

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

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

Assassin's Creed is one of Ubisoft's most beloved franchises. It's an action-adventure RPG series, and each game is set in a different historical period. The latest game in the series is called Assassin's Creed Valhalla, and it's set in the Viking era.

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

(MAIN THEME PLAYS)

For this episode, I spoke to Jesper Kyd about his beautiful song, Kingdom of Wessex. Jesper Kyd is well known for his work on the soundtrack of the original Assassin's Creed as well as the three following games in the series, Assassin's Creed II, Assassin's Creed Brotherhood, and Assassin's Creed Revelations. I wanted to start by asking Jesper how he felt returning to the series nine years later.

JESPER KYD:

I have been doing so much different stuff since I worked on the Assassin's Creed franchise, and I feel like there's so much that I have to contribute now. There's so many things I've learned. I've done a lot of work on film and some TV, and you learn so many things when you do all these different types of projects. And so I had... I felt like I had a lot to offer, a lot of new ideas and really excited to, you know, get to bring all these ideas back in the Assassin's Creed world, which I love working on very much.

CHARLES:

Do you find that your process has changed or evolved at all in that time? Like, are you the... are you quite the same composer that you were or have you changed a lot?

JESPER:

I think I always... I try to always evolve. That's how I look at it. And so, you know, I picked the project I work on based on whether there is an opportunity to be creatively challenged, which again, to me, you know, is how you evolve as a composer. So, yeah, I'm very much different and have a very... I feel... different sound. But I also know very much about what it is that made my music, you know, sound like it

fits in Assassin's Creed. So, you know, yes, it's changed a lot, but I still feel very at home working on Assassin's Creed.

CHARLES:

And what is it? Cause you said your music kind of has a natural fit maybe with the franchise, what is it in your style that works so well with Assassin's Creed?

JESPER:

Well, I don't know if I would put it like that but... (LAUGHTER) But let me... In answer to your question, what is it that I think fits the franchise as far as my music style? I think for open-world games working and atmosphere, it's a huge plus... You know, you have these vast worlds that you are exploring. And I have very much focused a lot of my work on creating exploration music. This is something that I've gone away from lately and I've tried all these, and worked, on all these other styles. But I feel I have a quite good handle on creating music that encourages you to explore. And many of my past projects outside of Assassin's Creed also have, you know, gone in that direction. And there's just something about... I write music in atmosphere, in mood and emotion. And once I have all that figured out, then I start thinking about the themes. Of course, the story is always there as well. But, you know, the mood and the atmosphere comes first for me. And I think that could be perhaps why it's a good fit.

(SERENE FLUTE PLAYS)

CHARLES:

Bringing it to Valhalla, what kind of mood and atmosphere did you want to create when you started working on this project?

JESPER:

Well, the first thing I felt when talking to Ubisoft about this project was how authentic everything felt. There's just a real focus on everything being really authentic. And you can, you know, see from the screenshots that this is something that is clearly a big focus. So that was the first thing I knew, authenticity was going to be very important.

The second thing is how do we bring in the sound of Assassin's Creed, the sound of things running through the Animus as kind of a simulation, you know, reminding the player, filtering the music, that they are actually playing in an... you know, in some kind of simulation. The live performances will be, you know, filtered and edited and tweaked in ways that give it a bit... like something is a bit off. So that authentic thing is mixed with an electronic side and it becomes this hybrid style. And that's very much what I focused on.

CHARLES:

So, it's incorporating both the more kind of modern technological elements with the

more traditional music style, because the game has those two elements as well, with the sci-fi element of the Animus and the historical period that's being represented.

JESPER:

Very much so. And even tracks that sound clearly more electronic. I mean, the music has its foundation and is very grounded in live recordings. That's where everything starts. And then, I can choose how much do I wanna, you know, mess and filter and change and edit these recordings. You know, how far do I wanna take that? So I have the options there to keep it more authentic or take it really far out in a more, kind of, almost modern sci-fi-ish direction. And that was very important to me, that the live performances would be the foundation of this whole sound and this whole world of sound that I'm creating.

CHARLES:

So instead of only using pre-recorded or canned sounds, that performance element brings a strong dimension.

JESPER:

This was the thing I really needed to realise and figure out. And in the beginning when I was experimenting, once I realised you were just not going to be using any pre-recorded sounds or sample libraries or these things, you have to create everything from scratch. That's when I decided to acquire all these instruments. A lot of them are like ancient instruments like the tagelharpa, and the crwth is a popular instrument back then in England, lur, rebec. All these unusual string-based instruments was a really good fit for Viking world. And so, once I acquired these, I was like, well, how do you compose for these? So I... (LAUGHTER) I guess I should have thought of that, right? But anyway, no, this is my process. So that's the first step.

So, I had all these instruments, and my studio is full of instruments now. I then started playing the instruments so I could figure out, OK, you know, this is how you compose for them. And by the time I started playing these instruments, I decided I'm going to perform these instruments myself. So that was really an interesting process for me. Like, suddenly I found myself performing all these instruments that I had never performed before. I also perform a lot on the cello, which I specifically mangle a lot. And, you know, 'cause you can get something a bit more expressive out of the cello than some of these more limited instruments. So there was a whole bunch of instruments I started playing and I started creating all this music. And like I said before, everything is grounded in live performance, percussion as well. So that was very much the perspective I had on the score.

(OMINOUS STRING MUSIC PLAYS)

CHARLES:

Do you remember what brief you got, or did you get anything from the team in terms of a cue or a brief for this specific song?

JESPER:

The brief was really... You know, we have the area of Wessex, which I was assigned... You know, we were assigned different areas, Sarah and I. And so, I was assigned Wessex, East Anglia, Northumbria and Norway. And so, of course, I was thinking about how to create something that would be, you know, different for each area. And for Wessex, I very much wanted like a theme to go through that we could bring back if we needed to. And that was really the main perspective on that track. And of course, it needs to fit the location as well. We're in England, but we're still a Viking in England, so I never let go... you know, I never let fully go of the whole Viking feeling cause I wanted it to feel like you were a Viking in England. I didn't wanna say we're in England, let's do everything that surrounds that kind of music style.

So that was my thoughts behind that. And I'm also really interesting in mythology and, you know, setting a really deeply mysterious mood. And that kind of tells you there is something here for you to, you know, to play. You just haven't uncovered it yet. But I'm going to keep encouraging you to look for it and enjoy yourself. And that was very much the... I think the feel I was going for. And then the instrumentation is more on the English side. It's one of the few tracks that actually has guitars, acoustic guitar in it.

And then it has the vocals in there as well to, you know... It's kind of like the yin and yang. You know, it has the male vocals and it has the female vocals. And they're kind of, you know, going back and forth, playing with each other almost. And that was a really, I think, a good choice because you can play the game as a male character or a female character. So that felt like... That felt pretty good to have those two opposites in there as well.

(VOCAL CHANTING)

CHARLES:

I mean, I know that you're from Denmark originally. And so, I have to ask, what was the inspiration in terms of recreating this Viking world for Valhalla? Did you find something particularly inspiring in your own heritage or in what you knew of Viking culture, or the research that you did?

JESPER:

Yeah, being from Denmark, I definitely grew up in a way where Vikings are taught... Viking history is taught in school. And I was quite aware of a lot of the Viking stories and the... like the Viking gods and the very complex afterlife they have and all these

incredible things. I did do more research and found some very interesting things that I started really holding onto. One of the things I found was that there was a lot of turmoil for three decades. And then, you know, with this... At the time, farmers. And at some point they had enough and they emerged as these warriors that were suddenly... they were more focused on war.

And this is one of the ideas and theories about where, you know, Ragnarok came from, because they went through these horrific natural disasters that wiped out large parts of the population. And it was so interesting to see that there was like a motivation and there was something that happened that kinda, it looks like, changed them. You know, going with some of these things gives you insight into just thinking of them as mindless warriors just wasn't going to give me the depth that I needed to write this score. And a lot of the music is not dark or driving or full of pulses like you would expect Viking music to be. You know? Especially when we think about it these days. A lot of the music needed to be, like, you are in an open world and you haven't engaged in the mission yet. You're just exploring. So some of the first music I wrote was definitely deemed much too dark. And I was like, oh, OK.

CHARLES:

That's the feedback that you got from the team?

JESPER:

Yes. Some of the first music was too dark for sure. I mean, there was definitely moments when dark is the proper fit. But I needed to figure out how to create a lot of music that had more of a... I don't know. It was more inspired by the everyday life and also by the spirituality these people felt at the time. They were very spiritual and their belief system was everything, you know? And tapping into the afterlife and all these things was a huge inspiration for the music.

(EXCERPT OF SONG PLAYS)

CHARLES:

So, you mentioned this kind of tension, and I guess there's sort of a meeting of cultures in the game, of course, between the Viking that you play and England where you're going as a character and how you're trying to combine them in the music. So, you mentioned the guitar as the more English, I guess, element. What are the other elements that are kind of more English in the song and where are the Viking or the more Norse culture elements in this song?

JESPER:

Well, it also has... There's harps in there as well. I mean, the vocal is a really strong part of that track. I have it playing quite exposed in places with lots of processed

layers and layers of vocals. I think the Viking sound to me is definitely, you know... There is of course, you have the two different characters, but the male vocal goes for me a bit more on the Viking side and the female vocals goes a bit more on the Celtic side. That's, you know, one way of feeling it. But then, when I was writing it, I was like, well, this is really cool also because you can play a male and female character. So this feels really good to go in that direction.

CHARLES:

Who's singing in the song? Where did you get these vocal tracks from?

JESPER:

That's Melissa Kaplan in there. And she was the girl who sang Ezio's Family on Assassin's Creed II. And she worked with me on vocals for Assassin's Creed I, Assassin's Creed II, Assassin's Creed Brotherhood and Assassin's Creed Revelations. So she's been with me all the way in this Assassin's Creed journey. And I was definitely gonna have her come back.

CHARLES:

Well, I wanna know more about recording Melissa, first of all. So were you able to record her remotely or was this done before the lockdowns of 2020?

JESPER:

I recorded her remotely, and I had given her a very detailed sketch of what I was looking for. And we have these long conversations about the feelings that I'm looking for in the performance. And knowing Melissa so well, since I've worked with her for a while now, especially on the Assassin's Creed music, I know that, you know, for example, with Kingdom of Wessex, those vocals were written for her.

I know how it's going to sound and I know what I'm looking for. And then, you know, on top of that, we talked about: is there anything else that we can bring out that I don't have in there yet? Working remotely, you know, it is what it is. I feel like the more detailed of a plan you have when you work remotely, it tends to go better. When you're in person, there's like a chemistry that flows, which is obviously very different.

CHARLES:

And is she singing words or is it just notes that you wrote for her?

JESPER:

She's not singing words. It's very abstract. And I really wanted it that way. It added to the mystery of that track. I didn't feel like it needed a Viking vocal performance. I wanted it to live in its own world, you know?

CHARLES:

Yeah, no, but it's cool because even though it's notes, it feels like there's meaning

behind them somehow... to me anyway when I'm listening to it, like, it feels like she is saying something.

JESPER:

Right.

CHARLES:

Even though there is no words behind it.

JESPER:

And it's interesting when you do it that way because different people will definitely hear different things when they listen to that music.

CHARLES:

You mentioned mystery a lot for this song. Is that the main emotion that you were trying to communicate on this track, or was there something else besides that?

JESPER:

Well, I think I'm trying to communicate that there is a huge world waiting here for you, waiting to be explored and, you know, just dig in and have fun with it. There is other music when you are on missions and in darker environments. There's music for night time, for example, which takes a different perspective. But for this one, I very much wanted it to be a track that didn't have this impending doom. But it's has you know, the opposite, right?

CHARLES:

Well, it has quite of a quite a fast-paced rhythm in the background, right? Maybe it's a guitar that's kind of bringing it that faster pace?

JESPER:

Yes. It has like a quite a monotone guitar riff in there, which we worked quite hard on to get right. And it's something where I would write it, and it was written as a demo. And I would send it to my guitarist, Dan Sistos, and he would work on it and send it back. And he would do a couple of variations that perhaps I hadn't quite... You know, since he's so fast on the guitar, he was like, well, let's try this, you know? And then it comes with some minor variations, and it might send your creativity flying again when you hear that.

And so, when I got the guitar back into the track, I decided to basically rewrite the guitar part. And then I sent it all to him again. And then he played it like it was in my... So it's really cool when you have these back and forth. That's a really great way to just discover things and move forward. And again, Dan Sistos, he has worked on prior Assassin's Creed scores with me as well, especially his sound is a part of the Brotherhood score as well.

CHARLES:

So a regular partner.

JESPER KYD:

Yes, he is a flamenco guitarist. And I love challenging him. I try to do this with, you know, the solo performers I work with. You put them in a space where they are not... I don't wanna say their comfort zone, but perhaps, it's the best way to put it, you know? And then you try to see what happens. And I think that's a really interesting... You know, you wanna challenge yourself, but you also wanna challenge the people you work with.

(CLASSICAL GUITAR RIFF PLAYS)

JESPER:

What's in there are a lot of live performances layered in ways where it gives you this kind of wall of sound. And then I do everything I can to bring that as much back as I can so there's only things left in there that absolutely is vital to the track. And so when you remove all that stuff, what's left in there? It's quite hard to define. And I think that's a big part of that track. And most of my music, actually really, but especially in that track, there's a lot in there that fills up the track that you can't quite put your hand on what is it.

Another thing I do is I run things through all kinds of processors there. For example, I have like a spring tower, which is like four-five feet tall. And it's just a giant wooden box from the 1960s that creates reverb acoustically.

CHARLES:

Oh, so you're playing it in your studio acoustically inside this box?

JESPER:

So, it does have electronic inputs and output. But once it goes into the unit, it has a... it's like a tube in there that reverberates. So things inside the tube are reverberating and then it records that and it sends it out. So the actual reverb creation is not done by a microchip, you know, which is what normally happens. It's actually... This is the early days of reverb, you know? It's actually done with a real spring. There's like a spring inside a tube. And when that metal spring starts to vibrate, it creates reverb that are then recorded. And so this is a really big example of that kind of process.

So, for example, I run things through that thing and it comes out and you're like, I don't know how... this sounds not so great. But then when you combine it with other stuff, it gives you... It puts some kind of DNA in the music that when you take it out, you clearly miss it. But when you put it in, it sounds really funky, you know?

And it's not meant to be listened to on its own, you know? But it's part of the sauce. So you put it in there and suddenly it adds something. And I do a lot of that. So there's a lot of... It's one way I create so much atmosphere in my track, is to include all this invisible sauce, you know, that I put in there.

CHARLES:

Yeah. Like, it's layering the kind of the sound, right?

JESPER:

Right. And it gives something to the track that you just can't really define. I am a big fan of 1970s and 60s – mostly 70s, actually – technology 'cause there's so much hi-fi in that sound, you know? It just brings something totally different from what you can buy today, I feel.

(OMINOUS MUSIC WITH REVERB PLAYS)

CHARLES:

I don't know if you'll be able to answer this question, but I always wonder because... So you're talking about this process of removing but also of adding these layers to the track. But when do you know when it's finished? Like, when do you know that it feels complete and it has enough and not too much?

JESPER:

Yeah. I never really had a problem with finishing music. When the track feels right to me, then it's done. And if there's anything in the track that I can't think of how to improve, then it's done. Sometimes you overwork a track and the magic starts to disappear. And that's when... You know, you have to know within yourself how far am I going to go with this? And you can work on a track and work on it and work on it and work on it.

But at some point, you're nit-picking, all that great stuff in there is suddenly, like, super clear and super tight. And suddenly, that magical element is just slowly being removed, you know? So, I like the music to sound a bit spontaneous, a bit like it happened as some kind of giant jam session. That's a good feeling.

And especially from Valhalla where everything has to sound organic, you know, it's a strength to make it sound like that for a game like Valhalla, I feel. Because then it sounds like a bunch of Vikings just came by, you know? And decided to pick up an instrument.

CHARLES:

Like, for this kind of culture, you don't want it to sound too polished or too edited, right?

JESPER:

Exactly. It needs to have some of that rawness in there, that we just know these people lived a much more intense lifestyle. And that does remind me, I mean, some of these live recordings are recorded with a lot of air so it does sound like... I was going for some kind of feeling where it almost sounds like you're outside because there's so much air in the recording. So there's different techniques I'm using. So much of the game is outside. And I felt that... How do we add something really authentic when we're outside like this?

CHARLES:

Oh, that's interesting. You don't want it to sound like it's at a recording studio.

(LAUGHS)

JESPER

It's like, you know, when you watch a movie, right? About like knights or something, and it's supposed to take place hundreds of years ago. And you see a guy on a horse, right? And he has a trumpet and he's like playing out some kind of call to the group, you know, to the soldiers to attack. But it sounds like there's trumpet played at Abbey Road and you're like, what is going on here?

Right? I mean... it would just work better if you go and have a guy who is kind of not awesome at playing the trumpet and go outside and record it somewhere and then put it on that scene. You know, suddenly, the immersion is more. And for a game like this, when you play for maybe even hundreds of hours, that immersion becomes so key and it helps the game feel so much more realistic.

(EXCERPT OF FINAL TRACK PLAYS)

CHARLES:

You can listen to the track Kingdom of Wessex, on the Assassin's Creed Valhalla Original Game soundtrack published by Ubisoft Music and Lakeshore Records.

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.

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(SONG CONTINUES)