

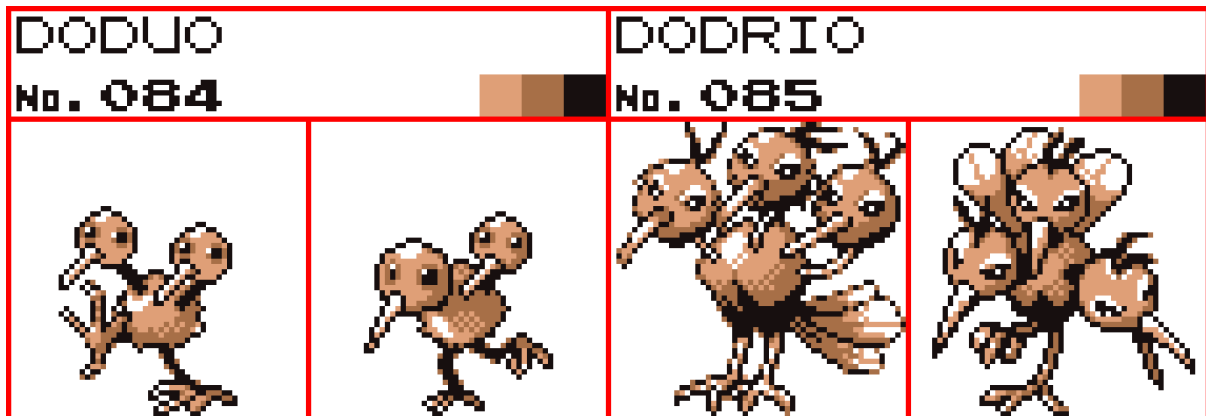
For my MA Entertainment Design Creation project, I will be operating under the working title: “What Role Does Pixel Art Play in Contemporary Music Marketing?” In this proposal, I will outline the reasons I believe this to be a subject worth investigating, and explain the methodologies I will be employing in order to ensure my artifact is both manageable within the defined time frame, and successful in accordance with my set objectives.

1. Topic Introduction

“The days when pixel art was requisite may be over, but it lives on as a specific artistic choice. Whether it’s making stand-alone art, animated sprites or your own video games, you’ll always evoke nostalgia when you work with pixels. But pixel art is more than just a throwback. The sprites might be simple, but the art is as complex as ever.” [Monserate, n.d.]

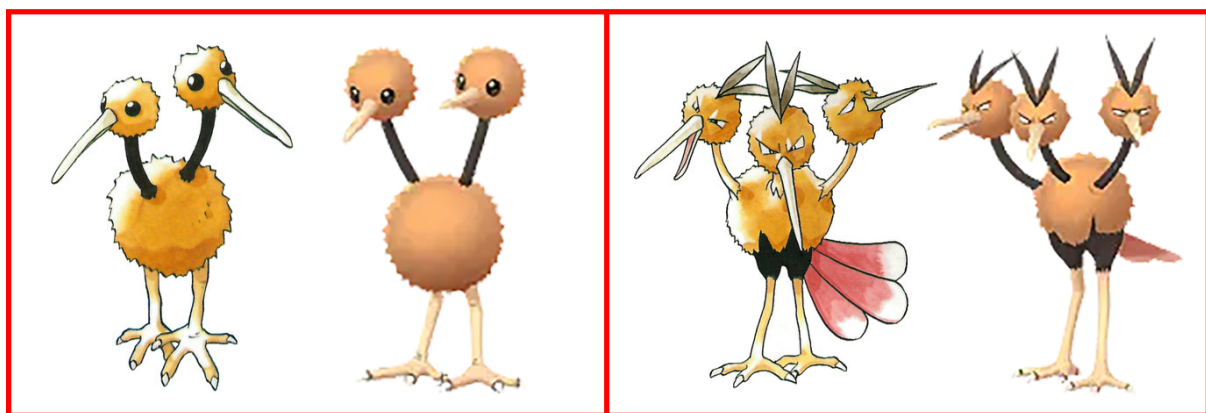
Pixel art sits among the earliest forms of digital art, and to many is synonymous with the word ‘childhood’. One of the oldest physical art forms most comparable to pixel art is mosaic [Cure, 2016], in which multiple physical tiles are laid side by side to construct a larger represented piece of art. In the same vein, pixel art is created by laying individual pixels down. Pixel art as an artistic medium was popularised during the 80’s, in the form of arcade games, and then later home video consoles [Cure, 2016]. It is characterised by the common use of a limited palette, often consisting of fewer than 10 colours. Due to the limited memory capabilities of the early hardware video games ran on, game designers had to simplify their game’s assets down to only the most essential components, colours included. It is from this restriction that the term *8-bit* came from, referring to the amount of memory available. Just like every word in a piece of written literature has to have a degree of purpose, every single pixel in a piece of pixel art had to count too. Despite the freedom now offered by contemporary image editing software, modern pixel artists usually set their own self-imposed limitations on colour in order to invoke a similar sense of nostalgia [Monserate, n.d.].

As the capabilities of video game consoles expanded and 3D modelling software became both more accessible and intuitive (purpose-built), pixel art suffered an effective death. Major gaming franchises like *Pokémon* and *Mario* gradually shifted towards 3D models, and for a few decades pixel art existed predominantly within independent franchises and in hobbyist communities. It had become outdated in an industry reliant on pushing boundaries and creating magnetic visuals, however, many are still drawn to these older titles. The distinctive charm instilled within the individual character assets that would combine to build a scene, also known as *sprites*, is incomparable to today’s 3D model equivalents. Because designers only had very limited means of capturing a character or creature’s personality, these sprites required an extra level of creativity. Poses were more dynamic, at times clunky and confusing, and other times just bad. Nonetheless, these designs were still able to connect with many on an emotional level.



Above: Sprites extracted from Pocket Monsters: Red/Blue/Green (1996)

Below: Promotional artwork by Ken Sugimori (1996) / 3D models extracted from Pokémon Go (2016)



Above: In-game pixel artwork for the Pokémon *Doduo* and *Dodrio* — extracted from *Pocket Monsters: Red, Green and Blue* [Nintendo, 1996], the first titles in what would lead to Pokémon becoming the highest-grossing media franchise of all time [Talaviya, 2019]. These are compared against the promotional artwork released to coincide with the releases [Nintendo, 1996], and the 3D models many now associate with these designs [Niantic, 2016].

The pixel artwork, or *sprites*, have a palette of only 5 colours — two of which are taken up by black and white values, and a further one for transparency. Techniques such as dithering are used to imply the presence of texture (in this example, fur), or gradual transitions between colours to imply shaded form. Whilst considered ugly to many, the *nostalgia* many connect with these early designs is what contributed to pixel art's relevance within the contemporary art and advertising markets.

Due in part to pixel art-making software becoming much more accessible and because of how quickly pixel artwork can be generated, it has also recently picked up traction within the realms of crypto art, with pixel-based NFT (non-fungible tokens — “a unique digital asset designed to represent ownership of a virtual item”) collections selling for hundreds of thousands of dollars in equivalent cryptocurrencies [Browne, 2021]. This sudden and unexpected addition of monetary value to pixel art once more — a medium once viewed as cheap — prompts further questions about its legitimacy as a *cultural* art form. The inherently polarising nature of pixel art's description as ‘artwork’ is enough to generate cultural discourse, however its easy comprehensibility to the mainstream consumer also renders many to disregard it.

2. Artifact & Objectives

My personal interest lies within pixel art as a form of digital illustration. Being somewhat weak at the physical side of drawing, the accessibility of a digital medium such as pixel art is appealing, and allows for greater control over the final result. Mistakes are easily rectifiable when working on such a scaled-down canvas, and there are theoretically no limits to what can be created. Pixel art can be created using the most basic of in-built software, such as Microsoft Paint; on a calculator, or even a spreadsheet. Just because it's more accessible, however, doesn't mean there is an absence of craftsmanship required. I'm drawn to pixel art because it allows me to find creative validation within my skillset, in an area that I feel many of my competitors are already adept at (digital art). By focusing my efforts on an unconventional/niche medium, I believe I will make myself a more desirable designer and holistically a more desirable creative. I still find a desire to challenge my own expectations with every piece I create, and this MA artifact will be no exception. In accordance to this desire, I have synthesised the following aims and objectives:

Personal Objectives

- Make my strength at pixel art more prominently positioned within the context of a commercial design portfolio. This will be achieved through the creation of a project centred around the marketing of a piece of music.
- Challenge my engagement with the medium and attempt something functional and personally ambitious, whilst making it more commercially viable as an offered service. An example could be an animated product, or something playable.
- Attain a greater understanding of both my craft, capabilities, and pixel art as both a medium and its role as a tool for marketing music.

Objective Impact — What would be different as a result?

- Further clarity on the question of 'does pixel art work as a tool for music marketing?'

For the subject of my artifactual outcome, I have chosen two potential directions:

- A 2D 'endless runner' game produced to coincide with a single release. This will involve a character(s) moving sideways, jumping to avoid objects and/or collect items. This will challenge my ability to create animations, and draws inspiration from franchises such as Mario and mobile games such as Flappy Bird. Ideally, this will be functional, however an animated mockup remains a viable alternative.
- A map or piece of artwork created in the *top-down perspective* popularised by games such as Pokémon and The Legend of Zelda, produced to coincide with an album release. This will challenge my ability to translate source material whilst simultaneously enriching it. This will require animation on a different scale, and doesn't necessarily need to be functionally playable, however it requires the creation of a significantly greater number of assets. Subjectively, I also believe this could be less financially marketable when compared to the endless runner concept, but would be more marketable within the context of a creative portfolio.

In order to decide which route to take, I will be undertaking primary research to attain a more informed perspective on which direction will be more beneficial in the scope of both my objectives and the wider

brief. I will conduct this by contacting creators who have been commissioned to work on similar projects to promote musical releases. One example would be further research into eBoy, a collective devoted to working solely in pixel art. Their work with Groove Armada in 2007 & The Wombles (currently releasing) are two potential case studies to inquire about, though the current rollout of the Wombles project would prevent asking any questions about results [Krol, 2021].

At the time of publication, I am already actively working on a 2D animated piece of pixel art-inspired marketing collateral to promote the release of a remix. Though I am contractually forbidden from expanding upon this, this live thread will serve as an important kickstarter for my research into 2D 'endless runner' inspired games. In order to take full advantage of this opportunity, I have taken into consideration the learning outcomes from a recent workshop with Dr Lindsay Davies, who emphasised the importance of asking interview questions with a more pragmatic approach. Instead of asking *questions* that I think will lead to interesting results, I need to think proactively and decide what results I *need*. These answers will thus lead to the higher productive output from these interviews. Some example questions I have drafted would be:

- What marketable factors did you consider when creating this project?
- Did the final product match your initial vision and expectations?
- How much influence did the client have over this project?
- What role do you believe pixel art plays in the marketing of music?

During the first week of my research period, I will be identifying further research and case study opportunities. Running concurrently with this, I will be also conducting research into my choice of subject. Currently my options are as follows:

- Identify and connect with a commercial artist interested in collaborating on a pixel art-inspired piece of marketing collateral. This could be done by utilising Tileyard Education connections, or internally through my current placement. This is the ideal narrative, and would be the most marketable option in the context of a commercial design portfolio.
- Identify a previous or upcoming release that I believe would be enriched by the creation of a personal/'fanmade' piece of pixel art-inspired marketing collateral. This is a less desirable, less marketable and a less fulfilling alternative; however, creative freedom would be mine — for better or for worse.

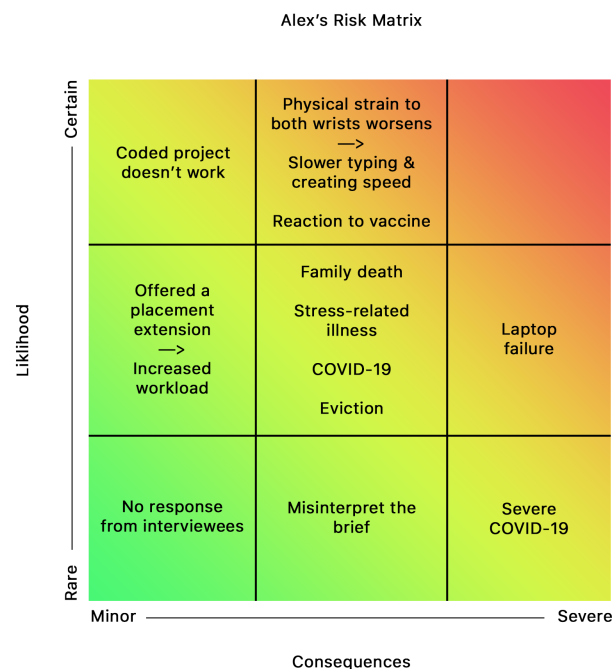
3. Risk Analysis

In order to anticipate and manage any potential problems that would hinder me from achieving my set objectives and roadmap, I conducted a risk analysis. The tool I used for this is called a *risk matrix*, which visually plots the likelihood of a problem arising against the severity of the impacts.

Health is the most common theme, with pre-existing wrist injuries earning the most likely moderately-consequential position. If I hadn't already enacted measures to slow this down, it would likely fall in the top right box as a certain and severely-consequential risk. Other health factors such as catching COVID-19 (and additionally the likelihood of having a severe adverse reaction to catching COVID-19), as well as stress-caused ailments such as a relapse of my hyperthyroidism or chronic fatigue syndrome also remain prevalent within the matrix.

As of writing, I am currently experiencing a moderate reaction to my second COVID-19 vaccine. I failed to manage this risk, and as a result my current cognitive functions and thought processes are impaired. Despite this, the situation explained below means that I am able to do little about this. This serves as an

important reminder of how essential it is to manage risks well in advance in order to ensure a healthy project lifespan. I aim to move on from this with a more pragmatic approach.



One of the more substantial problems that had already started affecting the project (specifically this element) was the 2-week placement I had started in the first week of August. After a very successful fortnight, I was offered an extended paid contract for another 3 weeks. This overlapped with the first deadline, but despite knowing this I accepted immediately. Including this extended contract, I would now be juggling a full-time freelance career, a full-time placement, and a full-time MA course. With only so many hours in the day, I was confronted with a question: am I content with the quality of my submission dropping, if it meant getting my foot in the door to a very closed-off industry? This comes hot off the heels of a very successful second module, and the possibility of graduating with a First Class Master's degree is very real if I continue to exceed my own expectations.

In order to begin managing this in anticipation of a potential contract renewal, I have started discussing my future plans openly with the creative team, emphasising that in the event of such a renewal, I would only be able to commit to a part-time contract. This will take the pressure off of spending my evenings working late into the night catching up with personal work, only to repeat this the following day. This would also begin to manage any potential health problems that arise from overworking and lack of sleep.

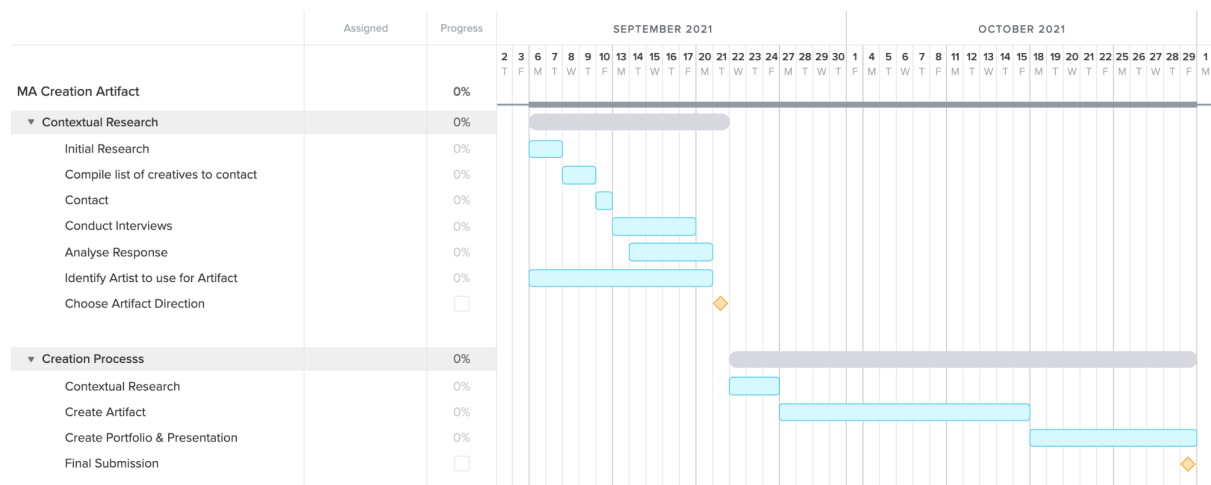
4. Creating my Project

I currently create all my pixel artwork on Adobe Photoshop, which requires an adapted workflow but is fully functional for working at a pixel level. However, my attempts at animating pixel art using its in-built *Frame Animation* tool has felt unintuitive and frustrating at times. Whilst it might fit the purpose of animating raster images (albeit somewhat crudely), I am aware that this might not be the most sensible option for my artifact. With the increase in popularity of independent artists and hobbyists on social media sites such as Twitter, several purpose-built programs have been developed. One example is

Aseprite, created by Igar Studio. *Aseprite* boasts multiple animation features much more adept to pixel art, and currently costs \$20. Another software alternative is *Tiled*, a ‘flexible level editor’ created by Thorbjørn Lindeijer. In contrast to *Aseprite*, *Tiled* is opensource and funded by donations, and is purpose-built for creating functional games using pixel art assets. Both of these will be researched further down the line as my project formally begins and decisions are made in regards to which direction I will take my artifact down.

5. Estimated Budget & Gantt Chart

Using TeamGantt I create a Gantt Chart to outline all the essential steps I would need to go through to complete my project in a timely and managed way. Having struggled with Gantt charts in the past, mainly due to creating them retroactively, it was interesting to create one that would be functional.



For my budget, I have compiled a list of all the costs I currently anticipate.

- Website hosting: Free—£100. This is optional, but potentially worthwhile for the presentation.
- Software purchasing: *Aseprite* — £20
- Stock images and design resources: Total allowance of £30
- Monthly overheads: £1000 — the only assured cost, this includes rent & software costs.

Applied over two months, this sets a rough budget of between £2050—£2150.

6. Summary

To summarise, over the course of two months I shall be creating an artifact for the purpose of promoting music in the artistic medium known as pixel art. This will take the form of either a functional game, or a piece of promotional artwork. My methodology will involve acquiring primary research via interviews with creatives that have made commissioned pixel-based artwork to promote a music release. I will achieve this by asking more considered questions, focusing on the answers I want, as opposed to questions that I think will get interesting responses.

I anticipate using the first two and a half weeks to acquire my research, and the further month and a half to apply this research in the creation of my artifact. I will evaluate the success of this project in accordance to my set objectives.

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Images

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