

## Stephanie Economou. *Assassin's Creed Valhalla: Dawn of Ragnarok*. Ubisoft Music, 2022

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The Grammy awards have had a longstanding commitment to recognizing music written for the screen. Beginning with the second ceremony in 1959, there has been an award for the Best Score Soundtracks for Visual Media. In 1998, a new category was added for the Best Song Written for Screen, and 2 years later, another category joined it: Best Compilation Soundtrack for Visual Media.

Yet while video games have now been a dominating cultural, technological, and musical force for decades, their soundtracks have only recently begun to be acknowledged by the Grammys. In fact, the first Grammy given to a piece of video game music—"Baba Yetu," Christopher Tin's theme song for Sid Meier's *Civilization IV*—was not for any of the visual media categories, but rather for the category of Best Instrumental Arrangement Accompanying Vocalist(s). Eleven years later, the second Grammy to be given to a piece of video game music was also for an arrangement category, this time Best Arrangement, Instrumental or A Cappella; this one went to the 8-Bit Big Band's cover of "Meta Knight's Revenge" from *Kirby Super Star*. Only one video game soundtrack was ever nominated for best score soundtrack: Austin Wintory's score for *Journey* in 2013.

Enter another new category: The Grammy Award for Best Score Soundtrack for Video Games and Other Interactive Media was introduced just this past February of 2023, marking the first time that the Grammys had specifically highlighted and sought to honor music written for video games. In an interesting coincidental twist, both Christopher Tin and Austin Wintory were nominated; the winner, however, was Stephanie Economou ("The Chair," "Jupiter's Legacy"), for her soundtrack for the "Dawn of Ragnarök" expansion for *Assassin's Creed Valhalla*.

In the main game, a group of modern-day Assassins locates the remains of a Viking raider in what was once Vinland (now New England). Viewing their memories through the Animus, the primary storyline is triggered: The player controls the Viking raider, named Eivor, first in their homeland and then in the British Isles. Through a combination of stealth, diplomacy, open battle, and, of course, assassination, Eivor gradually forges alliances with a number of neighboring kingdoms and clans, working together to destroy the secret Order of the Ancients (predecessors of the Templar Order). Given the series' tension between distant past and science-fiction present, the soundtracks—especially those by Jesper Kyd, who returned to *Valhalla* after a 9-year absence—have often mixed acoustic musical elements apropos to the game's primary historical setting with synthesized rock or electronica elements representing the modern world. Joining Kyd were Sarah Schachner, who had composed for the series since 2013's *Black Flag*, and Einar Selvik, folk and black metal musician.

The "Dawn of Ragnarök" expansion sees Eivor relive their past life as the Norse god Odin; here, Odin battles the great warlord Sutr, who has captured Odin's son Baldr. Much of the gameplay is identical to *Valhalla*, in that the player must explore vast areas, collect new weapons and items of power, and fight numerous battles in order to progress. The soundtrack, too, offers continuity with the main game: Einar Selvik returns to the expansion to work with Economou, who herself had previously composed the earlier *Valhalla* expansion "Siege of Paris." This time, with the emphasis squarely placed on Norse mythology, Economou and Selvik crafted a soundtrack heavily influenced not only by traditional folk music but also by black metal, neofolk, and even American heavy metal group System of a Down.

For all its varied inspirations, the overall result is strikingly cohesive. Stringed instruments provide an element of continuity throughout much of the soundtrack, shifting fluidly from *vielle*, *viola da*

gamba, harp, and Finnish instruments to modern electric guitar and bass depending on the context: The earlier strings and other acoustic instruments help to undergird more peaceful scenarios, such as exploration or dialogue, whereas the more strident electric strings and their black metal percussion kindred, at times courtesy of metal band Wilderun, align more with battle. Peppered throughout are the occasional vocals, some (in Old Norse) by Selvik himself.

In the game itself, the musical soundtrack sounds sporadically, depending on the player's choice of actions. Much of the game is sonically undergirded by the diegetic sounds of nature, of footsteps and armor, speech, and so forth. The various tracks appear in particular scenarios, therefore, to create a sense of place and time and to reinforce a certain mood. Battle themes, as I just mentioned, tend to feature the hard, driving sounds of metal. Pounding percussion underpins metallic shrieks and loud, raspy low strings in "Sinmara," a track named after Sutr's wife, whom Odin kills early in the game; electric guitars are added to this mix in "Through the Embers," a track that reoccurs in a number of smaller battles. In comparison, in moments of transition, such as a lengthy dialogue, arrival in a new location, or poignant scenes developing in-game plots, the music might waver between the harder metal sounds, up-tempo takes on folk music, or slow, mournful tunes. For example, listen to "Svartalfheim," the theme for the dwarves; whereas the same thudding percussion is present, here the earlier strings are layered on top, along with a ram's horn and swells of voices.

Throughout, though, the tracks are obscured by the sounds of the game world; even in instances where the player might pause to listen, there might still be pre-programmed winds rustling tree branches, or people speaking in the distance, or the sounds of animals or battle. This is in part what makes the official recording of the game's soundtrack so exciting to fans, for it is where they might be able to hear the various tracks stripped of the extra diegetic layers in the game's audio.

Certainly, the recording was released primarily to engage with players of the game, those who would have prior knowledge of the game's plot and the significance of the various tracks included on the album. The beautiful printed sleeves and lush golden vinyl give the recording an air of richness and long-awaited treasure, something to be cherished by its fans. Nevertheless, the album can be enjoyed in its own right, too; like the soundtrack within the game, the album feels unified and consistent, and while it is clearly video game music, there are more than sufficient currents of folk/neofolk and black metal to warrant attention from those communities, regardless of whether they play video games themselves.

To many, the significance of the recording lies not with its physical production or even its musical contents, but in its recognition by the Grammy awards. Having the Grammys create a new category specifically for video game music is a legitimizing act, one that signals to the world that such music can and should be recognized as being on an artistic par with music for other media. For this soundtrack to win the first award in this new category is a recognition of the quality of the soundtracks in the *Assassin's Creed* series; for Economou to win this Grammy is also a recognition not just of her own work but also of the long and often overlooked history of female composers active in video game music.

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