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Foundation Module – Element 2

**Analysing and Implementing the Cultural,
Musical and Financial Legacies of Video Game
Music, Lo-Fi and Ballad-Pop**

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Contents

INTRODUCTION	3
CHAPTER ONE: UNDER THE HARVEST MOON	4
CHAPTER TWO: VICINITY	7
CHAPTER THREE: TIME TO WRITE	10
CONCLUSIONS	12
BIBLIOGRAPHY	13
APPENDIX 1	16

INTRODUCTION

Since the first quarter of 2020, and according to the [businessofapps.com](https://www.businessofapps.com), annual usership of Spotify grew by 33%, in part due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on live entertainment (Iqbal, 2021). Over this time it has also been observed how our listening niches, whether those niches are for whole genres or specific artists, have fluctuated wildly in response to our altered living conditions (Hurwitz and Krumhansl, 2021). The synthesis of both of these parameters has meant that the commercial web of multiple musical genres across the gamut has increased. To that extent, this essay will analyse my interpretation of three extrinsically diverse genres (video game music, lofi and ballad-pop), comment on the cultural and economic impact each genre has made and compare genre-specific tendencies with my own interpretations.

CHAPTER ONE: UNDER THE HARVEST MOON

The video game industry has become a formulaic, yet lucrative venture for both developers, with \$49 billion being spent by consumers globally in 2020 alone, and musicians alike (Simmons, 2018). In the same way that the music industry has codified instruments to be genre specific, for example vinyl crackle in lo-fi or orchestral fusions in pop, the video games industry has codified its audience to be genre specific (differentiating participants into those more likely to play one style of game over another. The first implementation of such systematic formatting was through Chris Bateman and Richard Boon's Demographic Game Design (DGD1) model, in which both statistics about a person's game playing habits and a Myer-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) were used to determine whether you were a "Conqueror", a "Manager", a "Wanderer" or merely a "Participant" (2006). From this test, composer and ludomusicologist Winifred Phillips (in her book *A Composer's Guide To Game Music*) hypothesised that, because strategy gamers exude "Manager" characteristics, they would 'derive the most satisfaction from either a Rock or Elite musical score'. Phillips then cites such examples as the 'apocalyptic orchestral... grandeur of *Might and Magic Heroes VI* [and] the driving rock rhythms and agitated strings of *Supreme Commander 2*' (Phillips, 2014, PP.92-93). An additional contemporary of these two games includes *Civilisation VI (CIVVI)*, the game that my first reference track comes from.

In my orchestration of the sixteenth-century English folk song, I set out to keep the texture, instrumentation and arrangement as closely to the stylings of English romantic music as possible, employing David Goulding's theory of there being 'musical melodies[...] for places' (Goulding, 2019). Note that, in my second reference track, a modern recording of the piece, the only instruments employed are the female Alto voice and a Lute, both of which are synonymous with rural English folk music (Mignarda, 2011). Additionally, Knorr notes, in an interview I conducted with him on the importance of national representation in video games, how every piece must have 'characteristics of traditional playing'; '[t]he art, culture, and music do need to connect in a real way to the people-group that are representing' (2019). Consequently, my approach when orchestrating would follow the English and German school of thought (seen prominently in the works of Vaughan-Williams and Schumann), in which melodies are shared around the orchestra, and instrumental colours are subsumed into an overall orchestral colour. This is seen most prominently in the Palestrinian counterpoint in

mm.12-21 (Appendix 1.), where the counter melody is shared by the Viola, Trombone, Clarinet, Flute, Horn 1 and both Violins.

Spitfire's "BBC Symphony Orchestra" was my primary orchestral plug-in of choice, although a debate is ongoing regarding the validity of midi-dominant arrangements. Giovanni De Poli would argue that 'even if [synthesis] models could be very accurate... some very important artistic aspects of this kind of music will be omitted (De Poli, 2006). In the last fifteen years since this chapter was written, however, DAWs and synthesisers have become more powerful. Like Sam Maguire and Zbyney Mateju, therefore, I would argue that in an age where orchestras are both increasingly expansive and impractical, 'more people have access to the same timbres and musical sounds than ever before' (2020, p. 46). As was also acutely noted by Richard King, 'the clock is always running, whether it be tracking record time or break time' (2016, p.271). Having orchestrated the piece in Sibelius beforehand and knowing the location of key dynamic markers made it easier to control automation of each instrument, increasing it at points to make the countermelody more prominent. Negative delays and nudging were techniques employed to combat the plugin's notably slow attack, and the only reverb added came through my bussing and track stacking, to avoid the track sounding muddy. Binaural panning was also employed – from the perspective of the conductor – to make the orchestra sound as spatially interesting and give a new dimension to the piece.

While the score for *CIVVI* (in the late-game, at least) derives considerably from the orchestral resplendence of its contemporaries, Phil Boucher (the games co-composer, noted for his work on *XCOM: Chimera Squad* and *Fortnite*) is not orchestrally centred. In an interview for *Pushsquare*, Boucher notes that, while every composer in an audio department is a 'great musician', all of them have access to the same samples, subsequently making all the music sound the same. In creating his own samples and synthesisers, Boucher builds the pedestal that he himself musically stands on (Push Square, 2018). All *CIVVI*'s "Atomic" themes, remixed by Boucher, heavily originate from this school of thinking. This is most notably captured in *Scarborough Fair*. The oscillator doubling the Viola and Trombone (1:32-1:45), on top of the unique high-pass arpeggiator cutting through the primarily mid-based variation section (2:13-2:15) helps Boucher both stamp his own stylings onto the soundtrack, and musically demonstrate the era that the game world has transformed into.

Boucher's work in foley and synthesis, riding on principle composer Geoff Knorr's orchestration, is what would primarily inspire my work on *Under The Harvest Moon*.

To this extent, I swapped out the timpanis and suspended cymbals (usually reserved for rhythmic responsibilities) for Logic's Roland TR-808 emulator, allowing my bass to be tuned and for my low-end to have a more immediate attack. Additionally, as Boucher did, I doubled the principle melody with a piano with an egregious amount of reverb (provided by Logic's "SpaceDesigner". Finally, I recreated the aforementioned sine wave oscillator using the RS2 synthesiser native to Logic. It repeats from trough to peak every four bars, and reaches the nadir of its amplitude at 2:01, coinciding with the fortissimo section refraining the piece's main theme.

Overall, the track does an incredible job at not only being faithful to the source material, but in bringing classical music to a new contemporary light. If this project is developed further, employing specialist musicians to play in sections that are more exposed in the mix (Flute 1 in m.22, for example) would build further synthesis between the computer and the sheet music; even just a 10% inclusion of recorded instruments 'builds realism and fools listeners into believing the entire project is real... without breaking the bank' (ibid., p. 47).

CHAPTER TWO: VICINITY

In a stark contrast to the rather formulaic and stereotypically classist nature of contemporary classical and romantic music, the genre of Lo-fi (recordings with sub-professional and flawed sound quality) have boomed in popularity since the commercialisation of the DIY studio set-up (MasterClass, 2021). Underpinned by house jazz harmonies, hip-hop beats and economically viable hardware and samples, the content of Lo-fi and indie music as a whole explores the authentic experience of music creation, and ‘protest[s]... against the church of mainstream music’ (Fonarow, 2006, p.28). It is no surprise, then, that the reception towards a breaking of the musical “establishment” has been covered overwhelmingly negatively. R. Murray Schafer for example, in his *The Tuning of the World* goes as far to say that the genre is synonymous with ‘overcrowd[ed]’ urban environments, has alluded to the genre being a ‘problem’ and has referred to its ‘unfavourable signal-to-noise ratio’ as a ‘sound sewer’ (1999, pp. 91; 237; 272).

Henceforth, when looking for vocalists to top line the track, I wanted their inflections and timbre to not only stand out in the mix (as a mid-ranged female slotting in between the rumble of the bass and the highs of the piano) but to match the rebellious nature of the genre’s positioning; the vocals, at least in this case, according to Brian Warwick ‘really [are] the most important part of the song’ (Simmons, 2018). Bringing on Gemma Barnes to help me in this project then, an alto who in her own words is inspired by ‘the utopian world that she, and many others, have been led to believe in’, was sensible in both replicating the genres message, and Eloise’s vocal inflections” (Barnes, 2021). Barnes main vocals were subsequently made extremely dry, with little reverb in order to create an intimate environment between her and the listener. When considering that both *Vicinity* and the primary reference track *Who’s She* are both about the closeness of the protagonist to their partner, this production styling it matches the lyrical content perfectly. Monophonic flex-pitching was employed on Barnes’ voice when creating the ritardando during the piece’s outro, to homorhythmically match and double the Spitfire LABS “soft piano” playing an octave above it. Finally, though done in slight contrast to the style of the genre, light amounts of vocal correction (provided by Melodyne) were used on Barnes’ voice to smooth out transitions in phrases, especially during the more melismatic first verse. With that said, strong essences and lip smacks in Barnes’ inflection were decidedly kept into the performed recording to keep the vocals underpinned to the DIY recording values mentioned earlier.

Considering that the name of the genre itself refers to the lo-fidelity quality recordings and recording equipment used by its pioneers, imperfections in this track are more expected, not just advised:

”Mistakes” of a more traditionally musical sort – typically attributed to “amateurism” – such as wrong chords, imperfect timing or tuning are also common and can be considered *performance imperfections* (the larger category within which performance noises can be included) (Harper, 2014).’

Fortunately, Izotope’s free “Vinyl” plugin allowed me to run the mono cracklings of a vinyl record underneath the entirety of the piece, creating a vintage soundscape which (as briefly mentioned previously) is a stereotypical genre synchdote of lo-fi music. Additionally, the track is underpinned by a binaural recording of Kings Cross station. Sudden imperfections interjections in the mix, including the intercom announcement of a train waiting to depart during the middle of the second pre-chorus (1:20-1:34), hint at the piece’s rudimentary production quality. This sort of diegetic sound can also be heard in the opening 56 seconds of Tom Misch’s *Before Paris* (a London-based contemporary to Eloise).

Other elements in which I have extrapolated mainstream lo-fi writing techniques involve *Vicinity*’s structure and the layering of its bassline. The first chorus does not arrive until 1:36 into the song, and both the first two verses and pre-preceding it it are inconsistent in length. While this is most definitely a skewed listening experience, I would connect this more to the spontaneity of mine and Barnes’ song writing session (attributed to the independence of the genre) rather than through any compositional mishap. As Sally Margaret Joy notes, ‘perfect[ion] doesn’t have to mean smooth, shiny, verse-chorus-middle eight and top name producers twiddling millions of knobs’ (1992). Finally, I took particular inspiration for the prominent bassline in the chorus from Tony Lanez’s *Say It*. The introductory hook right before the first drop, referring to the prescribed values people give to you just from your looks, exemplify the indie, rebellious nature of the lo-fi genre that has been already documented (Multiple Contributors, 2015). The sudden bassline is suddenly a response, almost in angst, at the way society – and those you love – have treated you. To emulate this with *Vicinity*, I sampled a kick drum in from a Lo-Fi sample pack, and homorhymically doubled it with two bases: an 808 sub-bass and the “Chaotic filter lead” (provided by the

Alchemy synth, courtesy of Logic). The former provided an extra percussive nature to the beat, while the latter has a longer sustain and release (in addition to also being an oscillator and bringing rhythmic interest in the lower end of the EQ).

Though a large step outside my comfort zone, I found taking inspiration from Lo-Fi artists and songs an exceptionally enriching experience. Tighter backing vocal takes in the third pre-chorus (2:10-2:27) and a real guitarist playing the arpeggio lines are two aspects in which the track can improve in, but I believe the track functions as an early level introduction into the expansiveness of the genre.

CHAPTER THREE: TIME TO WRITE

The same genetic leap cannot be said for ballad rock-pop: a genre receiving renewed mainstream coverage with the release of Adele's "30". Features of the, albeit extensively documented, genre includes a pitch-perfect vocal performance (pushing the performer to their apex) accompanied by primarily organic instruments and washed in an egregious amount of reverb. This is emphasised throughout both Adele's *Easy On Me* and *Hello*, however can be observed in many other artists including Lana Del Rey, Leona Lewis and Alicia Keys. Such a recognisable musical zeitgeist is not down to a lack of musical inspiration, but an extensive knowledge of the target audience. Adele's refusal to work with TikTok, as revealed in an interview with Apple Music, is both a rejection of the new mainstream and a call to action: 'who's making the music for my generation?... I would do that job, gladly.. I don't want 12-14-year-olds listening to this record; it's a bit too deep' (Apple Music, 2021).

This, on a surface level, is what Adele brings to her performances, and what successful contemporary ballads thrive upon: unwavering authenticity and control in both her delivery and her communication, even for that which was not sung. Paul Epworth comments how, when recording *Rolling in the Deep* (and to help Adele manage her anger after the breakdown of her most recent relationship), he instructed her to hit a loose wooden step between the recording and control rooms, in a musical way that represented her anger: this would later become the opening kick drum for the song (Tosovic, 2018).

This almost cathartic release of emotion is something I wanted to, and to an extent did, achieve while writing this piece. The song's lyrics speak to my frustration in suffering from writers block, while underpinning my anger at the fast paced nature by which the industry forces me to write in, a fact that is – indeed – exacerbated by this very assignment. Writing this song made me 'feel completely free... [to] show [my] innermost soul' (Rubin, 2020). Whether this emotional goal will be perceived by my audience or not will not only be down to their listening habits, but as to whether the novelty of lyrical dissonance activates subconsciously. The act of taking away positive experience from a piece that, while in a major key, has sombre lyrical themes, has been thoroughly documented, though with contradicting results. Kazuma Mori and Makato Iwanaga provided evidence that listening to sad songs in fact provokes positive valence in listeners (2014). On the other hand, Kelly Jakubowski and Tuomas Eerola are that in fact music evokes 'relatively positive memories

regardless of its valence, with negative-sounding music reliably bringing back more positive memories than negative sounds/words' (2021).

Recorded on a cardioid condenser microphone, heavy compressor (Logic's in-built platinum detail compressor and an emulator of an 1176) were implemented and were side chained to the kick, to combat the metallic sound of the microphone. Two hall reverbs and a delay were added at different times to create the egregious reverb. Some pitch corrections through Melodyne were provided sparingly to give a pitch-perfect performance & two double tracks were added to the final chorus in order to build suspense: harmonies would have been added later on in production however, ironically, time was of the essence. Lastly, the ensemble was derived from synthetic elements native to Logic or found via external plugins (such as the rhythm section derived from Kontakt-based Native Instruments plugins to save money and increase practicality). One of many significant creative decisions that backfired, though, was the employment of Logic's in-built "Steinway Piano" emulator (over a Spitfire LABS piano plugin) to handle chordal movement. This was initially to emulate the quick attack and higher frequencies captured in *Easy On Me*. However, as my vocal range is substantially lower than Adele's, both myself and the piano ended up sitting in the middle-range of frequencies, thus not giving enough room to the extremities, and making the middle incredibly muddy.

By my own admission, this is the weakest track of all my submissions, and one that I am not particularly proud of. While the lyrics are thoughtful and the melodies are memorable, the arrangement of the track is cheesy and leaves a lot to be desired. Though a thoughtful Fauré into how my own ballad-pop repertoire could be expanded, this track would – in hindsight – work better as a stripped-back piano and vocal piece, in the style of Keaton Henson's *Prayer*. For this to work, though, recording on a microphone that better suited my vocal needs (a Shure SM7B over the sharpness of a Rode NT1A, for example) would be not just a wish, but a must.

CONCLUSIONS

The creative volatility of the modern musical landscape, to conclude, has resulted in producers diversifying their musical palette ever further, to crest the wave of exponentially more genre-specific tidal waves. The reference tracks, while in some cases only displaying one unique feature of the chose genre, represent the vibrancy and quality of the ever-expansive streaming service and are defining songs for their genre. To varying degrees of success, I have been faithful to those pieces and created marketable tracks that would fit comfortably in curated playlists of their musical contemporaries.

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APPENDIX 1

Under The Harvest Moon

Art. George Bone

English Folk Song

The image shows a page of a musical score, likely for a symphony, featuring various instruments. The score is written in 4/4 time and includes dynamic markings such as *mp*, *mf*, *f*, and *sf*. A rehearsal mark 'A' is present at the top. The instruments listed on the left include Flute, Oboe, Cor Anglais, Clarinet in Bb, Bassoon, Horn in F, Trumpet 1 in C, Trumpets in C, Trombone, Bass Trombone, Tuba, Timpani, Percussion, Harp, Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, and Double Bass. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and slurs. The tempo is marked as *j = 120*. The score is divided into two systems, with the first system ending at measure 15 and the second system starting at measure 16. The instruments are arranged in a standard orchestral layout, with woodwinds and brass in the upper staves and strings in the lower staves. The score includes various dynamic markings and articulations, such as *mp*, *mf*, *f*, and *sf*, as well as slurs and accents. The tempo is marked as *j = 120*. The score is divided into two systems, with the first system ending at measure 15 and the second system starting at measure 16. The instruments are arranged in a standard orchestral layout, with woodwinds and brass in the upper staves and strings in the lower staves.

This page of a musical score contains the following staves and markings:

- Fl. 1:** Flute 1, measures 1-25, dynamic *p* at measure 25.
- Ob.:** Oboe, measures 1-25.
- C. A.:** Clarinet in A, measures 1-25.
- Cl. 1 (Bb):** Clarinet in Bb, measures 1-25.
- Bsn. 1:** Bassoon 1, measures 1-25.
- Bsn. 2:** Bassoon 2, measures 1-25.
- Hrn. (F):** Horn in F, measures 1-25, dynamic *p* at measure 25.
- Hrn. (C):** Horn in C, measures 1-25.
- Tpt. 1:** Trumpet 1, measures 1-25.
- Tpt. 2:** Trumpet 2, measures 1-25.
- Tbn. 1:** Trombone 1, measures 1-25.
- Tbn. 2:** Trombone 2, measures 1-25.
- B. Tbn.:** Baritone Trombone, measures 1-25.
- Tba.:** Tuba, measures 1-25.
- Timp.:** Timpani, measures 1-25.
- Perc.:** Percussion, measures 1-25.
- Hp. 1:** Harp 1, measures 1-25, dynamic *mp* at measure 25.
- Vln. I:** Violin I, measures 1-25, dynamic *p* at measure 25.
- Vln. II:** Violin II, measures 1-25, dynamic *p* at measure 25.
- Vla.:** Viola, measures 1-25, dynamic *p* at measure 25.
- Vc.:** Violoncello, measures 1-25, marking "senza sord." at measure 25.
- Db.:** Double Bass, measures 1-25, marking "senza sord." at measure 25.

30 C 35

Fl. 1 2 *pp*

Ob.

C. A.

Cl. 1 (Bb) 2 *pp*

Bsn. 1 2 *mp*

Hrn. (F) 1 2 *mp* 2. *p* *mf*

3 4 *p* 3. *p* *mf*

Tpt. 1 (C)

Tpts. (C) 2 3

Tbn. 1 2 *mf* *mp* *mf*

B. Tbn.

Tba.

Timp.

Perc.

Hp. 1

Vln. I *mp*

Vln. II *mp* *unis.*

Vla.

Vc.

Db.

Fl. 1 2 *p* *mf* *ff* **D** 40

Ob. *p* *mf* *ff*

C. A. *mf* *ff*

Cl. 1 (Bb) 2 *ff*

Bsn. 1 2 *ff*

Hr. (F) 1 2 *f* *ff* *a2*

3 4 *f* *ff* *a2*

Tpt. 1 (C) *mf*

2 3 *p* *f* *a2* 2

Tbn. 1 2 *f*

B. Tbn. *f*

Tba. *f*

Timp. *mf* *p* *f*

Perc.

Hp. 1 *ff*

Vln. I *mf* *ff* **D**

Vln. II *mf* *ff*

Vla. *mf* *ff*

Vc. *mf* *f* *ff*

Db. *mf* *f* *ff*

45 E 50

1 Fl. 2 *p*

Ob. *p*

C. A. *p*

Cl. 1 (B) 2 *p* 2.

Bsn. 1 2 *mf* *sf*

Hrn. (F) 1 2 3 4

Tpt. 1 (C) *p*

Tpt. 2 (C) 3 *p* *sf*

Tbn. 1 2

B. Tbn. *mf*

Tba. *mf*

Timp. *f* *mf*

Perc.

Hp. I

Vln. I E

Vln. II

Vla. *sf* *dim.* *unis.*

Vc. *sf*

Db. *mf* *f*

8

F

1. *mf* 65 rit.

Fl. 1
2

Ob.

C. A.

Cl. 1
(Bb) 2

Bsn. 1
2

Hrn. (F)
1 2
3 4

Tpt. 1 (C)

2
Tpts (C) 3

Tbn. 1
2

B. Tbn.

Tba.

Timp.

Perc.

Hp. I

F

Vln. I *div.* *p* *rit.* *unis.*

Vln. II *div.* *p* *unis.*

Vla. *p* *mf* *p*

Vc. *div.* *p*

Db. *p*