

Ubisoft Game Makers Podcast
Sea Shanties Are Still Awesome
December 22, 2021

(ETHEREAL MUSIC)

CRAIG EDWARDS:

A shanty is going to regulate motion, concentrate force, and be sung by the people who are doing the work. I think those three things are common to all shanties.

(UPBEAT MUSIC)

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

You're listening to the Game Makers Podcast. This is Charles-Adam Foster-Simard from Ubisoft. About a year ago, sea shanties became all the rage on social media, especially on TikTok, after a young Scottish postman called Nathan Evans, posted a video of himself singing 'The Wellerman', a 19th century New Zealand sea ballad. Pretty soon, our feeds were full of sea shanty renditions, remixes, and remote collaborations. In the middle of a global pandemic, the popularity of the genre seemed linked to a sense of nostalgia and our desire for connection and camaraderie, in a time of lockdowns and social isolation.

At Ubisoft, we know a thing or two about sea shanties. The 2013 game Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag, an action adventure title set in the Caribbean during the golden age of piracy, featured collectible sea shanties that your pirate crew sang as you sailed the oceans. So, to celebrate the first anniversary of the ShantyTok Phenomenon, I reached out to experts from Ubisoft and beyond, to tell us more about what makes sea shanties so special and how they were recorded for Assassin's Creed: Black Flag. First, I wanted to get a better understanding of the history of sea shanties, so I spoke with American musician Craig Edwards, who's been studying, performing, and working with sea shanties for decades. Hello, Craig. Thank you for joining us.

CRAIG EDWARDS:

It's very nice to be here, I'm glad to talk to you.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

I wanted to start with you first actually on this podcast on sea shanties, because you know a lot about sea shanties. You are a musician yourself and you're also a historian, so if you can maybe just start by introducing yourself, saying who you are and what you do.

CRAIG EDWARDS:

I'm Craig Edwards and I've been interested in traditional music since I was small. I went to Wesleyan University back in the late '70s, early '80s and studied ethnomusicology, and about a year and a half after I graduated from Wesleyan, I started working at Mystic Seaport Museum, which is a maritime museum in Mystic, Connecticut. It's an outdoor living history museum. What is there is a collection of historic ships, boats, buildings that housed maritime trades like ship smithing and coopering and other structures that would be typical of a New England Seaport town in the 19th century. It's the largest maritime museum in North America,

and one of the great maritime museums in the world. And they were looking for a staff musician.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

So your role on this ship was to basically lead the singing for these work songs when the sailors were doing demonstrations on the ship, is that right?

CRAIG EDWARDS:

Correct. So, you had fewer men in the crew because of that, they needed precise coordination. So, they started developing songs that would not only enliven the music and regulate its pace, but also serve to concentrate force at very particular spots.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

So we should really think of these songs as work songs. They're really almost like engineered. They were made or they developed in order to be able to do certain things on a boat and bring everyone together, doing the right work at the right time.

CRAIG EDWARDS:

Exactly.

SONG:

She's lovely cause she loves me

That's all I want to know boy

Way high, Miss Sally Brown

CRAIG EDWARDS:

There's a period of about 250 years, where there's very little evidence that sailors sang at work at all, and that of course is the precise time that piracy is flourishing.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Right.

CRAIG EDWARDS:

You know, and what that all has to do with is the conditions of work on board a vessel, which has to focus on engaging in violence at sea because they're using cannon, right, as their main weapon and most of those cannon, and all of the most effective cannon, the most powerful cannon are not aimed by turning the individual gun, but by turning the ship. So, when you're in a battle, you have to have a crew that can handily sail the vessel without worrying about not having enough men to execute a sudden manoeuvre, right? You have to have a full sailing crew. You also have to have enough men to be at the guns because those cannons aren't fired one at a time most effectively, they're fired in broadsides, which means all the cannon on one deck or all the decks of one side of the vessel, if there are several decks of cannon, once you get to the 1550s, there is almost ceaseless warfare between these empire building European nations for the next 250 years.

So, merchant ships had to be able to defend themselves. To do it effectively, they had to carry large crews. And because a ship that organised like that, has to have as its focal

activity, that engagement because otherwise you can't, what's the point of going out there, right? If you can't defend what you have in your ship. So that work on board those vessels was done silently by the crew. There was no singing. In fact, there were rules in the British Naval code in various periods dictating how many lashes you would get if you sang at work.

What happens in 1815 is that Napoleon is defeated, and the Congress of Vienna leads to what was known as the Concert of Europe, which pretty much eliminated it or extremely reduced the amount of violence at sea between these European powers. Those navies then turned their attention to ending the slave trade and suppressing piracy with their navies. And all of a sudden you could sail around the ocean without having to worry about being attacked at all. The United States' biggest export in this period, the 1820s and '30s is when we're talking about, and earlier, even they, you know, once the Napoleonic wars are over, cotton is our largest export and the cotton is loaded onto ships, they pack in as much as they can, it's valuable.

So, it's put down below and a machine is invented, it's a human powered machine, but it's invented to compress cotton, so that three bales of cotton will fit into a space only two would occupy if they were freestanding. It's huge amount of compression, and it's done with a jack screw it's called, which has a collar on a shaft that's wormed inside and extends a shaft from inside as you turn the collar and there're handles on that collar, that men turn and those men were enslaved African-Americans in groups of five, one of whom was more experienced and knew what to look for as this work went on to regulate it and regulated the motion of the crew by singing work songs, call and response work songs. That's one of the biggest sources of the idea of doing this in this period. The other thing is that on American ships, about 15 to 20% of the workforce is African-American. So, there are a lot of African-Americans in these crews, in this period, and suddenly the crew size has been reduced. They're still having to do work that's just as heavy, but all of a sudden, you don't have 30 men to grab hold of the halyard and march off down the deck. They're not there anymore. So, at some point, someone who understood much earlier African-American work song traditions, who came out of that background might have something like this:

SONG:

Round the corner we will go, round the corner Sally

Around Cape Horn and the frost and snow

Round the corner, Sally

And on that word 'round' and on that word, 'Sally,' the pull would come and the whole crew would sing along and there would be people in the crew who would, other African-Americans, who came from that same cultural background and knew how these songs were used, who would be familiar with it.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

So Craig, I want to unpack a little bit of what you just said. The first thing for me to kind of notice is that first of all, it seems like it's clearly anachronistic in Black Flag, right? The pirates and sailors would not have been using sea shanties at this time, although I think we can know

why they included it in the game, but just to clarify, it wouldn't have been used in the early 18th century, like it is in the game?

CRAIG EDWARDS:

That's correct. What I do find fascinating thinking about that era, is that of course, pirate crews were extraordinarily diverse in many instances, especially in the Caribbean, but around the world, you'd find that, and there's not a huge amount of evidence about what music people would have made together, but it is really fascinating to contemplate given what we know about what was going on musically. There certainly would have been drinking songs with choruses and musical games like Rounds, those were very popular, and of course, ballads that tell stories. So, all those kinds of music would be frequent.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

The other thing you mentioned was African-American slaves. So, I just want to clarify, there's like a direct link that we can draw from essentially slave songs and songs that were used on plantations by slaves for their work into shipping and into sea shanties?

CRAIG EDWARDS:

Yes and less songs that you might've heard on plantations as that songs you would have heard in ports and especially those cotton screwing songs, and it was very quickly adopted as not an ethnic practise, but an occupational practise that spread to ships of all nations so that, you know, French vessels, German vessels, Scandinavian vessels would use shanties. When you look in collections, it's often interesting to see how many shanties have from those areas used the melodies of shanties that they clearly originated in English because the chorus is still in English or is a set of nonsense words that sound like the English words (CHARLES-ADAM LAUGHS) while the verses are just sung in the language of the singer.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Right, so you can kind of see the melting pot in the origins of the sailors as well.

CRAIG EDWARDS:

Absolutely.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Now, the examples that you sang, you can hear the kind of like repetition and rhythm in the songs, but of course you were singing alone, so there was no call and response, but call and response is something that I really associate with sea shanties.

CRAIG EDWARDS:

Absolutely.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

And that kind of people coming in on the chorus or coming in on certain lines, so for you, is that something that's, you know, a feature of sea shanties and what are some of the other recognisable features of a sea shanty? That's a good question, I was thinking earlier today of

how I, if I really wanted to define a shanty, you know, what makes it a shanty as opposed to simply a work song? Right.

CRAIG EDWARDS:

So the things those two categories share is that they enliven work, but that's true of any construction crew you walk by, that's listening to the radio. Music is enlivening their work, right? They're not making it themselves, but you can also just be singing to pass the time, and that's not a shanty. A shanty is going to regulate motion, concentrate force, and be sung by the people who are doing the work. I think those three things are common to all shanties.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Part of the reason why we're talking today and exploring this topic of sea shanties is because they exploded all over the internet last year, especially on TikTok, and a lot of people were singing sea shanties and discovering them. So, I wanted to ask you who, you know, you've worked with these songs, you've studied them and sung them. I wanted to know what you thought about this phenomenon, and what do you think attracted people to sea shanties in our day and age?

CRAIG EDWARDS:

I think it was an almost predictable outcome of the pandemic and the way that TikTok is set up, where you can layer on other parts and pieces to an initial post, you know, the first post was just a solo singing the Wellerman.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Yeah.

CRAIG EDWARDS:

And then people started adding harmonies to it and playing with it like that, and it gave people that, within the context of a genre that grew up to be something that people did together to bring them together and focus them into one unit and you can harmonise any way you want on them. You can make up your own verses. They function really well like that because people were using them in their daily lives for their work, when they were...

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

So it's a very welcoming genre in a way.

CRAIG EDWARDS:

Yeah, it's welcoming, and when you're just singing them for fun, you know, one of the reasons that shanties work in sort of a neurological sense is that music and motion can produce the psychological state called flow, which is that heightened feeling you get, say when you are at a concert, and there's some transcendent moment in the music and you'll have that experience where you realise that everyone around you seems to be in this same exalted state for a moment, right? That's a common experience at concerts, that psychological state is flow. One of its functions though, is to give you increased access to your own inner resources and it just makes you feel good. So, when you're singing with people and getting that rhythm, going back and forth in the call and response structure, and you can really start to hammer it, you know, and it doesn't take an expert. You don't have to be even particularly

in tune to have a good time doing it, and that I think was really great for people just to feel like they can just join in and be part of it.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

It's interesting that you mentioned flow because it's something that we talk a lot about in video games as well. There's this flow state when you're playing a game and you're not thinking about playing the game anymore, and you're just really in the world, you know, you're not thinking about the controller, you're just like really doing it, and the game becomes an extension of yourself, you know, game designers chase that feeling and try to create that feeling for their players, and so of course it leads me to talk about Assassin's Creed Black Flag, which we mentioned earlier in which incorporates sea shanties. I wondered if you were aware of the game when it came out, and if you, you know, had to listen to some of the sea shanties in the game as well, and what you thought of that?

CRAIG EDWARDS:

I'm a little long in the tooth to have been paying attention when it came out, but I heard of it pretty early on because people talked about the shanties and once I started exploring it, I think that you guys did such a good job with it. It's a great selection of songs, I like the way they're sung, doesn't feel kind of over rehearsed or overproduced, has a good gritty quality to it that fits right in with what you're trying to evoke in the game and, you know, good singing, but not, you know, doesn't sound polished or choir-like is what I'm trying to get at. And I think the way it intersect, you know, I didn't know that video game people talked about flow, but of course it makes perfect sense. That works really well in sort of creating this imaginary world for people that they can live in. So, I think it was a brilliant move I have to say, and it's a video game, it's not history, it doesn't matter that shanties weren't sung back then, people can do that and enjoy it. As a scholar, I'm concerned that people understand this history for a variety of reasons, but as an artist and even as a scholar, I have absolutely no problem with the way that the video game uses the songs, I really think it's wonderful.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Well, on that note, Craig, thank you so much for joining us today and sharing all of this fascinating information about sea shanties.

CRAIG EDWARDS:

Well, it's been a great pleasure to talk with you, Charles, I really appreciate being asked because I love to talk about it.

SONG:

Come all you young and old #
I must die.

(UPBEAT MUSIC)

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Now that we know a little bit more about the history of sea shanties, I wanted to understand the original intention and idea behind the integration of sea shanties into Assassin's Creed

Black Flag. Who better to tell me all about it than Darby McDevitt, Narrative Director at Ubisoft Montreal who worked on the game's story. Hello Darby, thanks so much for joining us today.

DARBY MCDEVITT:

Hi, it's good to be here, thank you.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

So I wanted to talk to you about sea shanties and the music of Assassin's Creed Black Flag, do you just want to introduce yourself first, say a little bit about you and what you do at Ubisoft and what your role was on Black flag?

DARBY MCDEVITT:

Sure, so my name is Darby McDevitt, I've been a writer on the Assassin's Creed franchise for, since like 2008, 2009, and I came to Ubisoft in 2011 to work on the main games of the franchise. So, I was a writer initially here, and then about four years ago, I became a narrative director, which is overseeing the writers, doing some writing myself, but also helping design the narrative systems of the game as well, and even though, so I guess when I was the lead writer on Black Flag, I was kind of getting into the narrative design aspect by working really closely on the sea shanty system itself. So, it kind of, I think it was actually the first time I got a taste of what it would be like to be a narrative director through the shanties.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

And so do you want to say a little bit maybe about first of all, how the shanties work in Black Flag for those who haven't played the game, what is their purpose in the game and how are they part of the experience?

DARBY MCDEVITT:

So the sea shanty system is pretty, I think clearly inspired by other games like Grand Theft Auto where, in a game where there's these long stretches of traversal, you want something to fill the space and kind of keep your brain occupied, and so like listening to radio in a car, the sea shanties started life as what I called pirate radio. When we started seeing this open ocean come together and we were able to sail from Jamaica to Cuba, we were like, well, let's fill this space, not with just the white noise of the ocean, but you know, some actual fun songs and shanties. When we did our research, shanties weren't actually historically accurate to this time period, but it was too good of an idea to pass up.

So, what I ended up doing was just writing up a brief design document with the help of the Audio Director at the time, Aldo, and just pitched this very simple idea of like, look, when we're at the helm of the ship and we're sailing, there should be a way to activate songs, maybe a way to skip to the next song, and then a way to shut your crew up if you didn't want to hear singing.

(CHARLES-ADAM LAUGHS)

And that was the basic idea, and it was a really short design document. At the time, I didn't know too much about shanties, but I did know a lot about folk songs. I went to school in Ireland, I'm a musician, so I got really into, back in the early 2000s, I got into the, lots of Irish folk music, and so I knew a bunch of that.

So I kind of made a list of, let's say, 16 songs that I would like to hear in this game, but they weren't shanties, and I gave this design document to Aldo, he went away and he kind of disappeared for a while, and when he showed me a couple of months later, what he'd done, he'd not only got a list of 70 songs, but he'd actually recorded 70 songs, 35 of which were actual shanties and 35 were what we call tavern songs, cause he had expanded the idea to say, let's have there be taverns all over the world too, where you can just go in and listen to music. And in Havana, there's about 10 Spanish songs and in the rest of the, sort of the British areas of the Caribbean, there's 25 other tavern songs.

So, this small idea kind of exploded into this big, let's have this tapestry of music from the time period and a little bit later. Shanties are mostly a 19th century thing, not an 18th century thing, but there were things called, what are they called? Call-outs in an earlier century, where they were kind of musical ways of counting, but they weren't as rich and lyrically engaging as the shanties we have in Black Flag, but we knew, we didn't think, OK, we're not going to make an ocean sailing game in the 19th century probably, not anytime soon, unless we do like a Moby Dick game, but, so technically the shanties that we have in the game are not historically accurate, but they're so engaging and rich that we just couldn't do without them.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Yeah, it was part of the, it really adds to the pirate experience, right? Even though it's not totally, totally historically accurate.

DARBY MCDEVITT:

Exactly yeah.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

And they're collectible in the game as well. The point I think is that the players can discover, chase after shanties and then kind of collect them and then they get more shanties that their crew sings on their boat, is that something that was part of the original design document as well?

DARBY MCDEVITT:

Yeah, no, so when I proposed this idea, I think it was the Creative Director, Jean Guesdon, he was thinking about it and I think he wanted some way to, the idea hit on him to repurpose the Ben Franklin Almanac mechanic from AC3. Early in AC3, you meet Ben Franklin, and he like opens a book and all the pages of his Almanac fly out in a gust of wind and then he asks Connor, Hey, can you go get those for me?

(BOTH LAUGHING)

And they're interesting pages, right? But they're just sort of there's text to read.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Right.

DARBY MCDEVITT:

So I think Jean kind of just had this, you know, little inspiration and said, "Let's reuse that," but now the collectible will be worth something like really great. You collect quite a few throughout the game and it's always great when you collect that and it pops up now you've

got Lowlands Away and you're like, "I want to run back to my boat" and hear that. I think that's a case where the reward equals the effort, you know, that's, and I think that's a problem with all collectibles in all games, is that the reward often does not meet the effort.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Yeah, and I think it's so cool how it's a feature that's basically from game to game that's been evolved and improved upon, right?

DARBY MCDEVITT:

Yeah.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

That's super cool.

DARBY MCDEVITT:

Yeah.

SONG:

Lowlands

Lowlands away me John

Lowlands away

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Now you mentioned that you were a musician yourself and that you knew some folk songs before getting into this and that some of the folk songs as well were incorporated into the game. I'm just wondering as a writer in video games and as a Narrative Director, do you think a lot about that intersection between video games and music, even though, you know, you're not technically on the audio and the music side of things?

DARBY MCDEVITT:

Even before I was living in Ireland, I was listening to like, you know, bands like The Pogues, and The Dubliners, and The Clancy Brothers with Tommy Makem, and I, so, I knew a lot of these old songs. And so, when it came time to working on Black Flag, I just immediately knew that this was an area I could pull from. I didn't have to research it, I already had it in me. So, I was excited about that, and that actually drove a lot of the excitement in the early days.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

And moving back to sea shanties, which are our theme of the day, sea shanties kind of exploded on TikTok late in 2020 and early 2021, these kinds of call and response songs, people were creating new versions and remixes and adding their own voices to them online. Why do you think these kinds of songs have that appeal or have had that appeal in this day and age?

DARBY MCDEVITT:

I think it's very hard to understand why things go viral. I think there's something about, the first thing about sea shanties is that they're vocal only, right? So, it's kind of available to everybody, if you're willing to put in the effort. The second thing is that there's these amazing

choruses that come in and if you're good with harmony, not just melody, but harmony, the explosion of harmony that comes in at the choruses, is always like impressive and pleasant to the ear. Harmony is something people learn, you know, I think second, when they're learning to play music, it's like you learn, you learn melody and then rhythm, and maybe they learn at third harmony, but it's a super impressive aspect of music, and I think it really hits you, if you listen to like an old Everly Brothers tune or Simon and Garfunkel, like you're always just like drowning in how beautiful the harmony and melody are together.

So, I think that's the appeal of sea shanties, it's, they're simple, but they are harmonically rich and people want to get in on that, and so that's when you see like the first guy, you know, singing his version and then other people jump on and they throw harmonies on top, because harmonies are additive, right? You can start throwing all kinds of harmonies on top of harmonies on top of harmonies, and if you're doing it well, it can take a while before it gets really muddy, and then I saw the one where Andrew Lloyd Weber joins in and it's like, there you go, like he's adding, he's adding a piano accompaniment to this. So, there's a real sense of collaboration, and that's exactly what, you know, TikTok and the internet is all about. It's about crowdsourcing and collaboration, and shanties provide a really good template for that, I think.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

People want to join the party.

DARBY MCDEVITT:

That's my guess, yeah.

SONG:

To England must go

Hoor-raw me boys, we're homeward bound

(UPBEAT MUSIC)

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

One of the voices you can hear on the Black Flag soundtrack is Sean Dagher, a folk singer based in Montreal. He was hired by producer David Gossage, who was brought on the project to select and record the shanties for the game. I reached out to Sean and David to talk about their involvement on the project.

(FOLK MUSIC)

SEAN DAGHER:

Hi, my name is Sean. I'm a Montreal-based folk musician and singer, et cetera.

(ALL LAUGHING)

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

And Dave, do you want to introduce yourself?

DAVE GOSSAGE:

Yeah, I'm Dave, I'm similar. I'm a composer, producer of music and I play flute in all sort, kinds of styles, and I did the music for, the source music for Assassin's Creed from III, to up until Origins.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Great. And we're here to talk about specifically the soundtrack for Black Flag and even more specifically the sea shanties and you were producer for the sea shanties, right?

DAVE GOSSAGE:

Yes.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Can you explain what that role entails?

DAVE GOSSAGE:

Well, that's, it's researching, finding all the shanties and then getting them recorded, getting all the musicians together and getting the studio together and doing the, you know, all those sorts of, a lot of this one, it was spent researching finding enough shanties, cause there's so many shanties in that game and 'cause it's part of the gameplay, and Benedicte was the music supervisor, kept calling and asking for 20 more.

(DAVE GOSSAGE LAUGHS)

That was the main bulk of it, but there was also recording them all, cause you have to go through each shanty and check the lyrics to make sure they're historically correct, and politically correct when they were doing bad things.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

And where were you to kind of run through the process, where were you researching? Like where were you finding some of these shanties?

DAVE GOSSAGE:

A lot of it was in the library at McGill, I teach at McGill. So, at the McGill library, they have, their music library has like tonnes of stuff.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

And so you mentioned that, you know, you were looking also for the right kinds of shanties, not just a time period, but in terms of, what they were saying or the political references. So, did you have to like modify any of the sea shanties or what were you finding in terms of stuff that was maybe not appropriate for the game?

DAVE GOSSAGE:

Well, the things that weren't appropriate were the obviously sort of, you know, the homophobic or outright racist lyric from back in the time when, cause they were all recorded or the words were written down as they were, you know, the ones that were actually saved from back then. So, there was a lot of, you know, misogynistic and things like that, well, they're pirates.

(ALL LAUGHING)

But, and we had to sort of get all that stuff out of it, but then there was the straight historical differentiations. Like if they, it wasn't Queen Anne at that time and it was King George, so there'd be things like that. I would shift around and switch the names of the Kings because shanties themselves are sort of they're a living sort of thing. They change with the historical context of the time the sailors are actually using them to do their work because that's the main part of them it's just, you know, work songs.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

So you yourself were making some adjustments in the texts, for example, on the lyrics, but you felt, it feels kind of legitimate because even back then they were changing all the time and not everyone was singing the same shanty, even for the same melody.

DAVE GOSSAGE:

Yeah, exactly, that's it. So, they would sing the lyrics, you could find shanties, I think, with five different sets of lyrics to them.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Right. And what were you looking for in terms of the musicians? Cause you mentioned you also supervised the recording sessions. So where did you get your musicians from to have an authentic sounding sea shanty?

DAVE GOSSAGE:

Well, I don't know if they want to be called authentic as such.

(ALL LAUGHING)

Sean, well I play with Sean so he was by my first choice and Sean does a lot of different works with different people and singers, so he hooked, and there was another one Nils, I'd picked too beforehand, but Sean had gotten Michiel and Clayton to join us, two other singers that he knew of, and that was basically based on Clayton, we needed a baritone and, but the guys who were singing it are like opera singers, but they're not singing in that fashion at all. Sort of gruff men would be what we were looking for.

(DAVE GOSSAGE LAUGHS)

With an ability to sort of, to sort of act, you know, somewhat because there's a lot of acting involved when you're doing like films, things like that because you don't want your pirates to sound like opera singers because that's very rare. Someone singing in harmony on a boat would probably just be beaten up or something, you know, like this to the ground.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

So they had to tune down their skills a little bit.

DAVE GOSSAGE:

They tuned down their skills, we usually do one take that was in tune, and then just sort of like go for making it sound authentic.

(CHARLES-ADAM LAUGHS)

People saying, OK guys, sing it in a different key or sing it, try to be out of tune." I think that was the hardest part, Sean, you could tell me that if I would just sing it badly, like making it sound like you're actually a bad singer.

SEAN DAGHER:

It was hard at first, but once you got into it that part was actually really fun.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Sean, did you have any experience singing sea shanties before like as a folk singer? Or is that something that you, you know, you were used to?

SEAN DAGHER:

Yeah, I knew a lot of these songs and you know, in a lot of the gigs that I play the whole point is to sort of entertain people and the songs that work best for entertaining people are those songs that have sort of a call and response, you know, and a lot of the Irish pub songs have that already. So basically, you know, the shanties are just a whole entire genre based around call and response. So, we use them a lot, even back then we used shanties a fair amount in performing just because...

DAVE GOSSAGE:

In the pub, yeah.

SEAN DAGHER:

...it gets people going, you know?

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Right. And in terms of the research for you, Sean, as a singer going into this, did you, you know, because I assume some of these shanties you'd know about, especially as David was kind of digging into the archives to find some, so did you do any research yourself to, or listen to any previous recordings to use as inspiration to try to be more authentic? Or were you trying to go in fresh?

SEAN DAGHER:

I was trying to go in fresh, you know, a lot of the previous recordings weren't trying to be historical or if they were, it was too sort of bad acting or, you know, like fake pirate, you know, sort of Halloween pirate type things. So, there wasn't really much to draw on in terms of that, but sometimes I'd go listen to it because Dave would send us the lyrics on one page and he'd send us the melody on another page and he'd send us an MP3 and none of the three things would match.

(ALL LAUGHING)

So I'd have to go.

DAVE GOSSAGE:

We'd do a lot of jury...

SEAN DAGHER:

I'd go sleuthing in the studio. Yeah, I'd go sleuthing around, saying, what did he mean? Oh, OK, this was that. And I'd sort of compile my, from what he'd sent me, I'd compile a version that I thought was singable, you know? And, but I, you know, we're obviously trying not to do an imitation of somebody else's version. Yeah, that's it and there's also, you could, the sort of cliches you want to stay away from, because in a game like Assassin's Creed,

(DAVID GOSSAGE IMITATES A PIRATE)

Like the argh and the sort of you get into the Disney pirates, which is, if you look at the images, it's not like that at all. They're like real pirates. So, you want to avoid the, a lot of the stuff you see online on is the kind of Disney "Argh! Line the guts", and the, "Ships ahoy!", and you're going, "Oh my God!"

(DAVE GOSSAGE LAUGHS)

You know, you can't use it.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

So in terms of getting that kind of authentic feel and that historical accuracy as much as they can be in the game, so can you take me back a little bit to the recording sessions and like, what were those like?

DAVE GOSSAGE:

They were a lot of fun. Like they were, we'd go in like, we'd do a take of the song or we'd first sort of read through it, read through it everybody, you know, pick a key that seemed to work well for everybody. Not that, that was the most important thing, cause sometimes it was good to have people singing out of their range, like you do when people sing all happy birthday together in different keys.

(ALL LAUGHING)

Like people don't always know, oh, this is you don't get pirates sitting there discussing the key of the shanty they're going to be singing. So, we go in and we read through them and then just set up the mics and in whichever studio we happen to be in at the time, a lot was Hotel2Tango, and start with one version, then another version, and then sometimes we'd even like, say, take the headphones kind of off a bit, so you don't hear the other version so well, and my, I remember my one direction would always be like, sort of change your voices now, OK, change here. And the guys would, because it was only four singers every time.

SEAN DAGHER:

It's three usually.

DAVE GOSSAGE:

Yeah, often three, yeah. So, there was always someone on the lead because that's the way that they work, and then we just build it up and build it up to be about 25 pirates on the ship. So that's like why I say why we wanted guys with some personality, cause we need a lot of different sort of acting things, like they had to try not to sound like the same singer when they went through to sing it the second time.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Oh, so you're using basically stems or tracks from like, you know, 2, 3, 4 takes per singer to kind of build-up that sense that you have a whole crew.

DAVE GOSSAGE:

But always, always all of them together, but then, then gradually building it up, but the lead singer's part, a lot of it was making sure that we had a good take of the lead singer and then we'd add the, you know, the responses.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Yeah.

DAVE GOSSAGE:

And then we can be a lot looser with the responses because that's where we got into the sort of the drunk singers and all the, like the little bit too much rum on the boat type people.

(ALL LAUGHING)

That's where it got really fun, funny, you know, we were spending a lot of time laughing.

SEAN DAGHER:

Well and you know, trying to sing low or high or out of our range or trying to sing badly, or roughly would often sort of wreck our voices. I remember one of the opera guys was like, he's like, I can't do the session this week because I have to sing an actual opera next week, you know.

(ALL LAUGHING)

It's like, OK, fine. (LAUGHS)

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

I have to save my voice for a real thing.

SEAN DAGHER:

Yeah, you know, I mean, not me so much because I'm used to wrecking my voice, that's part of my, part of my style, but the real singers were feeling it.

SONG:

Haul away your anchor

Haul away your anchor

It's our sailing time

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

So my next question is about sea shanties in general, because of course this year they've become, they've just exploded on the internet for the past year, you know, and I know Sean that you do a YouTube channel where you sing a shanty every week, I believe,

SEAN DAGHER:

Yep.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

But they've just been super popular since the "ShantyTok" Phenomenon from the beginning of the year. So, I just wanted to get your reaction, because you've worked with these for a long time, you did the soundtrack for Black Flag. How does it feel for you when something like that that was kind of your baby is suddenly like out in the open it's really cool, everyone's talking about it?

DAVE GOSSAGE:

I think Sean, that we had it from the beginning when we'd get sort of that response when

Black Flag came out, you know, there'd be fans, but I remember we did that show in Seattle. And so many people knew about it, like it's, it's not to the same level as it is now, but it's, you know, right from, right when the game came out, it seemed like it got pretty popular, and I know not as, not after TikTok and right now, but maybe Sean, you could answer that better than me seeing as you have your YouTube every week you know, so.

SEAN DAGHER:

Yeah, well, I was shocked when the shanties became popular when Black Flag came out, you know, not shocked, but I was surprised and it sort of gave me faith in lay people's ability to like different styles of music.

DAVE GOSSAGE:

Yeah that's true.

SEAN DAGHER:

And I thought, oh, if only people would get exposed to some kind of different styles of music, maybe they'd like it.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Right.

SEAN DAGHER:

So that was a big surprise, and, you know, we rode that as much as we could. I did anyway. So, when it happened again, this past January, it wasn't a surprise, it was like, so here, it's happening again.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Right, it's just it seems like there was a cycle for these things. Like they just keep coming back.

SEAN DAGHER:

Yeah, exactly. You know, like in the '80s when people were listening to Bulgarian stuff and when Oh Brother Where Art Thou came out and all of a sudden everyone started playing old time banjo, you know.

DAVE GOSSAGE:

I think, so the stuff that's thrown at people all the time, and they're always looking for different stuff. Maybe it has a lot to do with so many people being at home, searching for music on their computers rather than being out, you know, with COVID and everything. So those people were really looking for stuff to listen to.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Well, and I was going to ask, what is it for you about shanties like musically or culturally? What's the appeal?

DAVE GOSSAGE:

I think it's made to be sung along to, you have to sing along, you know, and I sort of said this in January when I was being interviewed about this stuff, and you know, like this sort of cliché that like here we are, everyone's forced into isolation and lo and behold, a style of music that

brings people together becomes popular, you know, maybe as a reaction to that. But also, you don't have to be, I mean, as we demonstrated you don't have to be a good singer. In fact, it's better if you're not, to sing shanties. So, people don't feel intimidated to sing sea shanties the way they might be intimidated to sing, I don't know, Barry Manilow or something. Yeah, it's been, we've been doing it, you know, Charles, for years, we've like Sean said, we've had people singing along in the pub. It's a pretty, it's a very common thing. There's some songs with little things that they yell out in the middle of the song that everybody knows who goes to an Irish pub. I think that people just, you know, like it's the same thing repeating over and over again. So, you know your part and you just have to jump in with it. So, it's very easy to do, and I think that it's fun, you know, so.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

And even people like Sean who are great singers have to dumb down their singing.

(ALL LAUGHING)

So it's accessible to everyone.

DAVE GOSSAGE:

Exactly. Well, if your line is just, "Right up your kilt", say in an Irish bar.

(ALL LAUGHING)

It doesn't get much dumber than that, I feel like it gets pretty easy. It's pretty easy to, see there's your parts just scream it out. We often say nice screaming instead of singing, because they're just screaming out little parts of the song.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

And I wanted to ask you what your favourite sea shanty was from the soundtrack. So maybe we can start with you, Sean.

SEAN DAGHER:

Well, I really like the song Leave Her Johnny, which, you know, became super popular after that, but when Dave would send out the list of songs that we were doing in any given session, and he'd send it out a few days in advance and I'd always try and make sure to go through the list before anybody else and write back to Dave quickly and saying like, "Oh, I like this one and this one."

DAVE GOSSAGE:

"I want this one."

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Getting dibs on the best one.

SEAN DAGHER:

Yeah, I would claim the nice ones. So, I ended up with a lot of the sort of nicer melodies, you know? So that was one of them and Randy Dandy. Always is a nice one.

DAVE GOSSAGE:

Yeah, Randy Dandy is a good one.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

So what do you like about those ones specifically? It's the melodies a little bit more?

SEAN DAGHER:

Leave Her Johnny is more melodic than some, you know, I don't know if it's true or not, but I read that, you know, shanties sort of started out as rhythmic grunts, you know, to keep everybody timed and then got gradually more and more sort of melodic, you know, more like songs and they, you know, imported melodies from other folk song traditions, and those two are particularly just nice songs. I don't know how effective they are as work songs, but they're nice as listening songs.

DAVE GOSSAGE:

Yeah, 'cause some of the work ones are just they're very lyrically simple and they really are just sort of grunt songs since...

SEAN DAGHER:

They're like Billy Riley.

DAVE GOSSAGE:

Yeah, Billy Riley I heard.

SONG:

Oh Billy Riley ahoo!

Ahoo, yeah, Billy Riley hoo! You know, but some of them like Lowlands is a beautiful melody, Lowlands Away. And so those are clearly more in the song. Then there's ones that are just kind of funny, like Down Among the Dead Men, you know, like going, some of them are going, we got to watch, we don't get to Disney-piratey on this one because you can just imagine these are animated characters singing those songs. I like Whiskey Johnny too.

SEAN DAGHER:

Oh yeah, you did a great job on that.

DAVE GOSSAGE:

They all have their own little, a lot of them is with, whoever was singing lead on them, seemed to, you know, bring them to life a bit.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Thank you both for joining us, gentlemen. Thanks so much.

SEAN DAGHER:

I want to thank Dave for hiring me for this.

(DAVE GOSSAGE LAUGHS)

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Yeah, kudos to Dave.

DAVE GOSSAGE:

Thank you very much. Thank you.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Well, this is great, thanks so much guys.

DAVE GOSSAGE:

Thank you.

SEAN DAGHER:

Have a good day.

SONG:

Whiskey Johnny

And a bottle for the shanty man

Whiskey for my Johnny O

(GENTLE MUSIC)

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

This episode of Game Makers was produced and edited by the team at Angle, I'm Charles-Adam Foster-Simard from Ubisoft. Transcripts of our episodes are available on Ubisoft news. For more from Game Makers, remember to subscribe wherever you get your podcasts. Thanks for listening.