

Some thoughts on charisma in *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*

STEN

You've returned, Vikingr. Are you here at long last to give me leave to weep?

SPENCE

Eivor Wolf-kissed, the hero of the blockbuster new videogame *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*, has no charisma. At least he doesn't at the start of the game. Players can choose to *develop* Eivor's charisma, and if they do, the game rewards them with new interactions and new outcomes, both in the main story and in side quests.

In the scene we just saw, for example, Eivor encounters another Viking warrior, named Sten, who is trapped by his inability to grieve.

STEN

These are the funeral embers of the last of my raiding crew. One by one, they have fallen.

EIVOR

It is a heavy loss.

STEN

There is more. Just days ago, news from Norway tells me my family has been taken by the plague. All of them. All!

EIVOR

Vikingr.

STEN

My wife, my children. All my pretty ones. It is too much.

EIVOR

You must grieve for your loss, friend.

STEN

I cannot weep!

SPENCE

Sten recognizes that Eivor is a fellow warrior, and he hopes that Eivor might grant him permission to grieve. And Eivor *can* do this, but only if he has first developed the necessary charisma.

The game borrows Eivor's charisma attribute from tabletop role-playing games like *Dungeons and Dragons*. The game's creators use it to increase the depth and range of emotional life available to its human characters. Granted, charisma is not Eivor's most important stat. Valhalla's hero is very much a warrior, and the game's designers devoted most of their energy to developing a complex web of interacting weapons, armor and war-making skills. But the designers also gave Eivor charisma, a sustained attempt to offer players a hero who is more

emotionally complex than the one-dimensional warriors that populated earlier and simpler videogames.

And Eivor's charisma is not static—increasing it depends on the player's choices and skill, and their successes change the ways that Eivor's story unfolds. In other words, the designers are using the unique properties of computational media—the procedural and interactive affordances of computers—to do what other storytellers have done for thousands of years. Valhalla's use of charisma shows that big-budget game designers are continuing to experiment with the computer's unique abilities, in their efforts to render a more realistic world filled with recognizably *human* characters.

STEN

Oh God. [sobbing]

EIVOR

Weep, my friend. I will leave you in peace.