

Article

Encountering the Sacred Past: Religious Experience and Historical Empathy in Assassin's Creed Valhalla

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Abstract

Historical empathy is a key concept in history and social studies education. It involves understanding how people in the past thought, acted, and experienced the world through engagement with historical context, perspective taking, and affective connections to historical actors. While these competencies are often developed through written sources and historical narratives, visual and interactive media may offer additional opportunities for fostering historical empathy. This article examines whether the historical video game *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* may provide affordances for historical empathy for players. Set in Viking Age England and Norway, the game's representations of Norse and Christian religion form the focus of the analysis. The study combines systematic gameplay analysis with qualitative thematic analysis. The empirical material was analyzed for historical empathy and compared with historical sources. The findings suggest that the game may provide opportunities to support historical empathy by helping players understand how people in the past interpreted and navigated the world through religious and cultural frameworks. However, historical simplifications and gameplay-oriented adaptations may limit this potential unless accompanied by teacher scaffolding and critical reflection. Thus, while *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* may be engaging and pedagogically valuable, it should be approached critically as an entertainment product rather than a straightforward representation of the past.

Keywords: historical empathy; historical video games; *Assassin's Creed Valhalla*; history learning

1. Introduction

Historians produce meaningful narratives based on traces from the past (Ferrer, 2015, p. 39). These narratives are often found in scholarly articles and history books. However, historians such as White (1973 as cited in Iggers, 2005, p. 100) argue that popular-cultural representations of history offer something different to historical discourse and that we should be open to more diverse representations of the past. Rosenstone (1995) contends that popular-cultural portrayals of the past must be taken seriously because: "if it's true that the word can do many things that images cannot, what about the reverse—don't images carry the ideas and information that cannot be handled by the word?" (p. 5). Chapman et al. (2017, pp. 359–361) argue that visual media such as films, TV series, and video games set in historical contexts have a significant impact on how we interpret, understand, and represent history. The historical narratives offered by these media may differ considerably



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from those found in history textbooks, yet they nonetheless play a major role in historical learning, historical understanding, and historical consciousness.

One publisher that has, over many years, produced video games situated within historical contexts is Ubisoft. They have developed the *Assassin's Creed* series (hereafter AC). The series is a type of open-world game in which players can explore and construct narratives through fictional characters in different historical periods or through engagements with recognizable historical figures and events. The French Revolution, Ancient Greece, the Italian Renaissance, the Viking Age, and the civil war period in feudal Japan are examples of such historical settings. The game examined in this article is *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* (hereafter *Valhalla*), released in 2020. In *Valhalla*, the player follows Eivor, a Viking warrior from Norway, who leads their clan to England in the ninth century to establish a new home in a time marked by war and political unrest. The game explores themes such as identity, honor, religion, folk beliefs, and conflicts between the Vikings and Anglo-Saxons (M. B. Johanson, 2022).

Research on AC is diverse and addresses topics such as learning about the past, critical thinking, source criticism, various forms of history didactics, and gender perspectives (e.g., McCall, 2023; Eklund & Zanescu, 2024; L. B. Johanson, 2018; Gilbert, 2019; Hiriart, 2023; M. B. Johanson, 2022). Hiriart (2023) and M. B. Johanson (2022) have linked AC to historical empathy. Historical empathy is a central curricular aim in both primary and secondary education in Norway (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2020), and thus it is interesting to study. For Hatlen (2020, p. 147), historical empathy concerns understanding how people in the past perceived their world in different time periods, as well as the reasons behind their actions. According to Boltz (2017), video games can promote historical empathy in those who play them. This raises questions about how the past is represented in games and whether such representations help players understand historical context and characters from the past. It also raises questions about whether games such as *Valhalla* can support educational aims. Thus, the research question guiding this article is:

What affordances for historical empathy can be identified in the video game *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* through players' interactions with elements of religious events and characters?

To address this question, it was essential that one of the authors played the game firsthand. According to Aarseth (2003, p. 7), this is the best way to analyze historical video games, in order not to miss important information and content. The episodes and experiences in the game were further discussed by both authors, and parts of the game were also observed by the second author. This research is thus within a frame of expert analysis and discusses the potential affordances for historical empathy the game may provide. Because *Valhalla* is highly time-consuming to complete and covers a wide range of themes, we limited our focus to the game's representations of religion, comparing Norse and Christian beliefs and analyzing these in line with Endacott and Brooks' (2013) framework of historical empathy. The study most closely to ours is Hiriart (2023) who examines the educational game *Valhalla Discovery Tour* and historical empathy. However, while Hiriart investigates a deliberate educational environment, our study examines the commercial version of *Valhalla*. More specifically we examine how representations of Norse and Christian rituals and traditions may provide opportunities developing historical empathy within the game's narrative and gameplay. To our knowledge, this perspective has not previously been explored in research on *Valhalla*.

In what follows, we present an overview of *Valhalla*, followed by a review of previous research on historical video games and particularly AC titles. We then explain the historical-didactic concept of historical empathy, which is central to our analysis. The methods section

outlines the analytical approach before presenting and discussing the findings in relation to the game's potential affordances for historical empathy through selected religious events.

1.1. *Assassin's Creed and Valhalla*

"Play your way through history in the award-winning video game series. *Assassin's Creed* immerses you in the memories of your ancestors, fighting to protect free will at pivotal moments in human history," writes [Ubisoft Studios Montreal \(2021\)](#). As of 2026, the franchise includes 14 main games—four of which feature "Discovery Tours" designed for educational purposes—in addition to spin-off games, short films, graphic novels, and a feature film. The series is best known for its historical narratives and contexts, which allow players to experience and explore both real and fictionalized historical events.

As noted above, the series seeks to reconstruct well-known historical periods. Players encounter real and fictional characters situated within these time periods, such as Edward Kenway from the *Assassins Creed IV: Black Flag*. The main storyline is conveyed through the machine known as the "Animus," which uses the DNA of modern individuals to recreate the memories of their ancestors. The Animus enables players to experience historical events and functions as a narrative device. Each game is developed in collaboration with historians, scholars of religion, and archeologists to ensure credible portrayals of the past ([Reparaz, 2021](#); [Cowen, 2021](#)). Although the different games revolve around distinct historical events, they share common features: the player addresses contemporary problems, battles the Templar Order, and opposes their attempts to control society through technological artifacts originating from a prehistoric civilization ([Bondioli et al., 2019](#), p. 1). Nonetheless, it is important to bear in mind that games like these may prioritize entertainment over historical accuracy.

The Viking-themed game *Valhalla* begins in medieval Norway, specifically in Rygjafylke on the western coast. Eivor seeks revenge for the murder of their parents. This quest for vengeance leads Eivor and the Raven Clan to England, where they explore landscapes and cities such as Lunden (London), Winchester and Jorvik (York). The clan becomes entangled in conflicts with the kingdoms of East Anglia, Northumbria, Wessex, and Mercia, while also forming alliances with historical figures such as Ivar the Boneless, Ubba Ragnarsson, Halfdan Ragnarsson, and Rollo of Normandy. The main missions revolve around developing the clan's settlement, forging alliances with various kingdoms, leading Viking raids, influencing political power dynamics, and confronting King Alfred of Wessex and other Saxon rulers.

In *Valhalla* players can partially construct their own narrative of the Viking Age, influence the outcomes of future events, and explore regions of Viking Age England, Norway, France and Ireland ([Jansen, 2020](#)). They may choose to follow the main storyline, complete side quests, or explore the game world freely. The choices affect not only Eivor's personal story but also other real and fictional historical events from the Viking Age, potentially generating unique narratives for each player.

1.2. *Previous Research*

Historical video games have received increasing attention as tools for fostering historical understanding. [Uricchio \(2005\)](#) argues that games represent the past differently from other media by enabling players to participate in and influence historical discourse. [Chapman \(2016\)](#) outlines a framework for analyzing these games and highlights their potential for historization. Several scholars ([De Groot, 2009](#); [Erlil, 2011](#); [Champion, 2015](#)) emphasize how video games can convey meaningful historical narratives, while [Kapell and Elliot \(2013\)](#) point to their capacity for relatively authentic representations. The visual and interactive nature of games may also enhance historical learning ([Champion, 2015](#)). Broader

studies (Egenfeldt Nielsen et al., 2019; Metzger & Paxton, 2016; Chapman et al., 2017; Kapell & Elliot, 2013) explore how historical games are analyzed, how they represent the past, and what they can teach. McCall (2023) highlights games' potential to foster comparison with historical sources and support critical thinking, while Stamou et al. (2026) show that games can promote historical empathy through emotional and cognitive engagement.

At the same time, scholars identify important limitations. Chapman (2016) notes challenges related to accuracy, simplification for playability, and commercial priorities. Gibbons (2024) warns that games may reproduce harmful colonial ideologies, and Hammar (2019) argues that many reinforce hegemonic perspectives centered on Western male violence while marginalizing alternative viewpoints. In a review study, Rubio-Campillo (2024) analyzes 50 years of historical board games, including digital games, and identifies recurrent biases, such as simplified historical representation, predominance on Western history, war and colonial narratives, and limited authenticity. Even though pointing out these biases, he still argues that historical games can be valuable in education if multiple perspectives are included and if games encourage reflection.

Research on AC-series spans topics such as identity, gender, religion, historical representation, and educational potential. Across this literature, the games are often understood not as neutral representations of the past, but as sites where historical meaning is actively constructed and negotiated. Hammar (2016) illustrates this in his analysis of *Assassin's Creed Freedom Cry*, arguing that the game enables "counter-hegemonic commemorative play" by challenging dominant narratives of the Caribbean slave trade and foregrounding marginalized identities and experiences. Furthermore, in his book, Kunzelman (2025) explores the whole series as a "massive and distributed entity".

Several studies emphasize the pedagogical affordances of the series. De Wildt and Aupers (2019), Leibovitz (2015), and Atkinson (2017) find that representations of religion may support meaningful educational engagement. Similarly, Gilbert (2019) argues that the games can foster a "human sense of connection" to historical figures and broaden awareness of diverse perspectives, while also noting that students often miss opportunities for critical reflection on these immersive experiences (p. 108). Karsenti and Parent (2020) demonstrate how the games can promote historical understanding in classroom contexts, and L. B. Johanson (2018) suggests that they may support both "knowing-what" and "knowing-how" forms of knowledge. Stephan (2024) further shows that students engaging with *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* report higher enjoyment and perceived learning compared to those using traditional reading-based approaches.

At the same time, the literature highlights tensions related to historical accuracy and representation. Whilst Casey (2021) characterizes the series as a "time machine" to the past, Bondioli et al. (2019) argue that *Assassin's Creed Origins* offers a generally credible depiction while simultaneously blending historical elements with modern cultural narratives. This ambivalence is echoed in more critical perspectives: Draycott and Cooke (2022) criticize *Origins* for its unrealistic portrayal of ancient Egypt, and Politopoulos et al. (2019) argue that *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* may encourage a more superficial and violence-driven engagement with the past, even if it can still provide insight into historical environments. Bello (2025) similarly concludes that the series presents history as an ideological and selective construction shaped by present concerns, prioritizing narrative and commercial appeal over accuracy.

Questions of representation are also central. Eklund and Zanesco (2024) show that gender portrayals have evolved, with more prominent roles and increasingly complex characters, yet they argue that female protagonists are still often rendered superficially or as "female skins on male characters" (p. 1). Champion and Hiriart (2023) situate such issues within broader discussions of the series' educational use.

Research specifically addressing *Valhalla* remains more limited but is growing. Bergman (2021), Skjoldi (2023), and Cook (2024) examine religion, identity, and aesthetics, while Kaald (2024), Grufstedt and Houghton (2024), M. B. Johanson (2022), and Hiriart (2023) highlight its pedagogical potential, including its ability to foster motivation, critical play, and aspects of historical empathy. In a review of *Valhalla*, Herman (2021) finds the game visually impressive and entertaining, but that historical accuracy is sacrificed due to playability and dramatic effect. However, Herman points out that the game gives a broad picture of the Viking culture. In addition, Lasausse (2024) investigates the cultural representation of the “Viking” north and argues that games like *Valhalla* create and spread specific ideas of a Nordic past. Furthermore, Weber (2026) examines how *Valhalla* depicts Norse religion and mythology and how this is adapted to the needs of the modern gamer.

Together, this body of research shows that historical video games offer opportunities for communicating history, promoting learning, and contributing to historical discourse. At the same time, they raise important questions regarding representation, accuracy, and ethics.

1.3. Historical Empathy

The current curriculum from 2020 emphasized historical empathy in both primary and secondary education in Norway. Nevertheless, Harnes (2023) and Hiriart (2023) note that there is no consensus among scholars regarding the precise meaning of the concept. For Harnes, historical empathy means “understanding the past from the perspective of a historical actor; seeing the society in which she lived, and in light of this assessing her life, opportunities, and choices” (our translation). Hatlen (2020, p. 147, our translation) similarly states that historical empathy concerns “understanding how people in the past viewed their world at different points in time and why they acted as they did.” According to L. B. Johanson (2018, p. 110, our translation), it is the “cultural, moral, social, and intellectual contexts” that shaped the actions of people in the past, and interpreting these perspectives allows us to understand historical actors more deeply. Barton and Levstik (2011, as cited in Hatlen, 2020, p. 150) argue that it is necessary not to maintain a dispassionate relationship with people of the past, because engaging in history requires care and concern for their experiences and lives. They divide this form of engagement into four components: (1) caring about people in the past, (2) caring about the events that occurred, (3) showing compassion for people in the past, and (4) allowing our present-day understanding to be altered by what we learn about the past.

To provide a more concrete definition, Endacott and Brooks (2013, p. 41) describe historical empathy as a process in which individuals cognitively and affectively engage with historical figures and events. They argue that historical empathy involves understanding information as well as forming an emotional connection to the past while still acknowledging the differences between past and present. It is important to emphasize that historical empathy is not the same as sympathy. According to Endacott and Brooks (2013, p. 43), three criteria are essential for developing historical empathy: (1) historical contextualization, (2) perspective taking, and (3) affective connection. These criteria are mutually interdependent.

The first criterion, historical contextualization, requires understanding the temporal distance and the social, political, religious, and cultural norms of the period under study. It also requires knowledge of the events that led to the historical situation and other relevant events occurring simultaneously (Endacott & Brooks, 2013). Harnes (2023) explains that “contextualization involves weaving together different aspects of the past into a whole that would have made sense in its own time and provides us with understanding of it” (our translation). She further argues that mastering source work is necessary, including engaging with historical sources that illuminate social structures and the lives of historical

actors. Without context, it becomes difficult to understand historical characters and events. For example, players of *Valhalla* need knowledge of medieval societies and of Norse and Christian belief systems. Although the AC games include fictional elements, they often present detailed reconstructions of cities and historical periods. This enables players to explore past societies and examine forms of technology, social structures, cultural expressions, and everyday life. Furthermore, players may critically assess the game's authenticity and historical accuracy by comparing it with primary or secondary sources.

The second criterion concerns perspective taking. This involves understanding the lived experiences, principles, positions, attitudes, and beliefs of historical actors. We must attempt to understand how a historical figure might have thought about the situation and the dilemmas presented. This requires shifting between focusing on the historical actor and reflecting on oneself, a process Endacott and Brooks (2013, p. 43) describe as challenging. Video games may facilitate such shifts by allowing players to inhabit different roles. For example, through Eivor in *Valhalla*, players can simultaneously experience life as a settler, farmer, religious specialist, and warrior. Role-playing, of which video games can be considered a form, may encourage players to make decisions that align with those a historical actor might have made. Hatlen (2020, p.156) points out that role-playing, in which learners assume historical characters, can support perspective taking.

The final criterion concerns affective emotional responses to historical individuals or events. Endacott and Brooks (2013, p. 43) argue that we must create emotional links to people of the past to develop historical empathy. Such connections rely on drawing on one's own life experiences, particularly experiences that resemble, even loosely, those of the historical figure. Harnes (2023) emphasizes that emotions must be taken seriously, both because they foster engagement and because they bring history to life.

Nevertheless, it is not easy to adopt the cognitive or emotional perspectives of people who lived hundreds of years ago. Differences in beliefs, values, and motivations can be significant. This creates a risk of presentism—judging people of the past through the lens of contemporary norms and perspectives (Seixas & Morton, 2013, p. 144). For example, Gilbert (2019, p. 129) shows in her study that students' emotional engagement with gaming AC often became intertwined with their feelings toward historical figures, reflecting a strong sense of shared humanity that may encourage contemporary interpretations if not critically examined.

Endacott and Brooks (2013) argue that combining the three criteria provides a deeper and more holistic understanding of the past and its actors. In an updated model, reflection is included. This is referred to as a phase in which "students are invited to make connections between the past and the present while considering how their personal views may have changed as a result of engaging in historical empathy" (Endacott & Brooks, 2013, p. 46). Building on their framework, this article examines how *Valhalla*, through the lenses of expert analysis, can contribute to the game's potential affordances of historical empathy and how it may serve as an opening a well-prepared teacher can work with. For educational purposes it is probably necessary that sequences from the game are supported by teacher-mediated activities. A student that plays the game and that does not have contextual understanding nor understand how to investigate sources will likely get only partial historical empathy.

2. Materials and Methods

Spring (2015, p. 209) argues that by analyzing historical video games, players can develop a genuine understanding of the past. According to Lankoski and Björk (2015, pp. 23–24), a central premise in game analysis is that researchers play the game themselves to form an understanding of its representations and narratives. Aarseth (2003, p. 3) agrees and argues that by playing the game actively, the researchers gain a more holistic under-

standing of the narratives. As he writes: “by indirect access to the experience of games we make ourselves liable to commit severe misunderstandings,” noting that interviews or observations alone can only offer a partial understanding of the game. While interviews and observations may yield insights unavailable through self-analysis, researchers should, as in other forms of historical interpretation, have first-hand knowledge of the material they examine. Moreover, analyzing the content of historical video games researchers can more easily incorporate the player’s perspective in ways that enrich the understanding of the game (Hammar, 2019, p. 16). Berry and Kitchen (2021, p. 120) likewise argue that self-study, when situated within a reflective context, can generate new forms of knowledge and understanding.

In line with these perspectives, our analysis of *Valhalla* is grounded in one of the author’s extensive gameplay experiences. Because the research question focuses on the games’ potential affordances for fostering historical empathy, it was essential to consider how the game may engage players in understanding and relating to the perspectives, choices, and emotions of the game’s characters and the historical context. The first author played the entire game systematically for nearly 500 h as part of a master’s thesis completed in 2022. This includes the PlayStation 5 version of *Valhalla* 1.2 to 1.3 and does not include downloadable expansions. This author is both an experienced video game player and an academically trained history teacher. The empirical material was documented using a think-aloud protocol, and reflections were written down. An inductive analysis of the think-aloud notes and gameplay documentation identified two dominant categories of religious representation in *Valhalla*: Norse religion and Christianity. Across these categories three recurring themes were found: (1) traditions and celebrations, (2) rituals and rites, and (3) graves and burial practices. While other religious traditions, including Roman religion and Islam, appear in the game, they are represented less extensively. The analysis therefore focused on Norse religion and Christianity, which provided the most substantial material for examining religion through gameplay.

When preparing for this article, both authors revisited these categories to assess their relevance for the new analytic framework. Following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) reflexive approach to thematic analysis, we reviewed the think-aloud material together to identify recurring patterns and themes. This process confirmed the continued relevance of religion as an analytical category while also allowing us to reconsider how the existing subcategories could contribute to the present analysis. Episodes involving Norse and Christian religious representations were particularly relevant to this study because they portray two distinct religious traditions and provide a useful basis for exploring different dimensions for historical empathy. Some religious episodes were excluded from the previous study. These were connected to Norse mythology and divine and supernatural beings. The analysis instead focused on human actions, beliefs, and religious practices that can be examined in relation to historical sources. The corpus consisted of 12 gameplay episodes, involving Norse and Christian rituals and traditions. These were selected because they were described thoroughly in the think-aloud notes and showed the distinction and tension between the two religious traditions. The gameplay also provided detailed contextual information that helped us interpret the episodes. These episodes were (1) Norse burials, (2) Yule festivals, (3) Ostara festivals, (4) Sigrblót, (5) ritual killings, (6) sacrifices, (7) weddings, (8) pilgrimages, (9) fasting, (10) prayers, (11) mass and (12) burial. An overview of all the episodes with excerpts of think-aloud comments, connecting them to the three dimensions of historical empathy, is provided in Appendix A. Then, the episodes were reassessed through Endacott and Brooks’ (2013) dimension of historical empathy.

For us this alignment was evident because religious content in *Valhalla* may support all three of Endacott and Brooks’ dimensions if guided by scholarly expertise:

- (1) Historical context—the game may incorporate scholarly knowledge about Norse and Christian religion throughout the game.
- (2) Perspective taking—the game presents historically informed religious worldviews that may shape characters' motivations and interpretations.
- (3) Affective engagement—the game may create emotional responses through narrative sequences grounded in rituals, beliefs, and faith-based relationships if the player has similar life experiences.

To ensure that both authors engaged directly with the empirical material, the second author, also a trained historian, read through all think-aloud notes and gameplay documentation from the master's thesis. The second author then observed gameplay sequences covering all three subcategories, drawing on both recorded gameplay and live demonstrations of scenes identified as analytically relevant. Each episode was discussed collaboratively, considering Endacott and Brooks' model, with a focus on how contextual, perspective taking, and affective dimensions of historical empathy might be activated for players. Whilst the initial coding identified categories related to different religious practices, the subsequent application of Endacott and Brooks (2013) shifted from describing the categories to analyzing how the different episodes might foster or encourage the three dimensions of historical empathy.

These discussions also examined how the first author's background as a historian and experienced gamer might have shaped his interpretations, including recognition of historical references or emotionally oriented decision-making during play. Bringing together the first author's deep gameplay familiarity and the second author's analytical distance allowed the authors to refine interpretations, question assumptions, and strengthen the reliability of the categorization. The different interpretations between the authors were discussed until consensus was reached. This collaborative process functioned as a form of methodological triangulation.

To situate the game's representations within a broader historical framework, the findings were partially compared with real historical sources. These comparisons made it possible to identify where *Valhalla* draws on documented historical practices and where the game blends historical knowledge with fictional elements, which is relevant for evaluating its potential to foster historical contextualization.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. The first author's historical training and extensive gaming experience likely influenced interpretations, implying that the findings may diverge from how an average or inexperienced player would experience the game. In addition, the study is based on data from only one main player, and experiences of historical video games may vary substantially across players. As Mortensen (Aarseth & Mortensen, 2021, p. 5) points out, representations in historical video games may be better understood through the experiences of multiple players. To mitigate these limitations, the second author observed gameplay across all categories and participated actively in discussions and interpretation. Thus, to strengthen reliability, we applied reflexivity by reassessing the original categories through Endacott and Brooks' (2013) framework, requiring us to view the empirical material through new lenses. It should be noted that this study's aim is to analyze the game's potential affordances for historical empathy, which trained teachers may use as inspiration and part of their pedagogical toolkit.

3. Results

3.1. Religion in Valhalla—Content and Findings

Popular cultural portrayals of the Viking Age, such as *Vikings*, *Norsemen*, and *Senua's Sacrifice*, include numerous representations of both Christian and Norse belief systems. *Valhalla* is no exception, and its depictions of Viking Age religions are extensive and varied.

As previously mentioned, the documented game experiences were categorized into three overarching religious themes. These categories encompass *Valhalla*'s representations of Christianity and Norse religion across the areas of rituals and rites, celebrations and traditions, and graves and burial practices. The categories related to different aspects of Christian and Norse traditions, rituals, and burial customs encountered in *Valhalla* are presented below.

3.2. Christian Traditions and Celebrations in Valhalla

In *Valhalla*, players encounter several dimensions of Christianity as it appeared in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. The game features multiple celebrations and Christian traditions. One of the earliest customs the first author engaged in was a wedding. Christian weddings were, according to [Wettlaufer \(2024, p. 1\)](#), one of the most vital social institutions of their time. In the game, players can participate in a Christian wedding when Oswald, the thegn of East Anglia was coronated.

The kingdom of East Anglia is controlled by the Danes, portrayed as originating from Viking Age Denmark and Norway, and by the jarl Halfdan Ragnarsson. Halfdan orders his advisor Finn to crown a Saxon noble who can rule on his behalf. Finn selects Oswald as king of East Anglia. To symbolize unity between the Danes and the Saxons, Oswald marries Halfdan's cousin, Valdis. The wedding, decorated with flowers and white ornaments, takes place in Elmenham and brings together both Danes and Saxons. During the ceremony, the couple exchange gold rings. Finn then proclaims: "I hereby name you man and wife. I name you Oswald of Elmenham, first of his name, king of East Anglia." A celebration follows outside the church, where players can participate in dancing, competitions, speeches, and a bridal race.

In the kingdom of Mercia, players also encounter another Christian tradition: pilgrimage. According to [Rasmussen and Thomassen \(2002, p. 231\)](#), Christian pilgrimages were a central practice both before and throughout the Middle Ages. In the game, players do not undertake a pilgrimage but can read a letter at St. Albanes Abbey written by a farmer complaining about pilgrims from Lunden:

Reverend father. We, the farmers of the fields surrounding Saint Albanes Abbey ask that pilgrims from Lunden no longer be welcome. We all pray to Saint Albanes as the first Mercian martyr. They consume barrels of ale and destroy the fields we plow. In the memory of our beloved saint, please send these people away.

This letter shows that Christians from Lunden traveled on pilgrimages to abbeys such as St. Albanes in Oxenefordscire.

An additional Christian practice represented in the game is fasting. According to [Mathews \(2015, p. 51\)](#), fasting was an act of repentance for one's sins. Eivor learns about this practice from local monks in Oxford. The monks have fasted for an extended period to honor Jesus and St. Guthlac and to seek forgiveness for their sins. In a letter, the monks explain:

His life on the coach of God was one of piety and devotion. Living from the mud and with the birds the angels did visit him, they told him the proper way of living without jewels, without fatty meals. No one lives proper anymore. Find a corner in the world and eat the apples our orchards provide. For otherwise we are doomed.

These examples illustrate only some of the Christian traditions depicted in *Valhalla*; players also frequently encounter Christian rites and rituals.

3.3. Christian Rites and Rituals in Valhalla

Throughout the game, players meet Christians praying to Jesus, God, or various saints. [Rasmussen and Thomassen \(2002, p. 88\)](#) describe prayer as an integral part of Christian practice since the 2nd century. In *Valhalla*, Christians pray both in churches and monasteries

in all the Saxon kingdoms, as well as in rural areas without formal religious institutions. For example, in Essex, two poor children pray to St. Martin, one of the most venerated saints of late Roman Gaul and later medieval Britain (Pernoud, 2006, pp. 11–13). The children kneel and pray for food and money, and a note in their hut reads: “Beans to breakfast. Supper will be prayers to St. Martin.”

Players may also attend Christian mass. Since the early Middle Ages, the mass has been a central Christian ritual (Rasmussen & Thomassen, 2002, p. 170). In the town of Wesbrie, players can join a mass after assisting the local priest, Serec, who demonstrates how he offers sacrifices to God and conducts the ritual. While several Christian rites are represented in the game, burial is the practice represented most frequently.

3.4. Christian Burial Customs in Valhalla

As Eivor, players encounter numerous Christian burial practices. These vary widely depending on the deceased’s social status. Players may visit graves of both kings and ealdormen across England. In Essex, for instance, players find the grave of King Æscwine of Wessex, with an inscription describing his lineage and demise: “Æscwine, King of Wessex. Son of Cenfus, who was son of Cuthgils. He is buried here with all his treasures. He was defeated by the Mercian invader Wulfhere”. His burial chamber contains treasures and weapons. In King’s Bury, players find the crypt of King Edmund of East Anglia, similarly adorned with valuables. Stenton (1971, p. 50) notes that archeological studies of Saxon royal burials confirm the presence of high-quality weapons and treasures.

Burials of prominent men such as ealdormen also appear. In Lincoln, players witness the burial of Ealdorman Hundbeorht, whose son declares he “shall be buried in the crypt with the rest of our kings of old.” In Oxford, a note beside another ealdorman’s grave states: “Our dear ealdorman has been laid to rest. Shriven, anointed and shrouded in simple cloth, his earthly remains have been buried in sanctified ground, his noble head positioned toward the setting sun”. Hadley (2011, p. 294) notes that social status and gender significantly influenced Saxon burial practices.

Players also encounter simple graves of monks and priests at a monastery on the Isle of Ely, consistent with more modest clerical burials. Ordinary Saxons are buried in churchyards, and some rural families bury relatives on their farms, as the man in Oxenefordscire who buried his daughter beneath her favorite tree.

3.5. Norse Celebrations and Traditions in Valhalla

Most Danes in the game express adherence to Norse religion. The game presents several Norse feasts, but three seasonal festivals are central: Ostara, Sigrblót, and Yule, celebrated in spring, summer, and winter. Both Sigrblót and Yule are mentioned in Snorri Sturluson’s *Heimskringla*. Snorri was an Icelandic chieftain and author who wrote sagas in the thirteenth century about the Viking age. *Heimskringla* and the *Kings’ sagas* have significantly influenced modern perception of the period (Bandlien, 2025, pp. 35–36). Snorri wrote his sagas more than two centuries after the Viking age and within a Christian society. His description therefore reflects not only earlier traditions but also the social, political and religious context in which he himself lived. Thus, his stories must be approached critically as sources. Sigrblót is described as a sacrificial feast held before the start of the summer (Nordberg, 2006, p. 76). In *Valhalla*, it appears as a celebration of summer’s arrival and a time to make offerings to Odin in return for good luck. Players may play Orlog, offer gifts to gods, and participate in communal sacrifice. The Yule Festival is portrayed as a winter feast involving gifts, sacrifices, and celebrations (Braslasu & MacArthur, 2019, p. 12). Eivor’s settlement, Ravensthorpe, is decorated for Yule, and players can participate in activities such as archery competitions, drinking contests, and the Yule brawl. The Ostara Festival

marks the arrival of spring. In the game, Ostara is presented as a seasonal celebration associated with renewal and communal festivities. Ravensthorpe is adorned with spring colors and flowers, and players can join in egg hunts and drinking competitions. Still, Hutton (2008, pp. 251–253) argues that Ostara is not a Norse festival and that there is no evidence that such celebrations formed part of Viking age religious practice. Instead, it is associated with modern pagan traditions. Its inclusion in the game demonstrates how historical authenticity is sometimes subordinated to modern interpretations of the past for the sake of entertainment.

3.6. Norse Rites and Rituals in Valhalla

Valhalla depicts a wide range of Norse rites, rituals, and ritual killings. In the game, a distinction is made between ritual killings and sacrifices: sacrifices have a divine recipient, whereas ritual killings do not (Näsström, 2001, p. 21). Players can observe several forms of both rituals and ritual killings in *Valhalla*. At the very beginning of the game, Eivor meets the antagonist Kjetve the Cruel. Kjetve has captured Eivor and Eivor's clan and plans to sell them to slavers. In a letter found on Kjetve's farm, Eivor reads: "Prepare the child of Varin (Eivor) for the slavers, you may use the others for blood-sacrifice." Sacrifices were, according to Näsström (2001, p. 11), a central part of Viking ritual culture.

Throughout *Valhalla*, sacrifices to gods such as Thor, Freya, and Odin are mentioned or shown. Thor and Odin were, in Norse mythology, Æsir and warrior gods, while Freya was a Vanir goddess associated with fertility cults (Bandlien, 2025, p. 61). The first example of a sacrifice mentioned in the game is given by the Viking Rikiwulf, who says to Eivor: "if you wish to be my first sacrifice, Odin will be more than happy". Across both England and Norway, the game features various offering sites where Eivor may present food, gifts, and valuables. Gift offerings were, according to Näsström (2001, p. 26), the most common type of sacrifice among Vikings. A letter from Ledecestrescire describes such an offering:

A danes offering something violent afflicts my son he has not eaten or drank in four days. Not slept for he shakes in the night, crying sad tears. It is no illness I have seen; thus, it must be a curse. One that I fear will bring about the end of his life. To the Gods, I offer the lifeblood of my horse. I hope an offering such as this appeases them, for only their strength may save my son now.

Animals, such as horses, were, according to Näsström (2001, p. 28), a common type of sacrifice to the gods. In Kent, players meet a religious specialist who sacrifices blood to Freyr to ensure that crops will grow again. The seer (a religious practitioner performing *seid*) says: "I made the offer on my own. With Freyrs blessing the crops will grow. Blood-mead. The fields need blood mead. If I fail my task the crops won't grow".

There are other forms of Norse ritual practices in *Valhalla*. One well-known ritual killing, also portrayed in the TV series *Vikings*, is the "blood eagle". Bugge (1910) notes that the blood eagle is mentioned in the *Ragnar Lodbrok* saga in *Heimskringla*. The ritual killing is described as a gruesome act in which the victim's ribs were cut from the spine and the lungs pulled out. Näsström (2001, p. 42) argues that this ritual is historically uncertain due to a lack of supporting evidence. More recent research suggests that the act is anatomically possible, although extremely difficult (Murphy et al., 2022, p. 1). Players witness the blood eagle in Westbrie, where Ivar the Boneless performs the ritual on King Rhodri. Ivar was a powerful Viking leader who established a base in Dublin and gained control over much of the Irish Sea region during the mid-ninth century. According to Bandlien (2025, p. 138), he was at the height of his power during this period. As part of the ritual, Ivar places Rhodri on the ground by a tree trunk and says:

Now comes the dragon to feed on his favorite meal, the blood eagle. The birth of a blood eagle is a sight to behold, my friend. First, I slice the length of your spine, now I pull back the flesh, out comes the lungs, as we spread them like wings.

Holmgang is another ritual players may witness. This was a duel encoded in law, in which men fought—most commonly in non-fatal duels. It was considered religious because it took place on sacred sites and participants made offerings to the gods beforehand (Dougherty, 2016, pp. 62–63). Eivor is challenged by its second-in-command, Dag, and challenges the antagonist Kjetve the Cruel to Holmgang. The Holmgang is described in the game as a “fight to the death”, which ends with Eivor killing both Dag and Kjetve.

3.7. Norse Burial Practices in Valhalla

Several types of Norse burials appear in the game. Viking burials took various forms, but were most carried out as inhumations or cremations, and it was customary to place tools or grave goods in the burial site (Steinsland, 2005, p. 337; Bandlien, 2025, p. 48). The large and well-known Oseberg and Gokstad burials were richly furnished and exceptionally lavish, but these were exceptions rather than the rule, according to Barndon and Olsen (2018, p. 64). They argue that variation in burial practices often reflected differences in social status and power and that the burial ritual itself served as a staging of the “idealized image of the deceased” (Barndon & Olsen, 2018, p. 65). Archeologist Stylegar (2009) similarly describes Norse burial customs as diverse and notes that Viking burials varied according to social status.

The most spectacular burial players witness is the cremation of Jarl Hemming. Eivor is given a mission in Nottingham to assist in Hemming’s funeral. The Jarl is placed on a large pyre along with gifts, thralls, treasures, and his advisor Trygve. During the funeral, Hemming’s son, Villi, declares: “this will be the send-off Hemming deserves. All the funeral preparations are in order. Be patient, Hemming Jarl, we are about to send you on your final journey”.

A central Norse burial in *Valhalla* is the ship burial of Ivar the Boneless. Ivar is laid on a boat with flowers, treasures, weapons, and animals before being sent out onto a lake. His brother Ubba shoots a flaming arrow onto the boat and says: “to you my brother, may your time in *Valhalla* be glorious”.

Additional Norse burials for Danes of lower social status also appear in the game. In the settlement of Ravensthorpe, players can visit simple Norse grave sites for “ordinary” Danes. These graves are marked with shields and axes and overseen by a statue of Freyja. A further example is found at a farm in Hamtunscire, where numerous Danes from a Viking clan are cremated together on a large pyre.

The sequences described above were analyzed using Endacott and Brooks’ (2013) three dimensions of historical empathy: historical contextualization, perspective taking and affective connection. The table presents 12 gameplay episodes and accompanying think-aloud excerpts from the expert player. For each episode, the three dimensions are identified and followed by a brief analytical discussion. The table is included in Appendix A.

4. Discussion

4.1. Historical Empathy Through Gameplay Related to Religion in Valhalla

Gee (2011, as cited in Gilbert, 2019, p. 111) argues that the narratives presented in historical video games can contribute to the development of empathy for people of the past. By playing historical characters, players may not only imagine past events but also engage with them from the perspectives of those who experienced them. Through direct interaction with a historical context, players may experience the past in ways that extend

beyond the factual knowledge. Accordingly, playing as Eivor may provide opportunities to develop empathy for both historical events and historical characters.

At the same time, other researchers have expressed concern that historical games may encourage presentism and thereby undermine historical literacy (Lévesque, 2008, as cited in Gilbert, 2019, p. 113). These contrasting perspectives emphasize an ongoing debate concerning the potential and limitations of historical games as tools for historical understanding. Moreover, the extent to which players develop historical empathy is likely to vary according to their prior knowledge and their ability to think critically about the past. As Lévesque (2005, p. 4) points out, students' background influences how they understand and interpret history. This suggests that historical games alone are insufficient to develop historical empathy. Rather, students need support critically reflecting on historical narratives presented in games such as *Valhalla*.

The central question, then, is how *Valhalla*'s depictions of religious aspects may facilitate historical empathy for ninth-century Danes and Anglo-Saxons. To explore this question, the analysis draws on Endacott and Brooks' (2013) model of historical empathy, which consists of three interconnected criteria. These criteria are not strictly separated but often overlap and reinforce one another, thus relevant to interactive mediums such as video games. Endacott and Brooks (2013, p. 46) emphasize that students must be prepared and supported by teachers when engaging with the past. They further argue that reflective activities should encourage students to "form opinions about the historical perspectives, feelings, actions, and circumstances they have closely examined" (p. 53).

4.2. Historical Contextualization

Endacott and Brooks' (2013, p. 43) first criterion concerns historical contextualization. This criterion is two-fold. The first part requires that the source provide players with an experience of temporal distance between the present and the period being represented. This temporal difference we found pronounced, as the game reconstructs medieval England and Norway while the player belongs to the modern era. The game allows players to immerse themselves visually and aurally as cities, architecture, clothing, and soundscapes are recreated in detail, enabling a clear distinction between past and present.

The first author encountered a range of characters, including priests, bishops, specialists within Norse beliefs, and laypeople engaged in everyday religious practices. Through these encounters, the authors observed how religion is embedded in both Christian and Norse societies as a central part of daily life. This may contribute to historical contextualization (Endacott & Brooks, 2013), particularly by establishing a clear distinction between past and present through differing belief systems, practices, and social roles.

The game also provides visual representations of how people may have looked in the Viking age, highlighting how clothing, materials, and everyday appearance differed from those of the modern world. During gameplay, the first author observed the use of wool and linen, as well as relatively simple garment construction, in contrast to contemporary industrially produced clothing. Such details function as concrete markers of temporal distance while simultaneously reflecting aspects of cultural identity and social hierarchy within a historical setting. However, some elements of the game's portrayal appear to be influenced by modern popularized images of Vikings, particularly in relation to tattoos, hairstyles, and certain styles of clothing, rather than based entirely on historical evidence. Evidence shows, according to the National Museum of Denmark, that Viking clothing was crafted from local wool and flax in vibrant, dyed colors (Nationalmuseumet, n.d.). Thus, when working with historical context, it is important that students, before gaming, work with source material and the credibility of sources from the period.

A sense of temporal distance is further reinforced through the ways in which characters think and act. In several narrative situations, the first author encountered practices such as honor-based violence and ritualized conflict resolution. The first author initially engaged with these practices as socially accepted responses within the game world, rather than immediately rejecting them as immoral according to modern standards. Such interactions emphasize the norms and value systems that structure behavior in the period and therefore strengthen the contextual dimension of historical empathy. Other examples from *Valhalla* are not historically accurate, such as the blood eagle, and may not offer historical context. This implies that even if some parts of the game provide historical context, others do not. Hence, playing without guidance may not consistently support the first criteria of contextualization.

The game's detailed graphics and carefully recreated world also play a central role. The first author explored longhouses, monasteries, churches, and rural settlements designed to reflect medieval social structures, dominated by small villages that differ significantly from modern environments. These spatial experiences provided opportunities to understand how medieval communities were organized. In this sense, environmental design becomes an important means of distinguishing past from present, supporting the first dimension of contextualization.

Still, *Valhalla* does not always represent the past with complete historical accuracy. In the game's recreation of Norway, Ubisoft places well-known Norwegian landmarks such as Torgatten and Ulriken within close proximity to Stavanger, despite their actual geographical distance from one another. This reflects a broader tendency within the AC series, where famous locations, people, and events are often reorganized spatially and temporally to create a more engaging gameplay experience (Metzger & Paxton, 2016, p. 555). Similarly, the game includes exaggerated elements such as polar bears and highly visible northern lights in areas where such features would historically have been uncommon or inaccurate. These design choices demonstrate how the game balances historical inspiration with dramatic and aesthetic considerations intended to appeal to modern audiences. In Gilbert's (2019, p. 127) research, she found that students were too trusting of the designer's presentation of stories in AC. Students who have not yet engaged with relevant historical sources may struggle to distinguish historically accurate representations from those who are inaccurate or contested, making external historical sources or teacher guidance important. Gilbert (2019, p. 129) discovered that students not applying critical skills may have a tendency towards presentism. Thus, episodes like these may provide valuable opportunities for developing source criticism skills. As Lévesque (2005, p. 8) points out, students need directions and guidance in a history terrain that is complicated.

Religious differences are evident in burial practices. In the gameplay examined, the first author encountered Norse graves, containing weapons, jewelry, and other items intended for use in the afterlife, as experienced in Jarl Hemming and Ivar the Boneless burials. These practices were presented as meaningful within the belief system of the time and appeared authentic to the first author. The practices are in contrast with today's more symbolic and minimalist burial practices. This provides insight into how religious beliefs shaped understandings of death and the afterlife for players that are not familiar with Norse burial and therefore support historical context.

Another example of temporal distance is how Norse ritual practices, such as sacrifices, differ from modern religious customs. The first author participated in seasonal sacrifices, like within Sigrblót. In this study, these events were experienced as integrated into both everyday life and crisis situations. For both authors, these examples illustrate how religion functioned as a practical and social system, rather than as an exclusively private or symbolic form of belief. These representations of offerings appear historically plausible and therefore provide opportunities for historical context.

The second component of contextualization requires insight into cultural, social, and political norms. The game provides several examples of this, particularly through its representation of religious practices among both Danes and Anglo-Saxons. In the Wesbrie sequence, which is recreated with considerable detail, the first author observed a Christian mass, including prayer, singing, and communal worship, which resembled modern Christian masses. The children praying to St. Martin offer insight into the significance of saint veneration within medieval Christian belief. Rasmussen and Thomassen (2002, pp. 88, 170) emphasize that prayer and mass were essential components of medieval Christianity, a point illustrated convincingly in the game. In this study, the authors interpreted these elements as central components of religious life in medieval Christianity. This can be interpreted as fulfilling the second component of contextualization, as it provides insight into the cultural and religious norms that structure everyday life. However, for players with no knowledge of the norms of the time, this might be a difficult dimension to understand.

On one side *Valhalla* provides insight into Viking cultural norms, particularly through representations of religious practices. An example is the narrative in which a Dane sacrifices a horse to save his son. The first author engaged with this act as significant within the context of Norse belief systems, rather than as an isolated or irrational event. The authors both had knowledge about the sacrificial norms, and thus the context seemed meaningful and thereby supported historical contextualization. On the other side, ritual killing such as the blood eagle remains highly contested by historians and is considered to lack firm empirical evidence (Näsström, 2001, p. 42). We found the inclusion of the blood eagle problematic from a historical perspective, because it may function more as a sensationalized or mythologized element rather than a reconstruction of actual Viking ritual practice. This may potentially blur the distinction between historically grounded belief systems and later popular- or fictional interpretations of Viking culture. Overall, while the game attempts to link religious practices to Norse worldviews and crisis management, certain elements risk weakening historical contextualization by prioritizing dramatic effect over scholarly consensus. For players with little or no knowledge of Norse rituals or ritual killings, this may be problematic.

Furthermore, the game does not always provide complete explanations of rituals. Some offering sites consist only of statues of gods such as Thor, Odin, or Freya and sacrificial objects such as food, animals, or weapons, leaving the interpretation to the player. Nevertheless, these sites offer an overall affordance for understanding sacrificial practices within Norse religion and thereby may enrich players' context. Such representation can be interpreted as a partial but still significant contribution to contextualization, as it reflects how historical understanding often involves interpretation based on limited sources.

Through gameplay, the first author observed that Norse religion was polytheistic and situational, with different gods invoked depending on context. This flexibility demonstrates how religious practice was adapted to different aspects of life and contributes to a broader understanding of cultural norms. For example, Vikings prayed to Freyr for good harvests, while in other situations they invoked multiple gods to ensure success in battle.

Insight into social structures is also provided at the burial of Jarl Hemming. The first author witnessed how grand the graves of the wealthy and powerful could be. Hemming is buried with thralls, gifts, treasure, and even his advisor—contrasting sharply with the simple graves of those with lower social status. Players may visit more modest graves, illustrating the stark social differences in the Viking Age. The burial practices portrayed align with research documenting these distinctions (Stylegar, 2009; Barndon & Olsen, 2018). The authors interpreted this as a reflection of status and belief in the afterlife, highlighting how burial practices provide affordance for historical contextualization by revealing the intersection of social structure and religious belief.

Through letters and dialogue players are offered insight into religious life. An example is the letter from the farmer at St. Albanes, which describes how pilgrimages affected both local communities and religious institutions. For the authors, the letters demonstrated that pilgrimages were common but could also burden the local population. Thereby offering a nuanced understanding of medieval practice and its social impact, thus providing opportunities for supporting contextualization.

Finally, attacks on monasteries and interactions with historical figures such as Alfred of Wessex and Ivar the Boneless situate religious life within broader political dynamics. These elements illustrate power relations and conflicts characteristic of the period. As Harnes (2023) notes, the inclusion of historical figures can strengthen contextual understanding by making the past more relatable. Through such narrative elements, *Valhalla* situates religion within a wider historical framework, thereby supporting the development of contextualized historical understanding, especially for players who are trained in history.

4.3. Perspective Taking

Endacott and Brooks (2013, p. 43) identify perspective taking as the second criterion for historical empathy. This involves understanding the lived experiences, beliefs, and attitudes of people in the past. In *Valhalla*, this dimension may develop through a wide range of religious representations that allow players to engage with both Christian and Norse traditions from multiple perspectives. In the gameplay analyzed in this study, the first author participated in various religious practices, including Christian rituals such as weddings, pilgrimages, prayer, and mass. These activities demonstrate how Christianity functioned as an integrated part of social life in medieval England. By engaging directly with these practices, the first author gained insight into how religion shaped everyday experiences and social relations. This aligns with Gilbert's (2019, p. 119) findings of students gaming AC. Through playing they felt a connection to the past and became aware of historical perspectives. Gameplay enhanced student feelings towards the characters (Gilbert, 2019, p. 123).

Similarly, Norse traditions such as the Yule Festival and Sigrblót, as well as rituals like sacrifices and Holmgang, offer detailed insight into Norse beliefs and practices. These traditions were closely tied to both everyday life and warfare. A concrete example occurs in Kent, where the first author met a seer who sacrificed her own blood to ensure the success of local harvests. In this game sequence it was easy to comprehend the actions of the seer as she was trying to save the local food supply. The ways in which characters in *Valhalla* justify their religious actions are, for the authors, essential for understanding their perspectives. This aligns with Gilbert (2019, pp. 120–121), who points out that AC can create human connections to history and historical figures. Students in her study emphasized how “both immersion and emotion” were keys that brought a “direct access to the past”. Similarly, Weber (2026, pp. 151, 153) argues that *Valhalla* portrays Viking culture and its religious elements as important for making the game world feel authentic and enhancing its immersive potential. In the case of the religious specialist, the seer, the game provides opportunities for players to adopt her perspective and understand her attitudes and beliefs. Thus, opening up for perspective taking.

Two further examples are found in Oxenefordscire. In the first example, monks engage in fasting as an expression of devotion to God and St. Guthlac. Through letters and environmental storytelling, the first author gained insight into their motivations, particularly the desire to live in accordance with God and avoid worldly excess. By situating the monks' actions within their religious framework, the authors can understand fasting as a meaningful spiritual practice rather than unnecessary hardship. The other example is of the pilgrimages where the first author comprehends why the monks executed these practices.

In the game the monks state why they travel on dangerous, but meaningful pilgrimages to show devotion to God as well as spiritual cleansing. These examples align with Mathews (2015, p. 51) and Rasmussen and Thomassen (2002, p. 231), who highlight the central role of fasting and pilgrimages in medieval Christian life. Furthermore, these episodes may provide players with opportunities for perspective taking because they clearly convey the monks' thoughts, beliefs and perspectives.

The funeral of Jarl Hemming is another example, where the first author witnessed a ritual involving burning the body along with gifts, thralls, and his advisor. Through the game's context, the sequence gave insight into how such burials serve to honor the deceased and ensure a favorable place in the afterlife. Engaging with such practices requires players to move beyond contemporary norms and consider how concepts like honor and the afterlife structured Viking worldviews. This process reflects the kind of perspective taking emphasized by Endacott and Brooks (2013). While such scenes may appear to encourage perspective taking, they risk simplifying or romanticizing complex historical practices by framing them within a coherent and emotionally engaging narrative structure that may not reflect the ambiguity and fragmentation of historical sources. Thus, this episode may not provide affordances for historical perspective taking for players that do not understand the complex context of Norse burials. Sequences like these need guidance.

Eivor's role is particularly significant in facilitating this process. Through the role, the first author engaged with the world through Eivor's position, which involved navigating conflicts, forming alliances, and responding to religious and political tensions. This encouraged adopting a perspective shaped by values and beliefs different from modern standards. Through this embodied engagement, the author is not only observing historical perspectives but also acting within them. This is in line with Hatlen (2020, p. 156), who argues that roleplaying can help individuals to understand others' way of thinking. In this manner the game provides affordance for players to develop perspective taking and gain a richer understanding of how people in the Middle Ages lived and thought.

The players are positioned to interpret actions, motivations, and beliefs within their historical context rather than judging them according to present-day values and norms. This is closely aligned with Seixas and Morton's (2013, p. 144) emphasis on avoiding presentism as a central component of historical understanding. Through the interactive nature of the game, players are given opportunities to explore and reflect on multiple perspectives and reflect on how religion shaped the lives of different groups. The game provides opportunities for perspective taking, but this requires players to interpret actions within their historical framework, and thorough guidance to the different historical episodes and characters is needed.

4.4. Affective Connections

The final criterion in Endacott and Brooks' (2013, p. 43) framework concerns creating emotional connections to characters in the past. This involves forming emotional links that make it possible to relate to historical individuals on a human level. Such connections depend in part on the player's own experiences, which shape how and whether emotional engagement occurs. In the game, the first author engaged in a range of situations that invite emotional responses connected to universal human experiences such as loss, love, struggle, care, fear and hope.

One example, from the Norse context, occurs in Ledecestrescire, where the first author, as Eivor, discovers a note describing a Dane who sacrifices his horse to the gods to save his sick son from a curse. In this case, both authors had cognitive and affective empathy for the Dane's desperate actions. Similar experiences and emotions such as loss made it possible to feel compassion for the father. In this way, the game creates an emotional presence,

which Gilbert (2019, p. 120) describes as a form of emotional attachment to the past. Barton and Levstik (2011, as cited in Hatlen, 2020, p. 150) emphasize that historical empathy requires care for the people under study, which is central to understanding individuals in the past. This emotional response can be understood as an affective connection in the sense described by Endacott and Brooks (2013), as the authors relate to the situation through shared human experiences despite cultural differences. However, such affective connections may be difficult to establish in situations involving practices that are far removed from contemporary experiences, such as human or animal sacrifices, as many players have little or no personal experience with comparable situations. For players who do establish such connections, reflection is not necessarily an automatic outcome and may require scaffolding and support.

Many Christian depictions in the game are based on traditions that still exist today, such as mass, weddings, and prayer, making it easier for some players to relate to them. In Essex, the first author faced two poor children praying to St. Martin for food and money. Meeting the children living in poverty and engaging in conversation concerning their circumstances made the situation feel more realistic and relatable, facilitating connections to personal experiences with poverty. Religion may provide hope and comfort in difficult everyday conditions. Familiar elements such as these may foster emotional bonds because they are probably part of players' own cultural context, even if they are not religious. These Christian rituals may offer affordances because of their resemblance to aspects of modern everyday life. However, meaningful reflection depends on relating them to one's own lived experiences.

At the same time, the analysis suggests that affective connections are not equally accessible across all religious representations. While Christian rituals such as prayer, weddings, and communal worship, even though significantly different from their medieval practice, remain recognizable today. Norse practices often appear more distant. Rituals, funerals, and festivals such as Sigrblót differ greatly from anything most modern players have experienced, which may limit the player's ability to form immediate emotional connections.

This challenge reflects what Van Sledright et al. (2014, as cited in Hatlen, 2020, p. 152) describe as the difficulty of understanding past mentalities without sufficient contextual knowledge. In this study, the first author was able to engage cognitively with Norse practices, but the emotional connection was at times weaker compared to more familiar Christian contexts. By presenting Norse rituals through dramatic and visually aesthetic representations, the game may create emotional distance, as such portrayals risk appearing fictionalized rather than relatable, thereby reducing the potential for genuine affective connections.

Through the Christian representations in the game, players are introduced to rituals and traditions that still exist in modern society. Christianity remains a significant religion today, whereas Norse belief has declined substantially over time. This makes *Valhalla's* representations of Norse religion and Endacott and Brooks' (2013, p. 43) final criterion for historical empathy more challenging to relate to than the Christian ones, though not impossible.

Thus, affective connections can still emerge in relation to Norse material when the situations themselves are relatable or the emotions are similar. Struggling to protect family members, coping with loss, or seeking meaning in crisis exceed historical and cultural boundaries. In such cases, the emotional dimension does not rely on familiarity with specific rituals but rather on shared human experiences. This supports Barton and Levstik's (2011, as cited in Hatlen, 2020, p. 150) argument that caring is central to historical empathy. By contrast, the blood eagle presents a greater challenge, as the ritualized violence is so far removed from contemporary experiences that it is difficult to establish a similar emotional connection with those involved.

Additionally, the interactive structure of the game also plays an important role. By allowing players to make choices and engage directly with characters and events in cer-

tain situations, *Valhalla* creates opportunities for experiences that are more personal and emotionally engaging. This may be true for many players, including the authors of this study.

Overall, the findings suggest that *Valhalla* may facilitate opportunities for affective connections to the past, particularly when the scenarios presented draw on universal human experiences or culturally familiar practices. At the same time, the degree of emotional engagement varies depending on the players' prior experiences and the cultural distance between past and present, such as the differences between Norse and Christian rituals. The affordances for affective connections provided by the game depend not only on the players' prior experiences but also, and just as importantly, on how opportunities for reflection are scaffolded during gameplay. This demonstrates how affective connection, as described by Endacott and Brooks (2013), may be both supported and constrained by the interplay between familiarity, experiences and historical differences.

5. Conclusions

Assassins' Creed Valhalla illustrates how historical video games may provide opportunities to foster historical empathy by allowing players to experience the past through interactive narratives. According to Gee (2011, as cited in Gilbert, 2019), such games can cultivate empathy for people in the past by enabling players to adopt the perspectives of historical characters. Using Endacott and Brooks' (2013) model of historical empathy, which includes the criteria of contextualization, perspective taking and affective connections, the game may contribute affordances for deeper understanding of both cultural and religious norms of the Viking era.

Valhalla creates a clear temporal distance between the past and the present by reconstructing medieval England and Norway with attention to details. Players gain insight into how religion, architecture, and social structures shaped both Christian and Norse societies. For example, the game gives insight into how Norse rituals such as sacrifices and burial practices reflected beliefs in an active afterlife, while Christian traditions such as masses and pilgrimages illustrate medieval religious practice. These elements may provide players with contextual understanding of past values and norms. However, the game's representations alone are insufficient to meet Endacott and Brooks' (2013) first criterion of historical contextualization. Without prior knowledge of the historical context, players are unlikely to fully understand the representations presented in the game, emphasizing the need for scaffolding and reflection.

Through perspective taking, players may understand how religious and cultural beliefs influenced people's actions. For instance, players can participate in rituals like the Yule Festival or observe Christian fasting practices, gaining insight into how faith shaped everyday life. At the same time, the game challenges players to avoid presentism, interpreting the past through modern values, and instead understand actions within the historical context. Although the game provides affordances for perspective taking, pedagogical guidance is necessary to help players reflect on and understand the perspectives of the characters they encounter, as well as the historical events and surroundings represented in *Valhalla*.

The game additionally offers opportunities for affective connections through universal themes such as love, loss and struggle. Although it may be difficult to relate emotionally to Norse traditions such as the blood eagle or other rituals of sacrifices, players may nonetheless experience empathy through narratives that reveal human emotions and motivations. Thus, *Valhalla* demonstrates how historical video games may serve as a valuable platform for exploring and understanding the past in an engaging and interactive way. Even so, this criterion is probably the most challenging to facilitate, as contemporary players are unlikely to have lived experiences comparable to those associated with Norse rituals and religious

practices. As a result, scaffolding and guided reflections are necessary to support historical understanding and empathy.

The development of historical empathy requires that players possess some historical knowledge and contextual understanding. Having the historical context is also vital for perspective taking and affective connections. The game alone does not automatically foster historical empathy but may provide affordances that encourage perspective taking, affective connection, and historical understanding when supported by pedagogical guidance. By consciously using historical video games as tools to stimulate the three criteria of Endacott and Brooks' model, it becomes possible to create learning experiences that go beyond memorizing facts and to contribute to students' historical empathy. And as Gilbert (2019, p. 122) shows, students find history in school too abstract, and gaming can bring history closer, more relevant and more real. Applying the game in educational settings can be both relevant and motivating, but it is essential to bear in mind that the game is designed for entertainment. If used in teaching, it is crucial to guide students in relation to, for example, the criteria outlined by Endacott and Brooks. We should also recognize that every representation of the past is shaped by selections that leave other stories untold. This is also the case of *Valhalla*. That said, historical video games may reach learners where they are, fostering stronger engagement with history, and perhaps especially among gamers.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

AC Assassin's Creed

Appendix A

Table A1. Norse religion: Excerpts of representative think-aloud reflections by the expert player, analyzed according to Endacott and Brooks' model of historical empathy. Historical contextualization (HC), perspective taking (PT) and affective connection (AC). Yes = ✓ No = ✗ Uncertain = ○.

Episode	Religion	Representative Think-Aloud Reflections	HC	PT	AC	Authors' Analytical Discussions for Affordances
Norse burials	Norse	The Norse burials appeared authentic. Richly detailed. Diverse burials. Possible to understand how and why the characters acted as they did concerning burials. Feeling and compassion for the ones left behind. Felt sadness.	✓	✓	○	Supports affordances for HC and support for PT if knowledgeable in history or guided by teachers. AC depends on personal experiences of loss.
Yule festival	Norse	The festival resembled Christmas traditions. The Yule festival is celebrated because of the shifting seasons and makes it possible to understand why Vikings celebrated. The festival seemed authentic. Detailed descriptions like ornaments.	✓	✓	○	Supports affordances for HC and PT. AC depends on familiarity with seasonal traditions.
Ostara festival	Norse	The festival appeared similar to Easter celebrations, for example, the egg hunt. Detailed descriptions of scenes. Colorful scenery. The festival seemed credible, and it is understandable why the Norse celebrated.	✗	✓	○	Historical authenticity is contested: limited support for HC. May provide affordances for PT. AC depends on familiarity with seasonal traditions.
Sigrblot	Norse	The festival resembled midsummer celebrations. Similar to other festivals in the game. Understandable why the Vikings make sacrifices before raiding.	✓	✓	○	Consistent with available historical sources. Supports affordances for HC and PT. AC difficult as it differs from modern experiences.
Ritual killings (Blood eagle)	Norse	Some ritual killings appeared exaggerated, such as the Blood eagle. Unpleasant scenery. Difficult to understand why Ivar acted as he did.	○	✗	✗	Limited support for the criteria: historical basis remains uncertain.
Sacrifices	Norse	The offerings appeared historically plausible and similar to other historical sources. Richly detailed and diverse. It was possible to comprehend why the Norse sacrificed to their gods. Sacrifices are very different from today.	✓	✓	○	Supported by historical sources: Supports affordances for HC and PT. Limited opportunity for AC.

Table A2. Christian religion: Excerpts of representative think-aloud reflections by the expert player, analyzed according to Endacott and Brooks' model of historical empathy. Historical contextualization (HC), perspective-taking (PT) and affective connection (AC). Yes = ✓ No = ✗ Uncertain = ○.

Episode	Religion	Representative Think-Aloud Reflections	HC	PT	AC	Authors' Analytical Discussions for Affordances
Wedding	Christian	Several elements resembled contemporary Christianity, and gaming as Eivor made the experience feel authentic. Detailed representations.	✓	✓	✓	Support affordances for HC and PT but needs historical knowledge. AC depends on prior experience, which is likely.
Pilgrimage	Christian	The letters resembled other descriptions of Christian pilgrimage. The game provides context to why and how the monks participate in pilgrimage.	✓	✓	✗	Supports affordances for HC and PT if players have historical knowledge. AC depends on experiences.
Fasting	Christian	The fasting practice differed from contemporary understandings of fasting. The game made it possible to comprehend why they fasted.	✓	✓	○	Supports affordances HC and PT. AC varies according to personal experiences
Prayers	Christian	The prayers resembled contemporary forms of Christian prayer. The game provides context for why they prayed in different situations.	✓	✓	✓	Supports affordances for HC and PT. AC depends on familiarity with religious practice but is familiar.
Mass	Christian	The Mass resembled one's own experiences of Christian services. Evidence supported. It was understandable why the Christians attended mass.	✓	✓	✓	Supports affordances for HC and PT. AC depends on prior experience.
Burials	Christian	The burial practices showed similarities to modern traditions. Although some depictions differed from contemporary practices. It is obvious why and how they buried their loved ones. The feelings were apparent in the characters.	✓	✓	✓	Supports affordances for HC and PT: AC depends on funeral experiences and mourning.

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