

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

You're listening to the Game Makers podcast, where we take you behind the scenes to listen to how Ubisoft games are made. I'm Charles-Adam Foster-Simard.

Assassin's Creed is one of Ubisoft most beloved franchises, an action adventure RPG series. Each game is set in a different historical period: the Crusades, Renaissance Italy and Ancient Greece among them. The latest game in the series just came out, it's called Assassin's Creed Valhalla and it's set in the Viking era. You play as Eivor as they lead their fellow Vikings from Norway to 9th century England.

The original soundtrack for Assassin's Creed Valhalla was written by three extraordinary composers: Jesper Kyd, Sarah Schachner and Einar Selvik. They composed nearly six hours of music for the game, and all three collaborated together on the main theme. We wanted to understand a little bit more about their process. So, in this set of episodes each composer will be discussing a track in particular that they wrote for the game.

For this episode we're taking a closer listen at Einar Selvik song Hausbrjótr - Skullcrusher.

(MUSIC PLAYS)

Einar is a Norwegian musician and composer well-known for his band Wardruna and their work on the soundtrack of The History Channel television series Vikings. Einar worked on a lot of the in-game music you'll hear as you play: the songs sung by the musician characters you'll encounter in the world, and by the crew of your Viking long ship. I first asked Einar to take me back to the very beginning of his involvement with the project.

EINAR SELVIK:

When I was approached by Ubisoft they were already quite familiar with my music. They had been using quite a lot of it, as temporary music for their gameplay. It's a comfortable universe for me to work with. And I've been asked quite a few times from other games as well to do the score. But, I don't know, I'm quite picky about the projects I want to spend time on. Because I think it needs to be done right and it needs to have the right intentions in terms of, how you want to tell the story or how you want to portray this time period or, or the music. What kind of space you're allowed to work with.

CHARLES:

And what was it about Assassin's Creed Valhalla? When the team came to you, what was it about that game, this project that made you say "Yeah I think I can add something to that."

EINAR:

In Assassin's Creed when they visit the time period, it is fantasy combined with historical facts. So, that premise was of course something I had to accept. Also in terms of the overall impression I got was that they were very ambitious in terms of how they envision it, and the seriousness of the things they wanted to tell with this game and. Implement into it. And was quite impressive and also derivation of the music. They seemed to have quite a lot of focus

on it. Of course music is one thing, but also you have to remember that the old Norse society was an oral one. It was an oral culture and so the skalds, the storytellers and the poets were quite central figures, important in many ways. You know, in an oral society these people were, they were kind of the news forecaster, the genealogist, the storyteller, the keeper of the traditional myths.

All at the same time and of course they were the entertainers as well. My involvement in the game is very much focused on that, or that's kind of the core of it that we work out from. And where I create songs in a sort of skaldic format. Either writing Old Norse lyrics that are very much related to the story of the given place were working in the Territory or that the quest. Or I use relevant Old Norse poetry. And so this will be the music that you will hear when you're inside the longhouse or on your longship.

CHARLES:

This is the in-game music that characters will be actually singing or playing inside the game.

EINAR:

Exactly. That's a big part of it. But in addition to that some of these skaldic songs will be more featured for special missions and such, where they will get a more produced format. Where I collaborate more into the soundscape that is more familiar to the people who know my music and work with Wardruna. So a selection of these songs will have that sort of amplified format.

CHARLES:

Well let's dig into this song that we're discussing, which I'm not going to pronounce right but it's Hausbrjótr – Skullcrusher.

EINAR:

Yeah wasn't too bad. Hausbrjótr. It's a tongue twister.

CHARLES:

It is a tongue twister for me.

EINAR:

Yeah it is for me as well.

(MUSIC PLAYS)

CHARLES:

And this song, is it poetry that you wrote, or is this something that came from an existing poem?

EINAR:

This is from an existing poem. It's a very vivid description of a skull being chopped in two, basically.

But the poem was originally written by a skald, and it's basically describing a battle between the Norwegians and the Danes, originally. It's such a brilliant piece of poetry. I wanted to, I felt that it fit so well in the Assassin's Creed universe which is a quite violent one. I would just say like if you go into Old Norse battle poetry you know if you think black metal or death metal lyrics are brutal they're nothing compared to Old Norse battle poetry. It's pretty vivid and, but really like poetic at the same time. So they make beautiful poems out of really grim stuff.

(MUSIC PLAYS)

I feel that very often when Nordic or Norse music is portrayed in various productions made by people who have no clue about Nordic music and one of the things that very often lacks is that they choose wrong rhythms.

CHARLES:

By wrong you mean that they're not traditional or that they don't fit with the style properly?

EINAR:

I can't say that it's wrong but it's very often too much focused on beats that go in four, which of course is present. But when you go into the oldest traditional stuff and also the older song tradition when you analyse the pattern there, it's more of things like going in three or in five or in seven. This is a song Hausbrjotr, the Skull Crusher is a song that goes in three.

CHARLES:

Well you're talking about the beat so can you tell me what is there specific, because you're saying so usually they're in three or five or seven. Does that come with a different emotional charge if you're in three verses and five. Like what does that do when you have that kind of bass beat that's in three for example.

EINAR:

Personally I think that it's a little bit unusual for people, right. But I think a lot of these things are more suggestive in a way that draws you in. It's sort of crooked beats. But the trick is to make them feel logical. And I guess that's being an old drummer, that used to be my main instrument, and of course that's something I focus a lot on: use weird beats but make them feel natural. And it can vary. It depends also on the poetry, how much of a leading role the poetry has. Often I tend to look at the poetry to decide the beat. So, you get a good flow it especially when the poetry, is like in many of these cases were sort of the backbone.

(RHYTHMIC DRUMMING PLAYS)

CHARLES:

And so when you're starting to write the songs. you said you're going from the poetry first and then figuring out what kind of rhythm there is to it inherently to create the beat for the

song. Do you then sing over? Like when you're working out the vocals you use, do you sing over just a beat at first? Or how does it come together. Do you just kind of sing the poem without any other instrument to kind of get that that rhythm from the words?

EINAR:

Yes sometimes I do that. On this project of course the string instrument we chose to focus most on because it was the most as far as we know the most common string instrument. It's a lyre. So I used different types of lyres. And that's an instrument that's sort of very effortlessly accompanies song. So it's an instrument that makes a lot of sense to work with. Also it keeps me within the limitations of that instrument as well which is quite important because a lot of these instruments are quite limited in the range depending on how you tune them of course.

CHARLES:

Why is that useful- oh because once you have the lyre you know that you're within that range.

EINAR:

Yes. Exactly.

CHARLES:

So it's kind of sets you in a certain direction and a certain range. For what you're going to add afterwards.

EINAR:

You know the lyre is an instrument that's been around all over the world for like at least five, six thousand years. You know they had that in Egypt, in ancient Greece, in Persia.

CHARLES:

It's quite simple at the base, it's quite a simple instrument.

EINAR:

Absolutely.

CHARLES:

Strings stretched over a wood, over whatever.

EINAR:

Yeah. With a bridge. And this song I use a Norwegian lyre called Kravik Lyre. So that's a seven seven string layer. That extra string - the most common is six string - and that extra string that gives me actually a lot more wiggle room melodically and I get more chords and these instruments you can either pick them like a harp or you can strum them and stop strings. By stopping certain strings you create different chords so you can play it like a guitar basically.

(SINGING)

So for this song that was sort of the guiding point of the melodic universe I explored. And this song actually when you hear it in the game it will feel quite different. You know, the skaldic version is very different in a way to the produced one. It only has sort of the middle part. It's almost more jolly, I would say. And of course I really felt that the more produced version needed to dive more into the feeling the atmosphere of the lyrics itself. So I highlighted certain parts of the melody of the verse and sort of work myself up front from there. And of course in these produced versions also I stand more freely in terms of tonality and of course instrumentation.

CHARLES:

It's funny that you say that it's more jolly in this skaldic version because I was listening to it before our conversation and I had the thought that it was quite an upbeat song, actually. I find it's quite, yeah. It's good there's something kind of jolly a little bit like jiggy to it even in the produced version.

EINAR:

It's definitely not a dark song, definitely not. It's more victorious in a way, like, yeah, you didn't lose.

CHARLES:

The skull of your enemy has been crushed.

EINAR:

Yeah it feels more like a homecoming, like boasting about it afterwards or telling the story.

CHARLES:

We didn't talk a ton about your kind of voice work in it. I don't know if you have anything specific to tell me about that. How you actually sing and do the harmonies and all that.

EINAR:

I try to keep it natural and not to process and of course a lot of these skald songs are... it's bone dry. So it's very very unforgiving. Very unforgiving. That's of course a little bit of the vanity gets challenged in a sense but that's how it is, you know. And that's how it needs to be in that context so.

CHARLES:

You mean that it doesn't always sound like super polished.

EINAR:

Yeah, no, it's supposed to be raw.

CHARLES:

Yeah.

EINAR:

And I when I recorded these songs as well I didn't want to have them perfect.

CHARLES:

Right.

EINAR:

You know I didn't want them to be polished perfect and I wanted them to feel like a live performance, which is basically what they were. They were recorded as one takes on my own. In terms of harmonies like when I worked in the ensemble versions or where you occasionally have more than one singer, and also in the produce versions, in several of the songs I try to follow on Nordic tonality that we see in traditional music as well but also jumping further back in time where we know for sure that they sang in harmony quite far back in time because they have this word which basically means two singing and the modulation of this was very often a parallel fifths, parallel fourths. That's something I try to use wherever it made sense to use this.

(MUSIC PLAYS)

I also used, quite a bit, the oldest bowed instrument we have in the north which is, it's basically a bowed lyre or a bowed harp. It goes by many different names: Tagelharpa is perhaps the most known name. It is definitely the oldest bowed instrument we have in the north but we don't know for sure whether or not they had the use of bow in, for instance, the Viking age. That's something that scholars and music archaeologist debate a bit about, whether or not it's a Viking age instrument or not. There are some findings that suggest the bow was present at that period. I think the oldest finding of a bow is in Ireland and also there is a recent find in Denmark which had a piece of wood that very much looked like a bow and it was found next to another piece of wood that you can definitely relate to having been an instrument at some point. So, in terms of authenticity that's kind of a decision I just had to do and that was something we discussed beforehand as well. What instruments do we actually use here. How strict should we be.

CHARLES:

Right.

EINAR:

I really wanted to use the tagelharpa because I should also mention that the string, tagelharpa but it's given that name because the tagel, that means horsehair. The strings are made of horsehair and that gives that their really, like, raw distinct sound. And also it doesn't have a fingerboard so it just has an opening like a lyre so you just touched the strings. You don't push them down to a fingerboard you just touch them either with your fingertips or your knuckles. Just the sound of them is so... For me it's a time travel.

(TAGELHARPA MUSIC PLAYS)

They use another wind instrument that you hear some places while the song starts with it. It's

a lurr. That's the word for it and it's a very very old instrument. We have documented use of different variations of lurr all the way back to bronze age but this was not a bronze lurr, it was a wooden long lurr and there is actually a living tradition for using this instrument in Norway. It's always been connected with communicating over vast distances, either a ship or during battle or... yeah, it's means of communication.

CHARLES:

Right.

EINAR:

In later times it was used a lot out in the pastures by shepherds and such to communicate of course but also to scare off predators and that kind of things.

CHARLES:

Can you describe what your wooden lurr looks like.

EINAR:

Traditionally they are made of spruce. Basically you take a branch and you hollow it and you glue it together and then you wrap birch bark around it. So it's a Birch bark lurr. That's also an example of authentic sound because they are locked to the harmonic scale. So the range then the number of octaves you get within the harmonic scale is defined by the length, of course, and your lip ability, in a way. And then you can of course discuss whether or not the musical ideal would be the same today as it was but you have to remember that this is a living tradition and also it's so intuitive. You know I've experimented on that theory by giving an instrument like that to children. And if they manage the blowing technique they basically play the same as I would do just intuitively. So that's an instrument I use in the song. I use it in a very simple way.

CHARLES:

It's almost like a kind of battle call in the beginning.

EINAR:

Yeah.

CHARLES:

Like it's just kind of in the background.

EINAR:

Yeah. And it sets the mood in a way and it kind of draws you in.

(INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC PLAYS)

So, the drums I use, I use a lot of large frame drums with their hide, rawhide. These are also instruments that I made myself traditionally. I didn't shoot the animal but I did everything else, like the skinning and the whole process where you put it into a river to... because you don't shave the fur off, you basically kill the hair sacs and then scrape off afterwards. And then you

mount it on a drum and let it dry. So, it's quite a cool process where you, in a way it sort of brings the animal back to life. So, I used a lot of these drums, I use a lot of other percussive things like I use a lot of their hoofs, like shakers made out of their toes, like the nails of the hoofs, and bells and sticks, shakers in various forms that I make out of hide and stones. And I try to do a lot of things like that.

(INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC PLAYS)

CHARLES:

You talk a lot about, you know, what's authentic, what's the instruments, where they come from their history. You seem very aware, and you must do a ton of research because you're aware of the latest discoveries and when things are dated and all that. So when you're writing music for something like Assassin's Creed Valhalla, how important is it for you to be 100 percent authentic? Where do you give yourself some leeway for something that maybe sounds authentic but maybe, you know, isn't 100 percent from the Viking era, from that age, like how do you negotiate that kind of line between what's what we would consider what we say is authentic and where you can be a little bit more modern or bring you know our modern interpretation to it.

EINAR:

Well I would say I do both because it's being portrayed to a modern audience. And so, I think a balance between expectations and also pushing the limits in terms of authenticity or presenting authenticity. I mean so I would say I do both because some songs are very true to sources in terms of tonality and instrumentation. And some are more freely based on I would say also in terms of instrumentation especially in the expression of the produced versions because another element that we did not talk about in terms of how the song sounds, is these huge drones that are very much present in my music and in that format.

(OMINOUS MUSIC PLAYS)

These are also things where I play around with these instruments, sampled and processed them to make these drones whether it's horn or the bowed instruments I use to combine them, creating new sounds. So, that's a very modern thing and creates that modern and very visual soundscape which is, I would say, very important in a production like this. So, and also you have to remember that even though we know we can sort of decipher quite a bit of what music might have sounded like back then or. How a skaldic performance or a poetic performance might have been conducted. The fact is we don't know there is a lot of things we don't know it's there are still a lot of open questions. So playing with these things makes sense and yeah, it's art when you come down to it. It's not a dissertation I made for a museum, then I would perhaps be very strict.

But this is art, it's entertainment. It's supposed to have a specific function for the audience, the users. So it was only natural to combine authenticity with relevance in a way. And that's kind of what I do with my music with Wardruna as well. It's really important for me... I make



music for the living not the dead. Also in terms of the themes I focus on and the ideas behind the song. There are so many things from the past that are just as relevant today as they were when the tradition was alive, or when these myths were part of the daily life or contemporary. So I rather focus on them because ultimately they are the ones you want your audience to connect with the music and the lyrics and so, it makes sense to focus on what's relevant as well.

(NORWEGIAN SINGING)

CHARLES:

You can listen to Hausbrjotr - Skull Crusher on the album Assassin's Creed Valhalla - The Wave of Giants, published by Ubisoft Music and Lake Shore records, and featuring a collection of Einar Selvik's original songs from the game's soundtracks.

I'm Charles Adam Foster Simard from Ubisoft. This episode of Game Makers was edited by Manu Bachet.

Special thanks to our friends at Ubisoft Music, Simon Landry and Anne Langourieux, and to Assassin's Creed Valhalla audio director Aldo Sampaio. Remember to subscribe to Game Makers - and review us - wherever you get your podcasts.

(MUSIC PLAYS)