

Institution: University of Cambridge		
Unit of Assessment: UoA 26		
Title of case study: Hellblade: engaging video game players with Viking culture and contributing to success and innovation within the creative sector		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: October 2008 to March 2018		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Dr Elizabeth Ashman Rowe	Reader in Scandinavian History	October 2008 – present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: November 2015 – October 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Dr Elizabeth Ashman Rowe was Historical Advisor for Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice, an award-winning video-game set in the Norse mythological world of the dead. Rowe coached the development team and influenced the development of the game itself. She contributed to the critical and commercial success of Hellblade, [text removed for publication]. The significance of the impact is that accurate aspects of Viking history and culture (original translations of primary sources, adaptations of primary sources, and motifs adapted from Viking art) were incorporated into the game, reaching video-game players worldwide. The game has had impacts on creativity and culture, generating international interest in the intersection between academic research and game creation. This case dovetails with the impact of Professor Fletcher (Dept. of Psychiatry, Cambridge).</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Underpinning scholarly work by Dr Elizabeth Ashman Rowe (Reader in Scandinavian History at Cambridge since 2008) provided historical background and information for specific elements of the Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice video game. Rowe's monograph examining the legend of the Scandinavian King Ragnar Lodbrok [R1] demonstrated that it was based on the figure of Regenheri, a historically attested Danish Viking. It did so by presenting the references to Ragnar in chronological order and contextualising them with ninth-century Viking history, and by investigating how the legend was developed in different ways by clerical authors writing in Latin and Scandinavian authors composing in Old Norse. Rowe's article [R2] investigated how battles were described in Viking Age and medieval Scandinavia. Surveying sources ranging from poetry and runic inscriptions to medieval Icelandic accounts of foreign battles, Rowe explored the social values expressed in these descriptions, and the changing function of their authors from anonymous Viking Age poets and warriors to named medieval historians. Research for a two-volume monograph [R3] provided further information for the game. The first volume presents the first ever complete English translation of the year-by-year chronicles compiled in Iceland from the 12th to the 15th century. The second volume describes the start of annalistics in Iceland, discusses each of the chronicles in detail and explains the ending of Icelandic annalistics in the 15th century. This analysis fundamentally changes scholars' previous understanding of these texts; it also changes broader understandings of medieval Icelandic textual culture by integrating the study of these texts with that of Icelandic manuscript production and Icelandic history. Rowe produced an article examining the medieval Icelandic historiographical reception of Odin, the Norse god of warriors and battle [R4]. Another article examined the medieval Icelandic literary reception of the figure of Sigurd the Dragon-slayer, the pre-eminent hero of ancient Germanic legend [R5].</p> <p>For the Hellblade game, Rowe's research provided detailed information about pagan Norse beliefs, rituals, mythology and magic; runes and runic monuments; Viking halls, temples and burials; Viking art, artefacts and symbolism; Viking ships; and Viking weapons. One important aspect of Viking culture was its transactional nature: a gift was expected to be repaid with another gift, and humans expected that the gods would respond favourably as a result of sacrifices being made to them. Druth's backstory in Hellblade came from a</p>		

monograph [R6] on the literary histories of Middle Irish and Old Norse, co-authored by Rowe, Etchingham, Sigurdsson and Ni Mhaonaigh. With rigorous attention to history and attested channels of transmission, the authors contextualise the texts' backgrounds and purposes to demonstrate that these emerged from multilingual interactions of the Norse and the Irish.

Paul Fletcher (Dept. of Psychiatry, Cambridge) also contributed his expertise to the game, and Rowe's impact was coordinated with him as follows. The Hellblade video game is about a young Celtic woman whose troubled background has brought her to the edge of psychosis. She undertakes a quest to bring her slain lover back from Helheim, the Norse realm of the dead, a task complicated by the voices in her head and the uncertain boundary between reality and hallucination. Fletcher's work on the causes of schizophrenia, its development, and the experience of living with the disease laid the groundwork for Senua's history (seen by the player in flashback sequences), ongoing symptoms and psychological state over the course of game-play. The Norse externalized the causes of schizophrenia, explaining it as a curse or the malevolent action of minor supernatural beings such as revenants and malignant female spirits known as *dísir*. People might encounter these beings in the real world or their dreams, and outlaws such as Senua are particularly susceptible to them. A different kind of madness was associated with the god Odin who, in addition to his ceaseless pursuit of wisdom, was also the patron of the berserks, human warriors who in their battle rage fought like madmen and did not feel their injuries. (The name Odin means 'the frenzied one'.) Like a berserker, Senua can access a special level of battle 'focus' that players must know about in order to win the combats necessary for progress through the game. The family psychodynamics affecting Senua are common in the sagas, and the theme of love that brings a woman to the world of the dead is common in Norse legends and myths.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

All references below have been peer-reviewed. All research grants were peer-reviewed and awarded to Dr Elizabeth Ashman Rowe as PI.

[R1] Elizabeth Ashman Rowe, *Vikings in the West: The Legend of Ragnarr Loðbrók and His Sons*, Studia medievalia Septentrionalia 18 (Vienna: Fassbaender, 2012). ISBN: 9783902575425 <https://doi.org/10.1515/ejss-2015-0017>.

[R2] Elizabeth Ashman Rowe, "'Axe-age, sword-age": Writing battles in Viking Age and Medieval Scandinavia', in *Writing Battles: New Perspectives on Warfare and Memory in Medieval Europe*, ed. Maire Ni Mhaonaigh, Rory Naismith, and Elizabeth Ashman Rowe (London: Bloomsbury, 2020). ISBN: 9781788316743.

[R3] Elizabeth Ashman Rowe, *The Medieval Annals of Iceland*, 2 vols (forthcoming from Cornell University Press) [delayed output].

[R4] Elizabeth Ashman Rowe, 'Sögubrot af fornkonungum: Mythologised History for Late Thirteenth-Century Iceland', in *Making History: Essays on the Fornaldarsögur*, ed. Martin Arnold and Alison Finlay (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2010). ISBN: 9780903521840.

[R5] Elizabeth Ashman Rowe, 'Fornaldarsögur and heroic legends of the Edda', in *The Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Heroic Legend*, ed. Carolyne Larrington and Paul Acker (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 202–218. ISBN 9781138936997 (e-book ISBN 9780203098608).

[R6] Colman Etchingham, Jon Vidar Sigurdsson, Maire Ni Mhaonaigh, and Elizabeth Ashman Rowe, *Norse-Gaelic Contacts in a Viking World, Medieval texts and cultures of northern Europe* 29 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2019). ISBN-10: 2503579027 ISBN-13: 978-2503579023.

Funding for [R3] The Medieval Annals of Iceland:

£995 Newton Trust Small Research Grant (UK) for project 'The Medieval Annals of Iceland (Indexing)', April 2012.

4. Details of the impact

Rowe's work has contributed to Hellblade's critical and commercial success, impacting game production, commerce and the economy, video game players, and creativity and culture.

Impact on Ninja Theory's Game Production

Rowe worked with Ninja Theory from November 2015 to May 2017, when Hellblade's development was well underway. The creative director explained the game-story and outlined the kind of Viking material he was looking for. Rowe provided information to the team about the Vikings, their society and beliefs. She identified suitable material, translated it, and adapted it for the game. With the psychiatric framework established by Fletcher's research, most of Rowe's work was to supply the development team with relevant primary sources from the Norse world. Because these sources echo, expand, and mythologize the psychiatric material, they were not self-explanatory for Ninja Theory's purposes; Rowe showed the creative director and the development team how the sources were relevant. Firstly, Rowe ensured the historical accuracy of 'lore stones', runic monuments scattered across the game landscape that tell stories as players approach them. For the game's 'disease' theme, she used surviving testimony of the 845 Viking siege of Paris, and translated and adapted Medieval Icelandic chronicle accounts of actual diseases, epidemics and natural disasters. Further material for the lore stones came from the legend of Sigurd the Dragon-slayer.

Secondly, Rowe led Ninja Theory in incorporating Norse tales and myths (e.g. the slaying of the god Baldr and the account of Ragnarök) into the storyline of the game. Rowe's knowledge of sagas about warrior women, swords, monster-slaying, torture, blindness, illusion, curses, and sacrifice enriched Senua's character and storyline. Rowe rendered translations as dialogue, especially for the character of Druth, using the myth of Odin to connect with the game's positive message that people suffering from schizophrenia have different perspectives on the world. In one sequence, the game used a lightless environment to make Senua and the player rely on the voices in her head, so Rowe wrote this piece for Druth: 'In blindness there can be wisdom; only by giving something up can you receive something in return. The Northmen say that their chief god, Odin, gave one of his eyes in exchange for a drink from Mimir's well, the well of wisdom.' As noted above, Druth's backstory was derived from the co-authored monograph **R6** and the setting of a different scene was drawn from the Eggja Rune-Stone inscription, which mentions a 'corpse wave' and a 'wrecked ship.'

Thirdly, Rowe contributed visual elements of the game. She translated certain phrases from English into Old Norse and wrote them out in the older runic alphabet (the Older Futhark), and assembled a dossier of images and texts. In December 2015, she gave a two-hour illustrated lecture on the Vikings, which was recorded for reference and publicity purposes. She gave feedback on the game at that stage of development, and she urged authenticity and historical accuracy wherever possible. This input ranged from comments on the landscape (which she persuaded them should be Norwegian rather than Californian) to explanations of how the themes of the Norse material could intersect with the themes of the game. In some cases, no changes were possible (e.g. the religion of Senua's people, the clothing and hairstyles, and the Fafnir and Valravn monsters which are historically inaccurate). Since creating an entire gamescape required substantial visual material, she drew on the full range of the Viking world, both geographically (from Icelandic volcanoes to funeral practices of Norse merchants at the mouth of the Volga) and chronologically (from early Viking Age rune-stones to twelfth-century stave-churches). Some of these elements became fundamental to the game-play. For example, the Volga funeral (described by an Arab eyewitness) included the construction of a gate-shaped structure past which a slave who was about to be sacrificed claimed to be able to see her master in the afterlife. In the game, gate-shaped structures allowed Senua to see special features of the landscape that were otherwise invisible.

Fourthly, Rowe influenced the game's subsequent development by drawing attention to the Viking myths and legends closest to Hellblade's characters and themes (madness, disease and death). Rowe adjusted the wording of Senua's main quest to recover her dead lover from Helheim (the realm of the dead) to parallel Norse myths about the gods' attempts

to recover one of their own from Hel (the goddess of the underworld). She adapted one segment of the game to fit the legend of Sigurd the Dragon-Slayer, who possessed shards of a sword that had to be reforged and adapted another game segment to echo the legend of Hervör, a rebellious daughter who became a warrior and entered her father's burial mound to retrieve his sword.

Impact on Commerce and the Economy

Released in August 2017, Hellblade has sold [text removed for publication] copies in more than 20 countries, as of July 2020. It has been translated into 18 languages and has generated far in excess of [text removed for publication] in revenue. The game was released in Xbox, Nintendo Switch, PC, and retail format as well as the original PlayStation4; the soundtrack is available separately for streaming and digital download from platforms such as Spotify and iTunes. Thanks to the game's popularity, Microsoft (now Xbox Game Studios) bought the Ninja Theory company. [E1]

Rowe's contribution to the game's critical and commercial success is acknowledged by Ninja Theory's Studio Head: 'The success of Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice, by whichever measure—be it critical, commercial or social impact, simply would not have been possible without our collaboration with University of Cambridge. What started out as our attempt to lean on experts in the field for research support, evolved into a full-fledged creative collaboration, where Paul and Elizabeth's expertise fed directly into the story, character and player experience. Following the success of Hellblade, Ninja Theory has gone from strength to strength. Hellblade's glowing reception led in part to Ninja Theory being acquired by Xbox Game Studios, securing the studio's financial future and has allowed us to build a brand new studio in the heart of Cambridge.' [E2] (p5).

The Ninja Theory Strategic Report (March 2018) summed the importance of Hellblade to their business performance thus: 'The video game has been met with critical acclaim, earning a Metacritic score of 81 [out of 100] on PlayStation 4, 83 on PC and 88 on Xbox and winning over 67 awards to date, including 5 BAFTAs, three Game Awards and a Writer's Guild Award. The success has underpinned the commercial performance of the studio, selling over 1m units to date beating forecasts for the video game by over 50% and generating significant revenues for the business during the year ... During the year turnover is GBP16,801,355, representing a 454% increase on the previous financial year. This financial performance was higher than expected with the incredible success of Hellblade' [E3] (pp4-5). In the 2017 Strategic Report, Directors reinforce its importance: "The launch of Hellblade has provided the foundation upon which Ninja Theory hopes to capitalise and build an exciting future for the company" [E3] (p30).

The chief Creative Director and Rowe won the 2018 Writers' Guild of Great Britain award for best video game writing [E4] (p3); Hellblade was nominated for nine BAFTA game awards, of which it won five, including 'Best Game Beyond Entertainment' [E4] (pp5-13): The Independent Game Developers' Association (TIGA) gave it 'Best Action and Adventure Game' in 2017 and it won the 'Creativity Award' in 2018 [E4] (pp15). The Guardian Games reviews roundup gave Hellblade five stars and praised its use of Norse Mythology to explore mental health, calling the game-world 'dark but stunningly realised'. The BBC produced a 'This game changed my life' podcast about the game and an article exploring the 'deep impact' it had on a player who had suffered psychosis. [E5]. Online reviews were likewise glowing [E6]. The IGN video game and entertainment media website noted: 'It's bound by threads of historical fiction, historical non-fiction, mythology, and metaphor all admirably weaved together to create a unique backdrop that's ripe for exploring the darker tones and themes Hellblade tackles' [E6].

Impact on Video Game Players

Given the game's wide reach, Rowe's impact lies in the area of public education: accurate aspects of Viking history and culture (in the form of original translations of myths, sagas and annals, as well as multiple Viking art motifs) are presented to at least [text removed for publication] people worldwide. Evidence of Rowe's impact on users is seen in their video and written commentaries on the game and on responses to commentaries [E7], including: 'This game is historic, it teaches you about... the superstitions of the gods of the North, and

what they as a people believed those gods powers were. ... I think this game... should be experienced at least once ... if not for its gameplay, then for its lessons on history' (p1). The historical, cultural and mythological aspects of the game triggered online discussions, with one player concluding: 'the lorestones and Druth's dialogue do reveal that Ninja Theory had a pretty good understanding of the mythology.' (p3). A response to the Hellblade Development Diary showed the value placed on these elements of the game: 'The level of detail in Senua's blade showing the grain within that blade and the inlaid letters, suggests a rich story with lore to support it. Your level of detail in the environment as an actor in Senua's story would make the journey as valuable as the destination' (p4).

Significant impact on individuals is demonstrated by the example of one player who emailed Rowe, asking for a runic inscription she could use as a tattoo. The woman wrote: 'I had played [Ninja Theory's] game Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice, which came to mean so much to me. Due to my love for the game, I decided to place its significance by my heart as a lifelong, motivating tattoo. There is a scene in the game with a quote that holds power to me, which is followed by battle music....The song repeats the Norwegian Bokmål word, "Ødelegge," roughly meaning destroy or waste-lay. I would like for part of my tattoo to include this word translated in Elder Futhark' [E8]. Rowe advised and sent a suitable runic inscription.

Impacts on creativity and culture

International interest in Hellblade as a cultural artefact led to Rowe being a guest at a Frankfurt Book Fair live-streamed interview organised by Stiftung Digitale Spielekultur (the German Games Culture Foundation) (13 October 2018 [E9]), during which she discussed the game, Norse mythology and Viking history. International interest in Hellblade continues unabated, as attested by an invitation to Celsius 232, a transmedia convention in Ávila, Spain (July 2020), at which Rowe was interviewed about the intersection between academic research and game creation, using her work for Hellblade as example [E10].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- [E1] Hellblade website homepage [link](#) & frequently asked questions [link](#) & GamesIndustry.biz interview with Microsoft Studios boss Ninja Theory acquisition 23.08.2018 [link](#).
- [E2] Testimonial from Ninja Theory studio head 20.11.2019 and data (updated 20.07.2020).
- [E3] Ninja Theory Strategic Reports from Annual Report and Financial Statements, year ended 31.03.2018 (pp4-5) and year ended 31.03.2017 (pp30-31).
- [E4] Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice awards: Writers' Guild [link](#); BAFTA TIGA news [link](#) BAFTA press release [link](#) &; and TIGA 2017 awards [link](#) and 2018 awards [link](#).
- [E5] Guardian Games reviews roundup 11.09.2017, [link](#); BBC Sounds article 'How Hellblade helped me cope with my psychosis' 28.05.2020 [link](#) and 'Jim: Fight, Flight or Freeze on the This Game Changed My Life' podcast 28.05.2020 [link](#).
- [E6] Online reviews: 07.08.2017 IGN [link](#); 19.08.2017 [link](#); 08.08.2017 [link](#)
- [E7] Player comments: YouTube comments; Responses to The Sunhunter's entry, 'The Mythology of Hellblade', on reddit (social news platform) [link](#); Comments on the Hellblade Development Diary 4, 'Creating the world' [link](#).
- [E8] Emails correspondence with player regarding tattoo (28.03.2018 – 07.05.2018)
- [E9] Emails from German Games Culture Foundation 11.09.2018 & CD Projekt Red, 13.03.2019
- [E10] Email from narrative director, Tequila Works, 13.06.2020.