity towards Christianity.

This representation of monks within *AC Valhalla* heavily limits my free will as a player, which reminds me of the marketability de Wildt spoke of (Wildt 2020, p. 106). In order to please as wide of an audience as possible, the guards are placed within every abbey, to give the player the feeling of actually raiding a church, whilst still leaving all important artifacts and innocent people alive and well. Innocence is in large an important part of Christianity as they attribute value to virtue, sin and redemption as explained by the narrative director of the game (Ubisoft 2020). The emphasis on warfare and raiding adds a large contrast between the Old Norse and Christians. Through the framing of Norse as savages and the Christians as peaceful worshippers of God, the image of innocence is portrayed. This representation in some way glorifies Christian religion as something of innocence and beauty.

## 5 Glorifying battle and Valhalla

Similarly to how Christian religion represents innocence, virtue and sin, most representations of Norse religion are based on stories of glorious battle and the ways to Valhalla, hence the name of the game. In the coming sub chapters, multiple examples will be given as to how *AC Valhalla* represents the glorification of battle through different encounters with either other religions or mythical beasts.

### 5.1 Encounters with mythical creatures

*AC Valhalla* implies the player to explore for a great variety of reasons and through different gameplay elements. A player can see 3 bars which track the progress of exploration for each region in *AC Valhalla*. These 3 bars represent wealth, mysteries and artifacts. The menu can be seen in figure 16 in the appendix. Wealth, as the name implies, helps the player improve his apparel through improvements in his/her armor or simply through providing money or other expensive items. Mysteries can differ in their appearance, these can be monuments, statues, religious altars or even mythical animals. The artifacts are mostly notes, cursed symbols or roman artifacts. The game holds 233 mysteries, 161 artifact locations and 388 wealth locations (powerpyx 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). It is clear that an abundance of objects and mysteries can be found throughout the large map. In this sub chapter I will focus on the encounters with mythical creatures, or "legendary animals" as they are officially called within the game.



Figure 3: The encounter with the great elk of Bloody Peaks

As explained before, the game suggests the player to explore as much of the map as possible. Exploring is almost always tied to a reward in one form or another. The legendary animals in specific can be hunted to be used as decorations in the players village, as well as improving the players strength after defeating the beast. Using these hunted animals as decorations is a way for the player to bask in the glory of defeating these animals. These decorations prove as achievements of sorts, emphasising the glorification of the hunt.

Eivor resembles the anti-hero spoken of in stories like that of Odysseus (Fitch III 2016). Eivor is constantly seeking war, battle and wealth, taking risks wherever he can and doing this mostly on his own. Conquering the legendary animals is one of many risky endeavours Eivor takes. This resembles Norse religion as explained by the narrative director of *AC Valhalla* (Ubisoft 2020). Norse religion embodies the constant search of honor and reputation through battle, *AC Valhalla* represents this through an enormous amount of fighting to be done and various references to the Valhalla throughout the story. One of the first animals the player can encounter is the great elk of Bloody peaks, as it is located closely to the starting area in Norway. On my way towards the great elk I found multiple notes of hunters before me describing their (mostly fatal) encounters with the great elk of Bloody Peaks. These notes can be seen in the appendix (figure 8 and 9). The notes

were mostly accompanied by the skeletons of the long gone hunters. Through the narrative of these notes I would expect an enormous animal which could gore me without hesitation. As I encountered the animal I saw the location we were in was reminiscent of an arena. As I saw a large health bar appear above the beasts head I knew what was coming, based on my previous knowledge. I knew this was a special enemy that required a strategy in order to be able to successfully kill it.

Through the fact that I have explored large areas of the map before progressing in the main storyline however, I was far too strong for the animal I encountered. This might be the result of not fully partaking in the implied play pattern, although it has to be noted that I did never intend to play the game transgressively (Aarseth 2014, p. 132). This resulted in me having developed a bow mastery that was far too great for the fight I was in. Because of this I could kill the beast with 3 arrow shots. This fight created a ludonarrative dissonance as the narration leading up to the fight created a large contrast with my actual gameplay experience (Hocking 2009, p. 255-260). This resulted in the animal not living up to its great name which it received through the folkloristic tales.

My exploratory play style in this instance shaped the representation of folklore as the power relation between man and nature has been compromised through this encounter. Although these encounters with the legendary animals embody the glorious hunting and battle which are hallmarks of Norse religion, player freedom trumps the coherence of the narrative that is shown through the hunters notes, which in turn diminishes the glory of the actual hunt, through its ease. Whilst these animals do pose a reference to the awe the Norse had for these animals at the time, they fail to represent their power, which deglorifies the actual battle and slaying of the beast. Easily achieved victories don't provide the same glorious feeling as battles which are won against all odds or battles that take considerable skill and dedication. The built up suspension which the narrative provides on its own does not help the player achieve greatness, the battle itself has to test the player's skills in order to create a framing which creates coherence between the religious representation, the narration within the game, and the actual gameplay that is required to kill the beast.

## 5.2 Meeting the Drengir

Similar to the legendary animals that are scattered throughout the map in *AC Valhalla*, another category within the mysteries are the so called Drengir. The Drengir were the most elite followers of King Ragnar. King Ragnar has recently received attention in different forms of media as well, as he is the main character of the hit series *Vikings* (Saunders 2014, p. 134). After the Drengir lost their king they served a purposeless life, wanting to ascend to Valhalla, but without Ragnar being there to send them into battle. They needed his commands in order to die a glorious death in battle. The player can find these Drengir and read their stories about how they long to enter Valhalla but are unable to. Both the note written by one of the Drengir to his king Ragnar, as well as my actual encounter with one of the Drengir can be seen in figure 17 and 18. These Drengir implore you to duel them, in order for them to die an honourable death in battle against a great warrior.

These Drengir represent the glorification of battle in another sense, they long for it, their lives served no purpose without it. Valhalla is framed as something glorious, something everyone should strive for. This depicts the contrast in representation between Christianity and Norse religion within this game. The game context, as described by Ferdig consists of glorious battle, it is present in nearly every narrative or side narrative that regards the Norse (Ferdig 2014, p. 73). Personal honor and glory are hallmarks of the Norse religion within this game, whilst Christianity adopts very different morals and ethics.

### 5.3 Raiding the wealthy Christians

Within *AC Valhalla* the player is required to raid Christian churches and abbeys. The city building aspect of the game forces the player to explore and accumulate wealth through various sources. A very prominent source of wealth is the raiding of religious buildings. Buildings in which the Christians worship their god. It seems that these buildings have no further use other than being raided.

As can be seen in the figure below, I visited the saint Albanes abbey which was close to my hometown in Britain. The abbey was clearly visible from hundreds of meters away because of its remote location. It was built high on top of a hill to emphasize its greatness. Whilst the abbey was still under construction it was visible that the old straw and wooden buildings, which were reminiscent of the villages close by, were being replaced by large marble and stone structures. The environment was surrounded with large gardens, columns, pillars and arches, these were all very familiar and looked like the typical roman-catholic style of building. The streets in front of the abbey contained multiple statues referring to biblical characters.



Figure 4: My peaceful visit of Saint Albanes Abbey

This was not the only abbey or church in the vicinity however, most, if not all, churches and abbeys that I visited seemed to be heavily guarded, some even had towers with ballista's on top of them. These religious buildings form an important part of the gameplay as the player is implied to conquer these churches and abbeys which are built as fortresses. Religion is portrayed through violence instead of innocence because of this, although it has to be pointed out that the actual practitioners of Christianity still remain innocent. The game allows the player to focus the battle on the guards, not the monks. When a player would actually attack innocent monks, the player receives a message that the game would desynchronize if the player attacks innocent people again. This can be explained through the assassins creed, as an assassin you are not allowed to kill the innocent, following the overarching narrative of the assassins creed series. However the player can call upon his/her crew through the blowing of a horn. The crew members are not assassins, they do not have to follow the creed but still refuse to attack the monks or peasants around the abbey. It seems as though Christians are protected from all harm, be it from assassins, which would fit the narrative or from the actual raiding party. The innocent representation of the Christians creates a conflict with the brutal and aggressive representation of the Norse here, as they are not allowed to show any violence towards anyone other than the guards guarding these churches. It might even be the sole reason that every church has this many guards protecting it, to give the player the sense of raiding, whilst protecting the Christians that are represented within the game from harm.

Secondly the player cannot demolish any buildings near the church, only pottery. The act of pillaging and plundering was of aggressive nature, including acts as rape and desecration of religious symbols among other utterances (Dougherty 2014). These vile and aggressive acts have been removed to change the activity of raiding in such a way that Christianity cannot be desecrated within this game. Lastly all raidable places share

repetitive similarities, using the same NPC's wandering these places as well as similar styles of architecture, soldiers and defensive outposts guarding these locations. The gameplay mechanic of raiding churches in order to acquire wealth seems like something that would fit the narrative of the Norse and their glorification of raiding. The way it is represented however shows many ways in which the battle is forced in a frame that distances itself from any religious sacrilege towards Christianity.

## 6 Religious gameplay

Within *AC Valhalla* religion is not only represented in parts of the playable world and environment or the game context (Ferdig 2014, p. 73). Religion is also used to enhance the playing experience and equip the player with special powers. Some examples of these mechanics will be analyzed in the following sub chapters.

### 6.1 Mechanized religion

As posed by Schut, most games need some order of either mechanized representation of religion, or need to put religion into the background in order to keep the game coherent and understandable (Schut 2014, p. 264). *AC Valhalla* does introduce religion through small gameplay mechanics and/or religious locations. This brings up the question if *AC Valhalla* commodifies religion to fit the gameplay, or if the gameplay is used to represent religion. This will be analyzed in the coming subsections, starting with the Odin's view.



Figure 5: The use of Odin's view

This image shows the view a player can have when pressing a designated button, the player is bestowed with the power of the gods and in one of the first scenes in the introduction of the game, the player is instructed to use the Odin's View. This is an adaptation of the eagle view used in earlier parts of the *Assassins Creed* series. What is special about this however is that it is an explicit example of how the Norse mythology is used to enable parts of gameplay that would otherwise not be possible. This is done without even explaining the player how he or she has gained the power to use the view of ravens to his/her advantage. As explained by Chapman this enables the use of historical resonance (Chapman 2016, p. 36). In my case I knew about the Norse gods beforehand, knowing something as broad as the names of the Norse gods enabled me to connect the dots and understand that Eivor has received godly powers which enabled him to use Odin's ravens in order to receive intelligence.

The use of iconic creatures like Odin's ravens has its roots in Norse folklore, multiple other games like *Age of Mythology* (EnsembleStudios 2002) and *Valheim* (IronGateStudio 2021) use crows to allow the player to scout an area or receive intelligence as well. This is an often used adaptation to the use of creatures within Norse folklore and games. In this sense, abilities like the Odin's view among other abilities don't seem to resemble any form of explanation as to how Norse mythology actually explains how these abilities came to be. They are just there to allow the player to connect with easy to understand and use principles which enhance the gameplay but do not add any depth when the representation of Norse religion is considered. In this sense gameplay does cause a conflict with the representation of religion, as religious practice, symbols and mythical animals are used to be molded into the gameplay system which *Assassins Creed* already established through previous installments. This makes various representations either repetitive or vague as they don't

seem to have a logical cause. In this case it seems that the entertainment aspects triumph the religious representation as these mechanics need to be easy to understand and use.

This differs from the representation of Christianity as the creative freedom the Norse religion has, both in how it is used as part of the gameplay, as to how it is represented in the main narrative and architecture, seems to be more varied. Norse religion is used as a "flavour" which is added on this installment of AC. The emphasis on battle and great strength fits the AC formula. Religion can be repurposed to fit this setting and explain Eivor his great strength in a free adaptation from writings and known information about the early Norse (Wildt 2020, p. 69-82; Brink and Price 2008). Adapting the formula of AC to this age and religion makes the representation of religion bland, which in turn causes the player to just accept the powers being there, but not understanding their relation to religion or the Norse gods.

## 6.2 Seahenge

Apart from Christianity and the ancient Norse culture other representations of pagan cultures exist in *AC Valhalla*. One of these being the Seahenge, which is built to represent the actual Seahenge which lies close to the city of Norfolk. The Seahenge, among other stone altars, is part of the large amount of mysteries this game holds. In order for the player to actually visit this location a gameplay element is added to these stone altars. As can be seen on figure 13 in the appendix, symbols have been carved on one of the stones in the altar. Later on in the game the player is bestowed with Odin's sight, this allows the player to see things that are not visible to normal human beings. The player can use Odin's sight to look at the Seahenge from a specific angle, connecting elements which will form the symbol that is shown on the note.

The Seahenge is a henge that has actual historical accuracy in both its representation and location, many other henges are added as a form of collecting and allowing the player to use the Odin's sight more often. Religiosity in the form of Druidism and Paganism can be seen in other artifacts and environments as well. These Pagan rituals and environments are mostly randomly added and don't seem to have any connection with any real historical phenomenon. All the standing stone altars have notes written on them, these were written by Brendan of Clonfert, a fictional monk who was on a pilgrimage, documenting his interactions with the divine, the gods. Again locations like these function merely as a gameplay feature, they are part of the large amount of collectibles a player can add to his/her collection within the game if the player wants to fully complete the game. Their exact religious purpose remain vague within the game as they seem to facilitate nothing but a simple mini game that has no actual connection to religion or religious representation as can be seen in figure 15. Similar to the churches, cults and rituals form a part of the gameplay. Gameplay is leading, whilst religion has to be molded to fill shape of the AC formula as explained by de Wildt (Wildt 2020, p. 73). This is an example of religion that has been adapted in a form that destroys mystery, as these gameplay interactions try to grasp a thing of myth and mysticism which surrounds these henges and boil it down to a simple mini game which represents symbolism and mysticism in the broadest form.

## 7 Alternative religious narrative

*AC Valhalla* tries to grasp parts of religious representation through offering alternative and mostly embedded narratives, these try to explain interventions of the divine. Throughout the series of AC the Isu have played part in religious representations. The Norse gods are part of the Isu as well. How these Isu change the representation of religion will be discussed in this chapter.

### 7.1 The Isu

The Isu are an ancient and highly-advanced species of humanoids, they inhabited Earth millennia before the most ancient of human civilizations (AssassinsCreedWiki 2021b). The Isu are divine beings and are an addition to the religious storyline of all the Assassins Creed games. The gods from Norse mythology are seen as divine humans through this alternative storyline. The *Æsir* was the name that was given to the group of Scandinavian gods. Odin, who among others, makes an appearance in *AC Valhalla* is the leader of the *Æsir*. The conflict between humans and the gods, or Isu, has been instigated by the theft of an apple of Eden by Adam and Eve. A war between man and Isu commenced, which ended with the Great Catastrophe, a coronal mass ejection from the Sun. Odin and the other *Æsir* stored their memories within the human gene pool in order to be reincarnated amongst the humans.

This story helps create an alternative storyline which allows the developers to have more freedom when creating a narrative involving the Norse gods. The Norse gods can all develop personalities which are explained through their human nature. Following Schut his logic Norse religion and the gods that are part of this are no longer unknowable, they can be clearly defined and incorporated in both narration as well as their physical representations (Schut 2014, p. 263). Due to this freedom the Norse gods are represented often within this game. One of the questlines even takes place within Asgard, which is the realm of the Norse gods. Gods like Thor, Odin, Loki and Freyr among others are not only worshipped within this game, but they actually partake in the storyline whilst assisting the protagonist within the story (which can be seen in figure 20, 21 and 22 in the appendix). It has to be noted however that this narrative takes place within a dream within a simulation, as the actual game that is played revolving Eivor is already a simulation within the animus (AssassinsCreedWiki 2021a). The player can enter Asgard through drinking a potion. There are multiple fictional layers of simulation/dreaming before the player actually can encounter these gods. Framing the gods as part of a dream helps frame their mysterious nature. This helps de-mechanize religion as it becomes something that makes sense to the player, instead of being a decorative addition to the game (Schut 2014, p. 263). Eivor has various encounters with the god Odin. Odin is represented as a mysterious man with a large beard, a robe and a staff, he is also accompanied by his iconic crows and ravens. The first encounter with Odin can be seen in the image below.



Figure 6: Eivors first encounter with Odin

Eivor is a prodigy of Odin, as Odin is his tutor. Eivor is a Norse warrior with great talent and potential. Throughout the story there are multiple cutscenes in which Odin tutors Eivor, this mostly happens when Eivor is about to kill another character with importance in the main storyline, such as Kjetve, the murderer of his parents. The relation between the protagonist and Odin is a free adaptation the developers made in order to incorporate the Norse gods within the storyline and partially explain the origin of Eivor his powers.

One of the powers Odin bestows upon Eivor is the Odin's view, this allows the player to scout the area through the perspective of Odin's iconic ravens. Odin's sight is added later in the story as well, further allowing Eivor to sense dangers and riches in his environment. These powers do not have a religious background nor are their origins explained, they are used to support the gameplay.

An important aspect of the Isu however is that one of the most important figures within Christianity, Jesus, is not part of the Isu. There have been explanations on his existence in other games in the series, but he is only mentioned, he is never visually shown within the game. The story of the Isu is mostly an embedded narrative, most of the information that relates to the Isu is hidden and has to be consciously searched for by the player (Jenkins 2004, p. 126). Part of this can be explained through the framing of the Norse. Playing as a Norse character makes it so that contact with Norse religion is more present than contact or narration on Christianity. However, the contrast seems to be larger than one would expect through this framing. Christianity, within my play sessions, has barely ever been discussed by the Norse characters within the game, apart from the example given on the baptism, the interactions between the religions are non-existent. It seems as though the religious representation is mostly steered towards the self-made narrative described through the Isu, as this narrative can keep the representation of religion clear-defined and harmless, allowing the developers to market religion within the franchise, whilst keeping the representation of religion commodified for their audience (Wildt 2020, p. 106; Schut 2014, p. 264).

## 8 Conclusion

### 8.1 Conclusion

In conclusion, *AC Valhalla* has issues representing both the Christian religion as well as the Old Norse religion and their interrelation due to a few reasons. The perspective of the Norse overrules the representation of the Christian religion. Christianity has no place within the narrative of this game which leads to nearly all representations of Christianity to be void of meaning or explanation. The player cannot learn about the ways in which Christian religion worships its god, nor what they deem important within their religion.

Due to this focus on the Norse perspective the gameplay and progress systems seem to focus more on the glorification of warfare, which is the staple of the Old Norse religion. Churches are no place for worship, they are represented as fortresses and serve no other purpose than being raided by the player. The addition of the Isu further draws attention away from Christian religion as it enables a more fantasy driven storyline, focused on Valhalla, mythical animals and the representation of Asgard.

Ubisoft introduces Christianity in cutscenes at the start of the game, but soon digresses, most representations of Christianity seem to lack depth as religious practice is barely shown. NPC's wander the areas near the church seemingly doing nothing or if they do, they partake in the same ritual over and over. The notes I have made, documenting the NPC behavior show this lack of depth on all occasions, without exception. NPC's serve a superficial role in the representation of religious practice and do not teach the player about either religious practice or morals and ethics as described through Ferdig's game content (Ferdig 2014, p. 71-72).

The innocent portrayal of Christianity is in direct contrast with the Norse perspective as the Christian monks cannot be killed within this game, the narrative of the Assassins Creed explains how the playable character Eivor cannot kill any innocent people, but when he raids the churches and abbeys, his plundering party do not possess the ability to kill any monks either, whilst they are not constrained by the assassins creed. It is obvious that Christianity has been represented with care and that the representation of Christianity lacks depth because of this, its innocence has been pushed to boundaries that severely limit the representation of an actual raid, as these would normally be characterized by their aggressive nature, including rape and other acts of sacrilege, which are all voided within the space of this game (Dougherty 2014).

Lastly the mechanized forms of religion are rarely de-mechanized, the gameplay uses religion in an instrumental way, sometimes by simply using symbolism which refers to religion, which is the case in the mini games the player can partake in when visiting the henges. Furthermore the representation of battles with mythical beings often creates ludonarrative disonances as they fail to represent the strength of these animals, due to the ease of these fights. This might be a subjective matter as another player might find these fights harder to complete, but attributing a certain power level to the beasts and the playable character ultimately boils down to a numbers game, which can, and does create ludonarrative disonances when taking the in-game notes describing these mighty beasts into account. Mysticism is especially hard to represent as it has to be designed in a way that is measurable, or as explained by Schut, be placed in the background (Schut 2014, p. 264).

The framing of Christianity through the perspective of the Old Norse and the Isu thus creates a perspective in which Christianity is barely represented. The framing itself emphasizes Old Norse culture more, whilst the Western-Christian game design traditions do not allow for any sacrilege towards Christianity. As the Old Norse religion is inherently anti-Christian (until its Christian conversion), the framing from this perspective, whilst not allowing for a way to harm or hurt Christianity, creates a framing which respects Christianity too much, limiting the representation of Norse aggression towards this religion.

### 8.2 Discussion and Future Research

The use of the textual analysis did have downsides, as I approached only a limited amount of artefacts and religious elements within the game that I hand picked. The textual analysis allowed me to analyse these artefacts in detail, but also ensured I only discussed a few elements within the game *AC Valhalla*. As emphasized in the method chapter, the player perspective is vital for the game experience as well as the analysis itself. My background as avid gamer as well as historical enthusiast probably has changed the content within this thesis. Someone without this knowledge or without any prior experience with these kinds of games might have analysed completely different aspects of the game.

Lastly, as this is a case study it is impossible to apply this analysis to all other games that represent Christianity. What this research does allow for however is for future researchers to be aware of the complicated design process that is tied to the representation of religion. Popular religions, Christianity in particular, have to be analysed critically in the fast growing videogame medium. During the design process certain decisions have to be made in regards to the representation of religion. As the Christian religion is a large part of the Western player base of videogames, Christianity has to be framed in a way that is presentable to these players. Additionally as shown in the literature throughout the thesis, Western studios themselves could well have Christian backgrounds interwoven into the design process. It is important to see if Christianity is represented similarly to other religions in Western games, or if the Christian religion is really handled with kid gloves within the Western videogame industry.

Further research has to be done on other games that represent Christianity in order to see how Christianity is represented and framed there. The conclusions within this research can not be generalized and applied to other games until a broader view on the representation of Christianity within videogames has been made. Some suggestions for research could be the games *Black and White 2* (LionheadStudios 2005) *The Binding of Isaac* (McMillen 2011) and *Divinity: Original Sin 2* (LarianStudios 2017).

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## 9 Appendix

When visiting the saint Albanes abbey, the first thing that I noticed was the style of architecture which differed greatly from that in the surrounding villages. The area was scattered with statues which seemed reminiscent of the ancient Greece and Roman architecture. The use of marble instead of straw and wood buildings was very typical to this abbey. The abbey was still partially under construction, the older buildings still were party built of wood but everything new was built out of marble or stone. A graveyard was close by, with a few crosses representing Christ. A few monks were standing close talking in Latin, probably performing a rite of sorts in honor of the dead.

An interesting find about this phenomenon however was that the monks would continue to do this for an entire day. I entered the abbey in the morning (in game time) and left the next morning. They stood there for all that time.

The use of Latin is bound to the practice of the bible and Christianity, whilst all the farmers and people in villages nearby were not educated and talked English.

Talking about villagers, poor people wandered the streets, but on close inspection they had no point in being there, all they did was wander the streets for hours and hours.

When looking at any NPC, either guard, villagers or priests they would perform a very simple loop and do nothing different.

Figure 7: Notes on saint Albanes abbey

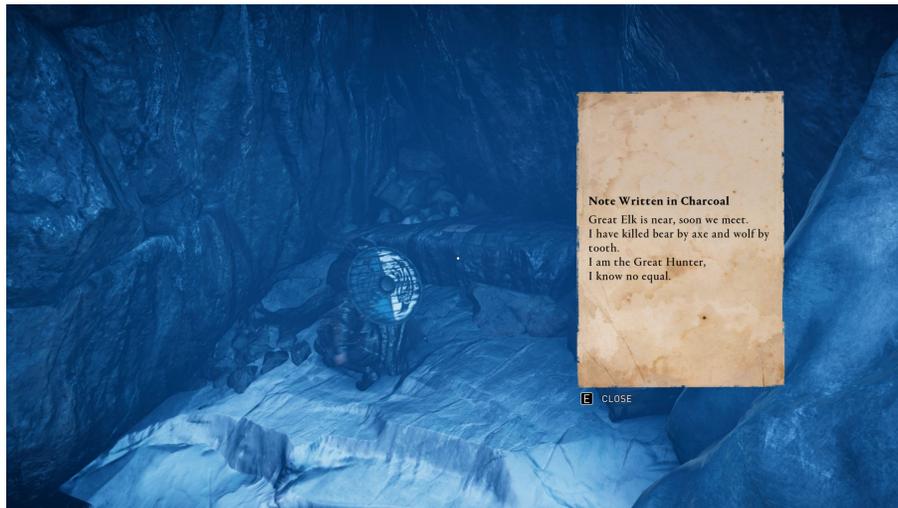


Figure 8: Hunters note on the great elk of Bloody Peaks



Figure 9: Hunters second note on the great elk of Bloody Peaks

On first sight Medeshamstede abbey looked more like a village than saint Albanes abbey did.

The abbey was guarded yet again, with peasants seemingly doing the same as in the other abbey. They either walked circles or stood still for hours. After noticing this in the Albanes abbey it became blatantly obvious that the NPC's in these villages are more or less used as filling to give the abbey a "living" feeling.

The village had some wooden homes and warehouses with straw roofs, but the actual religious buildings were made of stone, the abbey was full of statues of crosses or flags with a cross on them, to represent Christianity.

Something that I found out, more or less by accident was that, in addition to my crewmembers not actually attacking the civilians and monks in the abbey, I couldn't either. When I shot a monk with my bow I was shown the message that the game would desynchronize if I killed more civilians. Desynchronization would mean the game would restart from the last save game as it represents a simulation.

This makes both the actual simulation of living NPC's as well as the interaction with them very limited. This further accentuates abbeys and churches as places that merely serve the purpose of being raided in order for the player to acquire wealth and test his skills in battle.

Figure 10: Notes on Medeshamstede abbey



Figure 11: Saint Albanes abbey



Figure 12: Medeshamstede abbey



Figure 13: Notes carved on the stones of the Seahenge



Figure 14: The actual Seahenge



Figure 15: Solving a standing stones puzzle

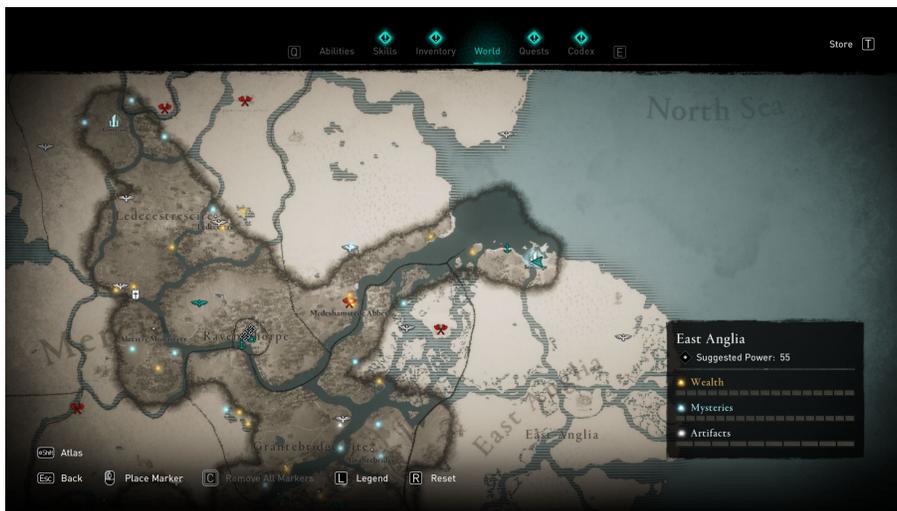


Figure 16: The map with the Wealth, Mysteries and Artifacts progress bars



Figure 17: The note Drengir Erik Loyalskull left before his duel with Eivor



Figure 18: Erik Loyalskull, one of the lost Drengirs

Evesham abbey was one of the smaller abbeys I have encountered, it seemed like a small community which was built next to a river. With only a small chapel and a few houses. At first this abbey seemed more peaceful than other abbeys and monasteries I have visited. However this did not seem to be the case as I was distrusted as soon as I entered, and upon close inspection I saw that half of the people wandering the small village were guards yet again. This village did not have any monks wandering the streets, around the church I saw around 15 guards, whilst there were no peasants nor monks. Due to the size of this village the representation of religious practice became even more obscured.

The village itself was built similarly to the other abbeys, it seems like a set of standardized objects have been placed across these monasteries and abbeys. Making them look very similar. The architectural style can be standardized in some form, but the way in which architecture is literally copied from one place to another makes these places feel even more as places that have to be raided, instead of them having their own identity and detailed representations of religious representation.

Figure 19: notes of Evesham abbey



Figure 20: Asgard, realm of the Norse gods with Yggdrasil, the tree of life in the background.



Figure 21: Thor, as represented within AC Valhalla

Asgard within this game can be entered through a potion offered by a vizier the player can visit in his/her village. This means we are in a dream within a simulation in the animus. The representation has layers upon layers of fictionality in order to freely frame this religious location.

Within Asgard the player can find various Norse gods such as Thor, Loki and Freyr. They all have human size and bodies. They do have godlike powers however, Thor for instance carries his thundering hammer and has the ability to jump high up the sky in order to come crashing down on the Jotunn within one of the quests.

The Isu are presented through dreams and visions and are never present within the actual game world, splitting the godlike tales in Asgard from the actual narrative which involves growing your village and forming alliances with other Norse factions within Britain.

This makes the religious representation within the “normal” world rather thin, whilst religious representation regarding Norse mythology within Asgard is everywhere. This Norse framing creates a narrative in which Christianity is barely represented, as it holds no place within Asgard. Norse framing and an enjoyable and action-packed narrative seem to be the main goal of the game, all other religious representations are made to fit this style of play and narrative.

Figure 22: Notes on Asgard and the Isu