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From *Skyrim* to *Skellige*: Fantasy Video Game Music Within a Neo-Mediaevalist Paradigm

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Situated within similar digital fantasy environments, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* and *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* share numerous aspects of design, including geographical formations, architectural design, and cultural indicators. Music cues are also implemented in similar ways in both games, with either layered stems or complete tracks dynamically adapting to the players' actions. While both their non-diegetic scores aim to support landscape and emotion within the gameworld, differing musical approaches see various utilizations of orchestral, vocal, and folk music elements. It is in fact the diegetic music found in each gameworld, predominantly performed by characters throughout the environments, that share the most musical commonalities in approach yet differ vastly in output. This in-game music espouses approximations of fourteenth-century and neo-mediaevalist traditions, but as creations of fantasy these musical endeavours are often historically inaccurate. This presents a compelling musical dichotomy of fantasy tropes and historical depictions, and it is these differing musical approaches that this article aims to explore.

Introduction

As in film and other media, the music of video games plays a critical role in the substantiation of a game's narrative and setting. It is subject to the composition and genre tropes that reinforce understandings of musical style in storytelling. Games set in worlds of high fantasy often employ the sweeping string passages, bombastic percussion parts, powerful choral choruses, and lush orchestral sounds associated with this genre. They also must contend with a neo-mediaevalist fraying typical of fantasy media, which tends to embed traditional and folk music influences within cultural settings indicative of a European Middle Ages epoch. The vast, freely navigable gameworlds of open-world fantasy games often feature numerous and disparate cultural areas, whose constituents require musical delineation. The complexities of this musical construction are compounded by the non-linearity of video games characterized by abrupt changes in gameplay. Two open-world games have been analysed in an investigation of compositional and technological approaches to this genre: *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Softworks, 2011) (*Skyrim*) and *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt, 2015) (*Witcher 3*). Both are set in similar fantasy gameworlds, and research into the music of *Skyrim* and *Witcher 3* reveals relatable creative intent but contrasting musical design and implementation into game software. The

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discordance of anachronistic music elements within diegetic performances and their relationship to the non-diegetic score, and their effective confluence, are discussed in this article. Based on this research, the analytical process employed here would likely yield compelling results through its application both to other games within the games' series and to games of the broader open-world fantasy video game canon.

Nate Garrelts notes that 'as digital games have become more technologically advanced, the possibilities for interaction within the world of a game have also exponentially increased'.¹ This suggests that a greater number of assets, including of a musical and sound effect kind, can be encoded within a game. The ever-expanding size of gameworlds and their increasingly realistic visual elements have thus come to require musical accompaniment of commensurate creative and artistic sophistication. 'For almost as long as there has been modern rock music, there has been video games',² Brendan Keogh writes, yet compared with cinema, as video games often are, the medium is relatively new. Games have, as in cinema, adopted an orchestral aesthetic of relative cultural familiarity. Steven Reale posits that in 'many video games, the musical score functions in a manner of typical film scores ... to amplify, heighten the intensity of, or provide emotional or ironic commentary on a narrative unfolding',³ and fantasy game scores share design tropes found in media of this genre.

Text 1: *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim is a role-playing game (RPG) developed by Bethesda Game Studios. It is considered to be one of the leaders of the open-world style, and recently it is still amongst the top ten best-selling video games on all platforms.⁴ The game is renowned for its vast array of features, from design to storyline, and for its freedom of choice and software engine. Another of the key components in its success as a fantasy game is its use of music and the soundtrack created by composer Jeremy Soule.

Score

Mark Lampert, the sound designer and audio director for *Skyrim*, describes the game's main theme, titled 'Dragonborn', as being 'rooted in the *Elder Scrolls* theme that people ... know and love ... which first premiered in *Morrowind* [Bethesda Softworks, 2002]'.⁵ *Skyrim* director Todd Howard wanted the main musical theme to encapsulate the game's integral narrative element of dragons. These fantastical monsters and their culture figure

1 Nate Garrelts (ed.). *Digital Gameplay: Essays on the Nexus of Game and Gamer* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2005), 3.

2 Brendan Keogh, 'You Can't Ignore the Cultural Power of Video Games Any Longer', Australian Broadcasting Corporation (Accessed 28 November 2016), <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-04-06/keogh-why-you-should-care-about-video-games/7303744>

3 Steven Reale, 'Transcribing Musical World; or, Is *L.A. Noire* a Music Game?', in *Music in Video Games: Studying Play*, ed. K.J. Donnelly, Neil Lerner, and William Gibbons (New York and London: Routledge, 2014), 77.

4 Chris Suellentrop, "'Skyrim' Creator on Why We'll Have to Wait for Another 'Elder Scrolls'", *Rolling Stone* (Accessed 10 July 2017), <http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/features/skyrim-creator-todd-howard-talks-switch-vr-and-elder-scrolls-wait-w451796>

5 Game Informer, 'Behind The Scenes On Composing *Skyrim*'s Theme', YouTube (Accessed 1 August 2016), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HoSV1CERCr0>

prominently in the game, which prompted the designers to invent the mythical 'Dovahzul' language. The purpose of this effort was the creation of a linguistic component of the fictional dragon culture, similar to the original language constructs that J.R.R. Tolkien used to differentiate species in his *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Howard wanted a song 'that works in dragon language, that rhymes with the *Elder Scrolls* theme, when translated into English also makes sense, and rhymes'.⁶ This lyrical content was envisioned as being 'sung by a barbarian choir',⁷ thus denoting the rough-hewn brutality of an unforgiving, frigid Nordic setting. Soule's 'Dragornborn' takes the melodic idea already established as the main theme of the series and adds a modest reharmonization and specific orchestration to sonically reflect the game designers' intent. 'The main theme of the game set the tone for the rest of the game, Soule said,⁸ and it has subsequently become something of a cult phenomenon, especially with audiences who attend live performances of game music.'⁹

An integral part of *Skyrim's* immersive experience, Soule's music often reinforces the idea of the Nordic/European mediaeval period that is visually present. By employing a variety of techniques ranging from orchestration, the use of acoustic and folk instruments such as harp and drums, and Renaissance compositional techniques, Soule's compositions provide a strong aural support for the diverse soundscape for *Skyrim*. These compositions are experienced by the player in both diegetic and non-diegetic states, and in both forms they serve to reinforce the immersion for the player in a constructed mediaeval setting. This setting is reinforced through a clear visual style reminiscent of both mediaeval and Scandinavian Viking architecture, with castles made of cubic stone, timber houses with thatched roofing, cobblestone marketplaces, limited internal furnishings, and a central focus on hearths inside buildings. Tim Summers explains that games with historic settings inform the player about these historic periods through a combination of established historic devices and an overall sense of distance from our present-day world.¹⁰ *Skyrim's* approach to an historic setting, Summers writes, is more of a mix of styles from the past than a re-creation of an authentic period style. This can be seen in the design of the tavern house, in which visual aesthetics and a clear use of music combine to suspend the player's sense of disbelief and provide a taste of the 'past'.

As mentioned earlier, *Skyrim's* diegesis lies comfortably within the quasi-Nordic/neo-mediaevalist¹¹ fantasy paradigm, and Soule's score often reflects the 'lush, sweeping and very noble'¹² orchestral qualities typically found in other media of this genre. While this article does not seek to provide a comprehensive comparison between fantasy game music and 'Hollywood music',¹³ it is worth noting that the two media have thematic and

6 Bethesda Softworks, 'The Sound of *Skyrim*', YouTube (Accessed 1 August 2016) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QLnPwnJjcFQ&t=5s>

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 James S. Tate, 'The Allure of the "JRPG Sound" Within Video Game Concerts' (paper presented at the Ludomusicology Videogame Music Research Group's Sixth Easter Conference on Video Game Music and Sounds, Bath, UK, 22 April 2017).

10 Tim Summers, *Understanding Video Game Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 96–7.

11 James Cook, 'Playing with the Past in the Imagined Middle Ages: Music and Soundscape in Video Game', *Sounding Out* (Accessed 26 April 2017), <https://soundstudiesblog.com/tag/james-cook/>

12 upagainstthewall (pseud.), 'Howard Shore *The Fellowship of the Ring*', sputnik music (Accessed 3 April 2017), <https://www.sputnikmusic.com/review/30166/Howard-Shore-The-Fellowship-of-the-Ring/>

13 Summers, *Understanding Video Game Music*, 143.

instrumentation commonalities. Howard Shore's use of fortissimo low brass and bombastic percussion accentuations to drive musical themes in *The Lord Of The Rings* films is highly reminiscent of *Skyrim*'s main theme. In writing for *The Chronicles of Narnia* film franchise, Harry Gregson-Williams similarly uses a bombastic aesthetic, and he also infuses the scores with romanticized string passages and liberal use of a massed choir.¹⁴ These musical elements can be found in the score for *Skyrim* and are experienced extemporaneously by the player during free exploration.

In employing archetypal fantasy musical flavours, Soule's score is by no means a facile pastiche of cinematic musicscapes. Rather, it is a highly complex narrative component constructed to both espouse the musical traditions of the *Elder Scrolls* series and to give *Skyrim* its own sonic identity. As with most video games, it is not only the musical qualities but also how and when the music is experienced that conveys meaning to the player. With open-world games frequently featuring multitudinous fictional races, locations, and cultures, focus naturally lies heavily in delineating these constitutive elements of the gameworld. Music can be harnessed to achieve such goals. Miller's descriptive distinctions of in-game radio stations that 'correspond closely to different parts of the gameworld' (423) in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (Rockstar Games, 2004)¹⁵ are evidence that music can be, if not directly tied to, certainly connected with specific in-game locations. Reale discusses the concept of a transformational music network 'that is isographic to the geography'¹⁶ of a gameworld and informs the player of their place within a game. Cumulative hours of analytical play with *Skyrim* suggest that while many musical score components may be experienced throughout the gameworld, some passages are coded into the game engine so that the likelihood of hearing certain cues in certain areas is increased. In other words, 'associating specific musical cues with specific game-world locations'¹⁷ helps to 'promote a spatial listening experience for the player'.¹⁸

A manifest example is the track 'The Streets of Whiterun', heard upon the player entering *Skyrim*'s significantly featured central city of that name. Built upon a recursively rising and diatonically major harmonic progression, the legato movement of the single cello melody stands out from its soft, lush orchestrated backing of strings, occasional cymbal swells, and female choral parts. The impression is one of quiet and resolute optimism, encouraging the player to explore in safety the variety of non-player characters (NPCs), interior locations, and quest lines that can be found within Whiterun's walls (Figure 1).

While this track is obviously eponymously connected with the in-game city, less stringent connections with geographical locations may be experienced by the player, and Lampert provides insight into these associations. He explains that the designers 'don't script the music too heavily ... and it has a weird way of justifying itself to you. You feel like this big sweeping score as I'm rounding this bend and seeing this mountainous valley view is playing for you'.¹⁹ This can also result in entirely non-scripted experiences, during which the game cues part of the score that may never have been heard by players in their

14 *The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian (Original Motion Picture Soundtrack)*, by Harry Gregson-Williams (Walt Disney Records D000074202, 2008).

15 Kiri Miller, 'Jacking the Dial: Radio, Race, and Place in "Grand Theft Auto"', *Ethnomusicology* 51/3 (2007), 402–38.

16 Steven B. Reale, "'A Musical Atlas of Hyrule: Video Games and Spatial Listening'" (paper presented at the annual meeting for the Society for Music Theory, St. Louis, MO, 29 October–1 November 2015).

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Bethesda Softworks, 'Sound of *Skyrim*'.

The Streets of Whiterun
reduced score excerpt

♩ = 45

Violoncello

Strings and choral harmonic backing

Vc.

Dr.

Chord progressions for Violoncello: F#m7 E/G# Amaj7 B(sus4) B F#m7 E/G# Amaj7 B(sus4) B

Chord progressions for Vc.: F#m7 E/G# Amaj7 B(sus4) B F#m7 E/G# Amaj7 B(sus4) B C#m E/G#

Figure 1. Reduced Score Excerpt from the Track ‘The Streets of Whiterun’.

current locations. To maintain overall music–location–narrative congruency, such dynamic gameplay examples rely necessarily on Soule’s consistency of musical construction.

Stylistically, the majority of *Skyrim*’s non-combat cues feature lilting melodies, drawn-out chord progressions, and ambience-oriented sounds. This partly reflect Soule’s own neo-Romantic approaches and composition influences, which include Benjamin Britten and Ralph Vaughn Williams, the latter of whom, incidentally, was very much influenced by the Tudor and Elizabethan music that seems to inform the non-diegetic musical elements in *Skyrim*.²⁰ A comparative reflection on Vaughn Williams’ ‘The Lark Ascending’ highlights the similarities in the single melodic line approach with gradual orchestral harmonic support in the majority of Soule’s non-combat music.

Narratologically, musical elements heard predictably in certain in-game locations support the player’s association between these elements. This and more chance-based musical experiences relying on sustained musical aesthetics provide a dynamic musical accompaniment to gameplay. This combination of dependability and dynamism could be viewed through the lens of Caillois’ *paidia* (free improvisation and gaiety) and *ludus* (that which absorbs and disciplines impulsiveness) polemic bookends of a gamic chaos and order continuum.²¹ With changes in gameplay often being instigated by the player’s actions, the music and story pacing of games must be able to adapt accordingly. This characteristic non-linearity of video games is ‘one of the primary distinctions between video games and the more linear world of film and television, in which the playback is typically fixed’.²²

Composers have developed processes to attenuate these constant changes enacted by the player and by gameplay in general. A common form this takes is the creation of cues that consist of musical ‘stems’ that can be layered, subtracted, and altered by the game engine in real time, as per the flow of gameplay. Approaches vary; the first-person shooter *Goldeneye 007* (Rare, 1997) uses finite tracks that loop until linearly-bound checkpoints

20 Global, ‘Vaughan-Williams Re-Assessed’, Classic FM (Accessed 10 July 2017), <http://www.classicfm.com/composers/vaughan-williams/guides/vaughan-williams-re-assessed/>

21 Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 13.

22 Karen Collins, *Game Sound* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 4.

are reached by the player, and the open-world game *Red Dead Redemption* (Rockstar North, 2010) uses a construct of interchangeable stems written consistently in the key of A minor and at a tempo of 120 beats per minute.²³ The latter exploits the uniformity of musical design to combine musical elements of varying intensity to denote such states of play as the approaching of an enemy or the undisturbed beauty of an in-game region, all with the intention of denoting a state of play for the player.

Skyrim's non-diegetic score functions similarly, but in a design method seemingly at odds with the game's otherwise sophisticated construction, musical cues often change abruptly. While traversing an area of the gameworld with complementary music playing, the player may be jolted out of his or her engagement by a sudden, explosive timpani strike. Semiotically, this informs the player of an approaching enemy. If that enemy cannot yet be seen, the abrupt and total change in musical mood is most likely interpreted as a pre-defined act of the game engine. Once an enemy enters a specific proximal distance to the on-screen avatar, however, the music changes accordingly as a sonic warning to the player, and this can result in varying responses. By avoiding a smooth transition of musical cues, any advanced state of flow that the player may be experiencing is broken, and in this sense the programming of the score could be viewed as flawed. This example nonetheless highlights an immediate communication of important information to the player. The ludic necessity of this music cannot be understated, and the unexpected jolt in musical qualities makes the cue instantly noticed. The design of these musical transitions is akin to similar gameplay instances in the second section of this article.

Tavern Music

Further examples of this music–location–narrative congruency can be found within the tavern music of *Skyrim* and the use of bards who perform a variety of solo voice pieces with various accompaniments. Interaction with these NPCs in *Skyrim* is both direct and indirect, with the bards often performing independently in the corner of a tavern until the player engages with them. By engaging with the bard, the player can discuss the current events of the narrative or make a request from five songs, at which point the non-diegetic music in the background becomes silenced for the sake of the bard's performance. The image of the bards usually features simple peasant-like garments and instruments such as a skin drum, a wooden flute, or a hybrid instrument that is a cross between a lute and a lyre. Whilst the lute-lyre is clearly a fictional design, it helps, along with the drum and the wooden flute, to enforce the idea of a period before industrialization. An example of a bard is shown in [Figure 2](#).

The bardic repertoire includes a variety of strophic pieces featuring topics that range from heroic deeds to the putting down of rebellious uprisings. This deliberate use of lyrical focus is a clear link to the types of pieces favoured by thirteenth- and fourteenth-century troubadours.²⁴ Whilst mostly strophic in approach to melody, the forms of these pieces vary and are similar to the forms of European secular songs from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.²⁵ [Table 1](#) presents the song forms for each piece.

23 RockstarGamesAus, 'Behind the Scenes of the Red Dead Redemption Soundtrack', YouTube (Accessed 3 August 2016), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fVfczLhb7yY>

24 Peter Burkholder, Donald J. Grout, and Claude Palisca, *Norton Anthology of Western Music* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), 76–8.

25 *Ibid.*

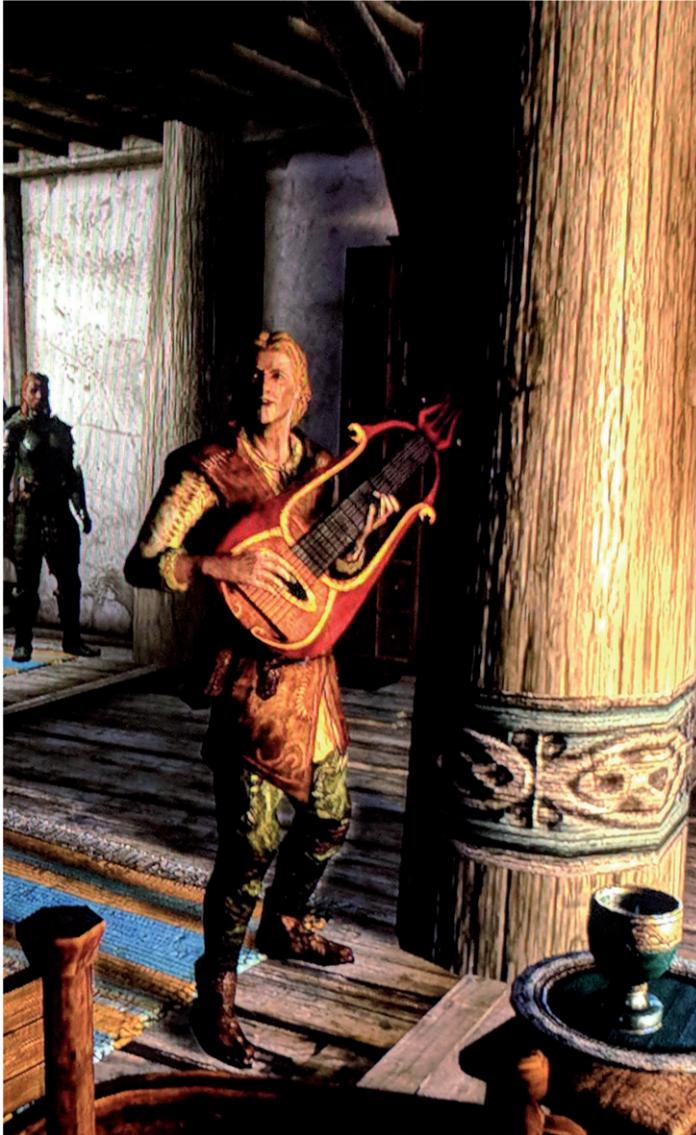


Figure 2. Sven the tavern bard of Riverwood performing in *Skyrim*.

The bardic approach is extended even further by Bethesda Game Studios through the inclusion of a wandering bard known as Talsgar the Wanderer. Although his appearance is randomized in various locations around the map, he can be engaged with in conversation by the user in the same way as bards in taverns, and upon request he performs one of three songs. Talsgar's repertoire and style are the same as those of the bards found in taverns, but his random spawning provides a novel reference to the wandering bards of Irish, Scottish, and British lore.²⁶ The overall aesthetic that is encouraged in *Skyrim* draws

26 Peter Crossley-Holland, et al., 'Bard', in *Grove Music Online/Oxford Music Online* (Accessed 21 March 2017), <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/02026>

Table 1. Bardic Song Forms in *Skyrim*.

Bardic song	Form
'The Age of Aggression/Oppression' 'Ragnar the Red'	AABAC Through composed (variation on original harmonic progression): ABCDE
'The Dragonborn Comes'	AAB AB ABB
'The Tale of Tongues'	AaaB, AaaB, CcCD, Eeef

upon the pre-mediaeval literature that refers to a bard's almost magical abilities exercised through the use of song and music. For example, the Irish poetic cycles often refer to the deference that ancient society had for bards who, due to their musical prowess, could overpower kings and armies, travel great distances, and often appear in varying locations impossible to the average individual.²⁷ By encountering Talsgar across all regions of *Skyrim*'s map, the player gets the idea that not only is he well travelled but that through his music he can survive a period often fraught with violence.

For the non-diegetic tavern compositions, Soule opts for a Renaissance-inspired style that features a strong focus on classical acoustic guitar/lute and flute/recorder. The five non-diegetic pieces that can be heard are 'Out in the Cold', 'The Bannered Mare', 'Around the Fire', 'A Winter's Tale', and 'A Chance Meeting', with all of them featuring Renaissance dance forms and various period instruments. Already the contradiction in chronology is clear: the Renaissance style of the instrumentation and musical material can arguably be placed anywhere between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries, but the overall Viking/Nordic setting of the narrative takes place in the period between the late eighth and late eleventh centuries. This, however, is not necessarily an issue, as *Skyrim* never intends to be historically accurate; quite the opposite is true, because the fantasy genre allows for a strong element of the unbelievable to be acceptable. In this sense, the game offers a blend of the mythological past, with its main aim being to create not historical accuracy but simply an overall concept of 'past'.

In reflecting the sense of the past, Soule's ambient tavern compositions, such as 'The Bannered Mare', highlight the composer's use of Renaissance dance rhythms, dominant-tonic harmonic progressions, and classical guitar to provide a stark contrast to the twenty-first-century application of technology that is inherent in the gaming experience. Coupled with the imagery and fictional setting, the use of this musical style further reinforces a sense of the past. Soule re-creates the feel of the Renaissance period by composing a piece in triple metre that employs simple rhythmic groupings of dotted crotchets and quavers and of crotchets and minims. Arguably, many Renaissance pieces featured this same rhythmic style; however, the similarity of 'The Bannered Mare' to the internationally recognizable 'Greensleeves' reinforces a not-so-subtle nod to the Tudor period and the song's alleged composer, King Henry VIII of England.²⁸

27 Michael Conran, *The National Music of Ireland: Containing the History of the Irish Bards, the National Melodies, the Harp, and Other Musical Instruments* (London: John Johnson, 1850), 104.

28 Although commonly credited to King Henry VIII as something he wrote for his second wife, Anne Boleyn, recent research suggests instead that the origins of this piece are associated with the Elizabethan period; Henry died in 1547, yet the composition is similar to the Italian works of the second half of the sixteenth century. It is also important to note that for decades the piece was used on ice-cream vans throughout the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand, and that it is commonly used as an 'on hold' theme for telephone lines.

Figures 3 and 4 contrast ‘Greensleeves’ with Soule’s song. In the second bar of both examples there is a dotted crotchet ascending to a quaver and then descending to a crotchet to end the bar. Soule uses this rhythmic motif throughout the piece, and he inverts the melodic direction to create a variation that deviates from ‘Greensleeves’. As his piece continues towards the second theme (B), the primary rhythmic pairings become identical to those of ‘Greensleeves’.

Figure 3. ‘Greensleeves’ Melody.

An examination of the harmonic movement of ‘The Bannered Mare’ shows a chord progression of i - $bVII$ - VI - V - i in D minor and then a secondary harmonic movement of III - $bVII$ - III - V - I . This bears an almost direct similarity to the implied harmony of ‘Greensleeves’ (i - $bVII$ - VI - i - V). Both pieces also feature a similar AABA progression, which again reinforces Soule’s reference to Renaissance popular song. By adhering to a limited compositional palette, Soule deftly avoids any musical cues that highlight the score’s modern origins. The musicscape of *Skyrim* is therefore made up of non-diegetic symphonic fantasy score cues that contrast with historically inspired bardic compositions. The divergences in instrumentation are wide, and these and other design aspects make the *Skyrim* music contrast sharply with that of another game in the fantasy genre.

Figure 4. Theme from ‘The Bannered Mare’.

Text 2: *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*

Like *Skyrim*, *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* is a multi-award-winning RPG and is set in a mythical universe created by Polish author Andrzej Sapkowski.²⁹ Sapkowski developed the *Witcher* series in a collection of novels based on the protagonist Geralt of Rivia, and in it he explores the classic European fantasy themes of mediaeval chivalry, knights, monsters, elves, dwarves, and magic. Although the fictional unnamed continent is divided into four regions, much of the novels and the games take place only in the Northern Kingdoms, a pseudo-European region based on such cultural stereotypes as Germanic/Scandinavian mythology, Celtic mysticism and arts, and central European landscapes. In terms of historical accuracy, these period and culture-specific elements form a disparate blend of influences, yet in a fantasy world these historical anomalies are forgiven. The variegated in-game environments of this ‘simplified Mediaeval Europe’³⁰ are congealed by constructs embedded within the score, including technical implementation, aesthetic choices, and consistency of instrumentation. This part of the article discusses the distinguishing design elements of *Witcher 3*’s score, with its musical and technical analysis contextualized by intermittent reference to *Skyrim*’s score.

Score: *Technical Implementation*

The real-time musical transitions from exploration to combat gameplay states of play in *Witcher 3* are discordant with those in *Skyrim*. Fundamental principles of player notification remain consistent, however. An enemy in *Witcher 3*, upon reaching a pre-determined proximal distance from the on-screen avatar, will result in a change of musical cue. In both games, danger/combat music is generally of a faster tempo, rhythmically combative, and centred in a minor tonality. Concerning logical game design, this aspect of *Witcher 3* is consistent with that of *Skyrim*. The primary difference between the two games lies in the coded implementation of these musical cues.

Rather than playing extended complete musical tracks that are abruptly interrupted by combat tracks, which is often the case in *Skyrim*, *Witcher 3*’s game engine employs a more layered cue-based system. This aims to facilitate a fluidity of dynamic musical changes that was first patented in the software iMUSE (Interactive Music Streaming Engine) by Michael Land and Peter McConnell, composers for the game *Monkey Island 2: LeChuck’s Revenge* (LucasArts, 1991).³¹ By adding and subtracting various music cues in *Witcher 3*, aided by effects such as audio fading and looping, an unbroken flow of music can continue throughout sequential and contrasting experiences. The music adapts to support developing in-game activity, such as when ‘a player ... [is] losing energy, dying or the combat is over’.³² As in *Skyrim*, this non-diegetic music mirrors on-screen gameplay, and ‘the music has to accompany all those events to make the gameplay experience more believable’.³³ The impact of this is perhaps most keenly felt when the music acts in concert with sound

29 Andrzej Sapkowski, *The Last Wish: Introducing The Witcher* (Warsaw: superNOWA publishing, 1992).

30 Cook, ‘Playing with the Past’.

31 Z. Michael Land and Peter N. McConnell, ‘Method and apparatus for dynamically composing music and sound effects using a computer entertainment system. U.S. Patent 5,315,057, filed November 25, 1991, and reissued May 24, 1994’.

32 Cameron Koch, ‘Interview: “The Witcher 3#2 Composer Mikolai Stroinski Talks About How Music Helps Bring The Game To Life’ (Accessed 20 June 2015), <http://www.techtimes.com/articles/53814/20150518/the-witcher-3-wild-hunt-composer-mikolai-stroinski.htm>

33 Ibid.

effect, as part of the game's broader audio design. 'Ambient sounds are very important. Every nuance matters, every change in the weather affects how the world around you will sound', says *Witcher 3*'s senior sound designer Pawał Daudzward.³⁴ The underscore, too, can operate on this more ludically sophisticated level. The individual musical stems that constitute cues can themselves be altered, thereby providing a more nuanced and interactive accompaniment to gameplay. *Witcher 3*'s soundtrack co-composer Mikolai Stroinski explains the use of musical cues to this very effect:

The cues (that were interactive) are divided into smaller layers, which come together, in the case of a combat cue, only when we are dealing with a very powerful enemy. If the enemy is small (let's say a pack of wolves), only the first layer of the piece will play.³⁵

The effect is an unbroken progression of musical cues to support and enhance different states of play, retaining stylistic consistency and facilitating smooth transitions. This is made possible by means of musical cues that are germane to technical implementation. *Witcher 3*'s combat cues, for example, 'are very elaborate in the orchestration, [and] are composed ... on basic riffs which are easy to hum and repeat in an uncomplicated way'.³⁶ By basing complex orchestrations on initially simple themes, specific sections and theme variants of cues are more easily altered as is necessary. The rudimentary instrumentation is of paramount concern here, in spite of the power of these technical implementation processes. It is in this respect that the scores of *Skyrim* and *Witcher 3* most fundamentally differ.

Score: *Locale Aesthetic*

Narrative progression and high fantasy thematic tropes aside, the topography of *Skyrim*'s and *Witcher 3*'s gameworlds share commonalities. Each gameworld features densely forested regions, sheer cliff faces, permafrost-imbued tundra, and frigid, fast-flowing rivers induced by the melted snow from towering mountain ranges. These elements are accurate depictions of Northern European lands and, coupled with neo-mediaevalist bestiaries, mythology, and folklore, epitomize nostalgized fantasy representations of the same areas.³⁷ They are, to wit, the paragon of high-fantasy environment.

As Soule's *Skyrim* score draws more from the school of institutionalized Romantic composition, Stroinski's and co-composer Marcin Przybłowicz's *Witcher 3* score gives traditional folk-oriented music primacy over symphonic grandeur. *Skyrim*'s Haafingar Hold and *Witcher 3*'s Skellige Isles archipelago regions are most closely related in natural land formations, weather patterns, and man-made cultural design. Examples of the two regions are shown in Figures 5 and 6.

A comparison of these two spaces, similar in appearance, highlights the differing musical approaches. While in Haafingar, the player hears the same grand orchestral refrains and solemn choral chants that they would in most other areas of the gameworld. This is not surprising, as there are no boundaries preventing movement to and from the area, which is connected with the rest of the gameworld by marsh, mountainous path, and ocean. The Skellige Isles, by contrast, are only accessible via a fast travel mechanism, transporting the player thither from the central *Witcher 3* map via a brief loading

34 GameSpot, 'Creating The Sound—The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt Official Developer Diary', YouTube (Accessed 17 January 2017), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J-jogZgwf3M>

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

37 Cook, 'Playing with the Past'.



Figure 5. Haafingar Hold in *Skyrim*.



Figure 6. The Skellige Isles in *The Witcher 3*.

animation. They are, in effect, part of the whole, yet removed from the main, and the score reflects this. In eschewing *Skyrim*'s self-characterizing 'northernness' through depictions of Viking-esque barbarianism and design, Skellige embodies a distinct quasi-Celtic/Gaelic influence to the same end (the Skellig Islands that lie some thirteen kilometres off the south-west coast of Ireland share cultural, phonetic, and—most obviously—name similarities with the Skellige Isles in *Witcher 3*). It has been noted that the *Witcher 3* environment looks 'curiously like Scottish islands ... occupied by inhabitants with Irish accents'.³⁸ In so describing it, Cook refers to the diegetic discordance of 'Celtic' folk music deviating from geographical and historical bases in fantasy, and he contends that the

³⁸ *Ibid.*

Witcher 3 score ‘draws on aural cues from the popular Mediaevalism of the filmic soundscape tradition’.³⁹ While this is true, to apply an authenticity-based critique to Skellige’s non-diegetic music would be reductive, as the text (game) itself exists as an affirmed embodiment of high-fantasy characteristics (a point on which Cook agrees). The score seeks, therefore, not to fully replicate a twelfth-century court music canon but only to inspire this connection. This design concept pervades games based in historical eras.⁴⁰ Summers alludes to the contrasts between *Age of Empires* (Microsoft, 1997), ‘which tries to be more accurate and historical’ yet employs ‘Hollywood music that’s associated with historical worlds’ to connote its setting, and *Civilization* [MicroProse, 1991], ‘which does use real-world music’ but is not ‘absolutely historical’.⁴¹

While the *Witcher 3* need not contend with this predicament of historical accuracy, score elements heard in the gameworld are indeed influenced by traditional music of the real-world locales it seeks to reference. The ‘Skellige Isles—[a] region with Celtic, Scottish and Norse references ... had to be reflected in music’,⁴² notes, and the ‘[u]se of bagpipes, flutes and Scandinavian folk instruments corresponds with that setting’.⁴³ Other instrumental and timbral qualities heard in the score of this region include slurring approach notes on a fiddle instrument and muffled folk drum patterns. A haunting tin whistle instrument conjures romanticized associations with the mysteries of naval adventures. The economical reliance of Skellige’s inhabitants upon commercial fishing and inter-island water-based travel marries with this sonic articulation, not dissimilar to parts of James Horner’s score for the film *Titanic* (Cameron, 1997).⁴⁴

Where geographical influences are easily defined, a definite era of musical inspiration is more ambiguous. Predominant musical references to period accuracy appear to be made in the diegetic musical performances of NPCs throughout the *Witcher 3* gameworld. Correspondingly, the game’s non-diegetic music incites a perceived preference of writing for folk instruments not because of how they are played but simply because they existed. Linking instrumentation more accurately with a location than with a style period aligns with Marshall’s neo-mediaeval description of ‘a presentist space that disrupts traditional depictions of the Mediaeval’.⁴⁵

Denser orchestrations are not avoided altogether, and larger string sections recorded by the Brandenburg State Orchestra⁴⁶ combine with percussion as supportive beds for solo instruments. There are few western art music connections to be made regarding the refinement and austerity that a full orchestra tends to axiomatically inspire. In almost complete antithesis, *Skyrim*’s score is constructed for the inherent purpose of marrying the resplendence and majesty of the score with that of the gameworld’s visual elements. *Skyrim*’s score exhibits

39 Ibid.

40 Barnabas Smith, ‘Bringing London Murders to the Australian Stage: An Evolution of Game Music Collaboration and Performance’ (paper presented at the Ludomusicology Videogame Music Research Group’s Sixth Easter Conference on Video Game Music and Sounds, Bath, UK, 21 April 2017).

41 Emily McMillan, ‘Tim Summers Interview: Understanding Video Game Music’, Video Game Music Online (Accessed 12 January 2017), <http://www.vgmonline.net/tim-summers-interview/>

42 Interview mit Marcin Przybyłowicz”, interview by ICO Radio, last modified June 21, 2015, <http://www.ico-radio.de/2015/06/show-79-the-witcher-3-komponist-im-interview/>

43 Ibid.

44 *Titanic: Music from the Motion Picture*, by James Horner (Sony Music Entertainment Inc. SK 63213, 1997).

45 David W. Marshall, ‘Neomediaevalism, Identification, and the Haze of Mediaevalisms’, in *Defining Neomediaevalism(s) II*, ed. Karl Fugelso (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2011), 22.

46 GameSpot, ‘Creating The Sound’.

Table 2. Instruments used in the *Skyrim* Tavern Music and the *Witcher 3* Ensemble Pieces.

Game	Instruments employed in 'folk' settings
<i>Skyrim</i>	Classical guitar/lute Wood flute/recorder Fiddle/violin Drum Tambourine/shaker stick Double bass ('A Winter's Tale') Strings (slow drones in 'A Chance Meeting')
<i>The Witcher 3</i>	Bowed gusli Tin whistle Wood flute Ghaychak Tambur Acoustic guitars (nylon and steel string) Lute Hurdy-gurdy Skin drums (double-sided, bodhrán) Fiddle/Renaissance violin Saz Dulcimer (hammered) Cello

a musicscape so intrinsically entwined with the fantasy genre that the timelessness of a score dominated by orchestra and massed choir only affirms its sonic identity. *Witcher 3* conversely possesses a score espousing an earnest approximation of musical traditions idiosyncratic to lower-central Europe within a gameworld that is historically inspired.

Score: Instrumentation

It was posited earlier that the underscore represents differentiated regions in *Witcher 3*. To this end, Sweet argues that 'players need clues ... when they enter a virtual game environment'⁴⁷ and that the musical themes establish a location in a gameworld. The folk instrumentation in Skellige cues supports this assertion. Throughout the entire *Witcher 3* score, traditional instruments and folk-inspired parts provide a consistency of musical aesthetic and its relationship with the environment. Co-composers Przybyłowicz and Stroinski firmly rooted their score in 'authentic' practices. Stroinski comments:

In order to nail the Slavic portion of the soundtrack I had to do some research and listen to a couple of folk bands from Poland but expand it with Balkan music as well. The pivotal point between the two styles is Bulgaria. The rest of my inspiration was folk music from Ireland and Scotland.⁴⁸

Developers at CD Projekt Red and the composers therefore aimed to authentically represent the mediaeval setting of the series through live recordings of folk instruments and actual mediaeval equipment.⁴⁹ Przybyłowicz stated that for elements of the soundtrack 'we

47 Michael Sweet, *Writing Interactive Music for Video Games: Composer's Guide* (Crawfordsville, IN: Pearson Education, 2015), 26.

48 Ibid., 26.

49 GameSpot, 'Creating The Sound'.

worked together with extremely talented [Polish folk ensemble Percival] experts in the field, who really know what folk is and how to play it in order to make it sound authentic.⁵⁰ Their creative decisions saw artists such as Robert Jaworski of the folk band Żywiołek recording lute, hurdy-gurdy, Renaissance fiddle, and bowed gusli sections.⁵¹ Percival added additional traditional instruments such as bouzouki, recorder, acoustic guitar, Renaissance violin, and dulcimer.⁵² Uniquely, the focus on period and history in *Witcher 3*'s soundtrack highlights the importance of traditional, real instruments. Many of Jaworski's instruments, such as the hurdy-gurdy and Renaissance fiddle, were custom built from ancient schematics.⁵³ Other instruments, such as Yaghami's 200-year-old ghaychek and violist Andrew Duckel's seventeenth-century Maggini viola further contribute to the game's period authenticity.⁵⁴ Overall, Przybłowicz believes the instruments allowed cultural breadth in performance, stating: '[o]ne thing you need to be aware of when dealing with Mediaeval or period instruments is that their natural tunings can set the tone for your work'. However, he also iterates that:

the instrument is obviously an important part of the process but if you strip it out of that [cultural attachment] it is just a tool, an object you are using to create music ... so it is how you use it, what kind of sound you produce of that instrument, what kind of scales you use ...⁵⁵

A comparison between the instrumentation of *Skyrim* and *Witcher 3* highlights the contrast in instrumental approach (Table 2).

Przybłowicz further observes that '[t]hese sounds are not something you can make using modern instruments',⁵⁶ and he says that it was this searching for a distinct aesthetic that led to the collaboration with Percival. It proved copacetic, as the band 'formed as a result of [their] fascination with history, experimental, archaeology and historical re-enactment', and a wish to 'spread the knowledge of [their] Slavic history and the traditions of people ... in the Baltic Sea area'.⁵⁷ In addition to recording instrumental parts, much of Percival's contributions to the *Witcher 3* score lie in vocal shouts, exclamations, and singing. Female vocals in particular are most associated with magic and the several deuteragonists who are prominently featured in the game's main quest line. These vocal parts in combination with strings strike a 'balance between certain film scoring techniques and new musical colour that are unique to *Witcher 3*'.⁵⁸

A useful example for dissection is the cue 'Commanding The Fury' that may be heard during *Witcher 3*'s combat gameplay. Stroinski says that the 'raw sound of string and folk instruments lend themselves well to the brutality of the witcher's world'.⁵⁹ This connection made, the different musical characteristics of each gameworld region come into play. Stroinski's composition process began by selecting appropriately Slavic sounds and colours

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.

53 Przybłowicz, 'Slavic Adaptation of Music in "The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt"', Youtube (Accessed Jan 10, 2018), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ChnSuLYKkWc>

54 Stroinski, 'Slavic Adaptation of Music in "The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt"', Youtube (Accessed Jan 10, 2018), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ChnSuLYKkWc>

55 Przybłowicz, 'Slavic Adaptation of Music'.

56 Przybłowicz, 'Creating The Sound'.

57 Percival, 'About us', Percival (Accessed 21 August 2017), <http://www.percival.pl/eng/>

58 Koch, 'Interview'.

59 Ibid.

and then settling on the kemenche and the yali tambour played by Amir Yaghmi. Added to this were large drum parts and vocal shouts to symbolize hand-to-hand sword combat. The final musical cue is heard often during combat gameplay throughout the gameworld, but with a varying instrumentation depending on the region in which it is heard.⁶⁰ This concept of a consistent gameplay theme (engendering memory connections) reimaged with instrumentations specific to different regions (sustaining music–place associations) supports the current musical congealment argument. Other music, however, is more stringently bound to specific regions, such as Skellige. In musically delineating the ‘rural peasant life of the Velen wastelands’,⁶¹ a sustained melancholic motif played by bowed gusli haunts the player’s traversal of the battle-scarred landscape. As is the case for much of the score, a supporting string section and soft, recurring drum patterns accompany the melody, along with intermittent scraping and tinkling sounds.

A distinguishing feature of the overall musical palette of *Witcher 3* is the parity between non-diegetic score and diegetic performance instrumentation. Central to reinforcing the sense of place in the *Witcher 3* soundtrack is the setting of the tavern and outdoor performing areas within the cities and towns.

Folk Performances

Throughout the larger cities of *Witcher 3* a diegetic element of NPC musicians, usually a group of four, is used to reinforce the overall sense of the mediaeval setting. These town minstrels are shown to perform with a sample of the instruments employed by Percival in the recordings with Renaissance fiddle, a transverse flute, a lute, and a skin drum. An example of these NPC musicians is shown in [Figures 7 and 8](#). The composers set themselves the task of embracing the past whilst also meeting the audience’s expectations.⁶²

The songs included in these settings tend to be a collection of lively dances that feature simple rhythms and a single melody on either violin or flute, with simple melodic material focusing on a modal approach. Przybyłowicz decided that these performances focused around the improvisation of the musicians and that these elements were combined in separate recordings.⁶³ To combine these elements and contribute to the *Witcher 3*’s performance identity, Stroinski and Przybyłowicz applied a central key of D minor to allow for differing instrumentalists to apply their own improvisations over the foundation rhythms and chords performed by Percival.⁶⁴ They took note of Percival’s self-taught approach, which further reinforced the score’s folk aesthetic because self-teaching was a genuine attribute common to folk musicians from many cultures.⁶⁵ The cultural ambiguity of these performances is evident as each piece can feature elements common to multiple European traditional styles: the use of drones, complex metre, grace-note ornamentation, dance forms and rhythms, vocalization, and a vast array of folk instruments. As Przybyłowicz states, ‘we looked for a unique sound obviously but what we cared about was the history behind each instrument because we believe that if you pour a lot of soul into the music people will hear it and basically love it’.⁶⁶

60 Cook, ‘Playing with the Past’.

61 Ibid.

62 Przybyłowicz, ‘Slavic Adaptation of Music’; and Stroinski, ‘Slavic Adaptation of Music’.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid.

66 Przybyłowicz, ‘Slavic Adaptation of Music’; and Stroinski, ‘Slavic Adaptation of Music’.



Figure 7. NPC musicians performing.



Figure 8. NPC musicians performing.

This approach also applies to cues heard during the in-game card game called *Gwent*.⁶⁷ The in-game card game activity features two players who compete with decks of cards, usually within a tavern or in a scene involving travelling merchants. When the game player engages in *Gwent*, the screen transitions to a wooden board that features the cards; as the transition occurs once the NPC is invited to play the game, background pieces by Percival begin to sound. Two pieces in particular, 'Drink Up, There's More' and 'A Story You Won't Believe', feature consistent driving rhythms on skin drums (either a bass drum and a frame drum such as a bodhrán) supported by bouzouki, saz, or acoustic guitars. 'A Story You Won't Believe' features a repetitive melody performed by wooden

⁶⁷ Ibid.

Figure 9. 'A Story You Won't Believe', Melody and Rhythm.

flute and focuses on a D natural minor/Aeolian mode. This piece features a driving rhythm from both the bouzouki and the davul drum; the supporting davul drum performs a simple 12/8 shuffle to provide a dance rhythm as shown in [Figure 9](#).

The second piece, 'Drink Up, There's More', is another common occurrence within *Witcher 3*, appearing as both a frequent backing piece during the Gwent card game and as a piece performed by the outdoor musicians. It is similar to the previous example in that it features a small ensemble consisting of flute, skin drums, and saz and is driven by a consistent rhythm and a jumpy melodic theme. In contrast to the previous piece, the use of the saz is more audible as it provides both a drone accompaniment and a jangled rhythm. The main theme is primarily performed by the flute and is interspersed with a section of vamping by the ensemble with a focus on rhythmic and dynamic interplay between the saz and the drums. The melodic content of this theme is much simpler and focuses on repetition between three target notes of G, E, and D, keeping with the overall D minor approach of Przybyłowicz and Stroinski. The tempo is fast and the rhythm has an almost gallop-like feel, with the two sets of drums, bodhrán, and tambour, and it does not deviate throughout the performance. The simplicity of the overall rhythmic and melodic structure reinforces the tavern/folk aesthetic yet provides a distinct musical contrast to the tavern music of *Skyrim's* bards.

The clearest example of diegetic reinforcement of place occurs during the playable quest song 'Broken Flowers', whereby the characters Geralt and Zoltan try to find their friend Dandelion by way of his former love interests around the city of Novigrad. Eventually the pair end up at the Kingfisher Inn in the evening to witness a performance by the female troubadour Priscilla. Priscilla, as we are informed, acts with the local mummers' troupe as well as performing her compositions and poetry nightly at the Kingfisher, and this immediately establishes the setting for her solo recital of 'The Wolven Storm'.

Priscilla's overall image and use of the lute projects an interpretation of the fourteenth-century troubadours as represented in manuscripts such as the *Cantigas de Santa Maria*.⁶⁸ A comparison between Priscilla's image and a troubadour from the *Cantiga de Santa Maria* is shown in [Figure 10](#). These elements, in conjunction with the performance elements of 'The Wolven Storm', strongly reinforce an image of both mediaeval European culture in gnarl and the secular tavern culture of this period.

68 Burkholder, Grout, and Palisca, *Norton Anthology of Western Music*, 72.



Figure 10. Comparison between Priscilla and 14th Century Troubadours.

'The Wolven Storm' features a few key elements to further reinforce the feeling of a fourteenth-century troubadour/trobairitz song: lyrics about love with a mostly syllabic text, a strophic melody with a modal focus, simple harmonic movement primarily between the tonic minor and the dominant, and a basic instrumental accompaniment.⁶⁹ The introduction of the piece features an instrumental refrain performed on lute, although this could possibly be two guitars as the accompaniment features contrapuntal interjections. This is followed by Priscilla performing the melody, which features an AAB form for the verse stanza and an overall structure of AB between verse and refrain. This is typical of troubadour songs, which often feature either an AAB form or a variation of AB-aab-AB, with a stanza bookended by two stanzas.⁷⁰ The overall melody does not deviate far from an Aeolian mode in A minor, and it never employs any chromatic passing tones from the target notes of A, F, and D. The harmonic movement of the piece is equally basic, with a focus on the tonic minor chord and the dominant, with a few inclusions of the VII chord as a substitute for the tonic (Figure 11).

The lyrical structure of the piece can arguably be considered a combination of a *trouvère* style known as *chanson a refrains*, which feature a repeating lyrical motif, and a troubadour style known as *Salut D'amour*, which in essence were love letters. This specific combination has only been noted in the works of the thirteenth-century *trouvère* Phillippe de Rèmei, who is credited with the style of *Salut a refrains* that involved both forms.⁷¹ Although the *Chanson a refrains* style generally features the refrain as a tag at the end of each strophic line, 'The Wolven Storm' can be seen to employ this in a more contemporary form as verse-chorus. The overall progression of the piece features an AB form; this occurs three times, with the lyrics outlining a statement of courtly love and yearning clearly written by protagonist Geralt and directed towards his love interest Yennefer. The lyrics are shown in Figure 12.

69 It is important to note that, whilst there is no written accompaniment from the manuscripts of troubadour song, the artwork of the period does show evidence of instrumental accompaniment either with plucked or bowed string instruments. *Ibid.*, 76–8.

70 *Ibid.*, 77.

71 T.H. Necombe, 'A Salut d'amour and its Possible Models', *Neophilologus* 56/2 (1972), 125.

A: Verse

9 Vo. *i* VII

Guit.

14 Vo. *iv* *V* *i*

Guit.

19 Vo. *VII* *bVII* *i* *VII* *V* *mf*

Guit.

Figure 11. 'The Woven Storm', Melody and Harmonic Accompaniment.

Conclusion

This article has sought to demonstrate the semiotic, technical, and narratological links between music and place in *Skyrim* and *Witcher 3*. It has shown that intent for the *Witcher 3*'s non-diegetic score to reflect various inspirational locations from the Balkans to Scotland and Ireland led to the predominant employment of folk instruments. It has also shown that, conversely, *Skyrim*'s score eschews such locational concerns in order to act as a conduit of the strongly defined fantasy aesthetic, largely featuring orchestral and choral music. This is not to say that the latter score lacks a strong connection with the gameworld, as both games are, after all, fantasy creations espousing neo-mediaevalist designs and cultures. What is evident through these comparisons is, arguably, a difference in style between composers from America and Europe, with Soule focusing on a stronger influence from film score and period-influenced compositions and Przybyłowicz and Stroinski exploring European cultural references through folk instrumentation. By stating that 'we as composers appreciate it very much if we can do something new instead of copying someone else's style',⁷² Stroinski has aphorized the creative drive behind his score, and the distance placed between it and Soule's composing for *Skyrim*. Soule's approach, although employing elements of Renaissance instrumentation, evidences the Classical

72 Gillian McAllister, 'The Music of Wild Hunt: The Witcher 3 Composer Interview', Game Reactor International (Accessed 14 July 2015), <https://www.gamereactor.eu/articles/318184/The+Music+of+Wild+Hunt%3A+The+Witcher+3+Composer+Interview/>

The Wolven Storm
 These scars long have yearned for your tender
 caress
 To bind our fortunes, damn what the stars own
 Rend my heart open, then your love profess
 A winding, weaving fate to which we both atone

(Refrain)
 You flee my dream come the morning
 Your scent - berries tart, lilac sweet
 To dream of raven locks entwisted, stormy
 Of violet eyes, glistening as you weep

The wolf I will follow into the storm
 To find your heart, its passion displaced
 By ire ever growing hardening into stone
 Amidst the cold to hold you in a heated
 embrace

(Refrain)
 You flee my dream come the morning
 Your scent - berries tart, lilac sweet
 To dream of raven locks entwisted, stormy
 Of violet eyes, glistening as you weep

I know not if fate would have us live as one
 Or if by love's blind chance we've been bound
 The wish I whispered, when it all began
 Did it forge a love you might never have found?

(Refrain)
 You flee my dream come the morning
 Your scent - berries tart, lilac sweet
 To dream of raven locks entwisted, stormy
 Of violet eyes, glistening as you weep

Figure 12. 'The Wolven Storm', lyrics.

and Romantic heritage associated with scoring for film and moving images. The lush orchestral interludes, solo melodic fragments, and Romantic lyricism reflecting the natural environments all combine in Soule's music to emulate similar approaches of twentieth-century composers such as Ralph Vaughn Williams, Erich Korngold, and Richard Strauss.

It is further evident that, while different in their technical approach, both games and their respective soundtracks attempt to remove the player from the contemporary world through a musical concept of 'the past'. The gamer's suspension of disbelief is reinforced through clear diegetic cues, *Skyrim* reducing the diegetic music to single instruments in line with the solo bardic musician and *The Witcher* employing a quartet to perform the ensemble sound clips. The attention to detail through the inclusion of NPC musicians further reinforces the significance of musical interactions in the gameworlds. Whether by means of bardic interaction within a tavern or musical ensembles in town squares, both games present unique musical interactions as part of their overall fantasy experience. This sense of past by both composing teams is rooted in clear compositional tropes that range from traditional folk musics to established Renaissance and Classical forms. As noted, the diegetic interactions do not truly reflect the depth of instrumentation employed by the

composers, the NPCs instead being used as a platform by which to introduce unique musical experiences away from the non-diegetic soundscapes. While the contradictions of instrumentation, song forms, and periodic styles are clear in both games, the suspension of disbelief provided by these elements of authentic performance on real instruments highlights the importance of considered compositional approaches in a video game's construction. Jesse Schell posits that 'sound is what truly convinces the mind that it is in a place',⁷³ and this study has argued that while *Skyrim* and *Witcher 3* are indeed similar places, each world and its related bardic characters possesses a musical identity all its own.

As the success of game series such as *The Elder Scrolls* and *The Witcher* continues with a greater focus on music and score within the game development, there will be further opportunity for research. This naturally extends to the recent appearance of *Gwent: The Witcher Card Game* (CD Projekt Red, 2018) and its spiritual successor, *Thronebreaker* (CD Projekt Red, December 2018), as stand-alone games with original soundtracks, composed by Stroinski and Przybyłowicz. The analytical principals put forward in this article could well be applied to future fantasy video games, but they might apply just as well to historically based games of similar design. The recently released *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (Warhorse Studios, 2018) is set firmly in 1403 Bohemia, now the Czech Republic, and is based on the true life story of fifteenth-century monarch King Wenceslaus IV.⁷⁴ Rather than focusing on fantasy tropes such as dragons and wizardry, this RPG 'painstakingly re-creates period-specific details' and seeks to generate 'an accurate feeling of mediaeval times'.⁷⁵ With in-game music so acutely focused on creating for the player the environment of mediaeval Bohemia—sans the mythological elements of fantasy—such a text conjures scholarly aspirations towards the future development of the discussed approaches. This and other texts will offer ample analytical material, especially as game soundtrack and non-video game composition become ever more difficult to separate.

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73 Jesse Schell, *The Art of Game Design: A Book of Lenses*, 2nd ed. (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 4.

74 Warhorse Studios, 'Realism', Warhorse Studios s.r.o. (Accessed 16 February 2018), <https://www.kingdom-comerpg.com/en/game-features/realism>

75 Andrew Webster, 'Kingdom Come: Deliverance is an RPG that Trades Fantasy for Historical Accuracy', Vox Media (Accessed 16 February 2018), <https://www.theverge.com/2018/2/2/16964080/kingdom-come-deliverance-history-rpg-ps4-xbox-pc>