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JOURNEY

A DISTINGUISHED UNDERDOG OF GAME MUSIC

AND WHY PEOPLE NOTICED

BY

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<u>I. Synopsis</u>

JOURNEY is a Playstation 3 exclusive video game developed by

Thatgamecompany (TGC) and published by Sony Computer Entertainment. It was

released in 2012, and follows the story of an enigmatic red robed humanoid being who

awakens in the desert. You play the role of this being, and upon awakening, you are

immediately drawn to a huge mountain far off in the distance. It becomes your immediate

goal, and thus the story begins with your quest to reach this mountain. During your

adventure, you must traverse deserts, temples, ruins, and many more while encountering

various types of obstacles, including obstructed paths, missing bridges, and seemingly

out-of-reach locations. You are not rushed to complete levels, there is no timer, and there

is no feeling of imminent danger until the latter half of the game. This allows for a unique

gaming experience, which allows the user to simply enjoy their surroundings, the music,

and the charm of the artistic direction in the game, removing the focus from

competitiveness and urgency to enjoying each level's beauty.

> "For JOURNEY as a game, it's a person's birth, who is very young and he
> doesn't know anything and he starts to explore, and childhood is very safe and
> everything is exciting. Then as he grows, he realizes more and more about why
> he's here and his purpose."
> -Jenova Chen

It is a third person adventure game, meaning you play from the perspective of a

free-floating camera that hovers far behind the character. JOURNEY features few

gameplay mechanics when compared to other AAA or high profile indie games. The

character can simply run freely in any direction and can jump. More advanced mechanics

include the ability to hover through the air upon jumping, which quickly depletes a meter

represented by the player-character's scarf. This meter can be filled by interacting with red fabrics that resemble your robe, which are strewn about the world in a variety of forms, like small animated shards, to large seaweed-like protrusions in the ground, to even an epic woven whale which you must ride later in the game. You also have the ability to shout or softly chirp, which is dependent on how long you hold the circle button on your controller. Doing so will create a burst of sound that radiates around the character, and will attract any pieces of fabric in close proximity to the player to fill your meter or sometimes thrust you into the air.

Creator Jenova Chen describes the game as being about emotional, human, connections, setting it apart from other mainstream games who's focuses rely heavily on empowerment and the feeling of achievement upon destroying your enemy or completing a puzzle, etc. This mentality leads to a unique multiplayer aspect for the game, which allows for cooperative play without the ability to communicate with the other player. The idea of encountering random players with minimal communicative abilities is not new, though. In fact, two years prior to the release of JOURNEY, the game Demons Soul's (also published by Sony Computer Entertainment) featured a system that allowed players from all over the world to randomly invade your game with the objective to kill you. JOURNEY takes that idea and reverses the violent elements, creating a unique cooperative experience. As you traverse the vast deserts or explore the giant temples in the game, often times you may find that there is another player in your map. The game does not reveal the other player's account name, and there is no way of messaging them in the game, which is what sets JOURNEY's cooperative elements apart from other games. The player-player interaction becomes about an exchange of feelings, rather than

exchanging bullets or uniting to become more powerful. You are fully capable of advancing through each level alone, but sometimes you have company with which to solve puzzles together or independently of each other to advance more quickly through each level. Since other players wear the same robe you do, touching them will also replenish your scarf meter, which will allow you to progress more quickly and reach obstacles you may not have been able to without first searching for a way to fill your meter.

These are only a few reasons why JOURNEY was met with such critical acclaim and success upon its release. It was almost unanimously reviewed with a 9/10 score on websites like GameSpot, Game Informer, IGN, and more. It won 8 awards at the D.I.C.E. (Digital Illusions Creative Entertainment) Awards, including Game of the Year, Outstanding Achievement in Musical Composition, Outstanding Achievement in Art Design, Outstanding Achievement in Online Gameplay, Outstanding Achievement in Sound Design, and more. It also won five BAFTA (British Academy of Film and Television Arts) awards, including awards in Original Music, Artistic Achievement, and Audio Achievement. There are many more from different awards organizations, but the most notable is that JOURNEY was the first video game to ever be recognized and nominated to the Grammy award for Best Score Soundtrack for Visual Media. Others nominated that year were Howard Shore (Hugo), Hans Zimmer (The Dark Knight Rises), John Williams (Tintin), and Trent Reznor & Atticus Ross (The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo), who ultimately won the award.

<u>II. The Composer</u>

We owe the incredible music and sound of JOURNEY to composer, Austin Wintory, and sound designer, Steve Johnson.

Austin Wintory began composing at an incredibly young age. When he was just ten years old, he discovered the music of Jerry Goldsmith, which led to his fascination with orchestral music. Born and raised in Denver, Colorado, he is now a graduate of New York University and the University of Southern California (USC) and is based in Los Angeles. His relationship with Thatgamecompany began during his studies at USC, where he met the director Jenova Chen as a student. When it came time to present his thesis project, Jenova Chen asked his colleagues if they knew any composers, which is where Chen and Wintory met and first collaborated on what would eventually become the hit Playstation 3 exclusive, flOw. It was in fact his work on the game flOw that made him the youngest person to have ever received a British Academy Award nomination.

Austin now has an enormous list of credits to his name that is not limited to video games. His most notable works in the area of film being Sundance winners, Captain Abu Raed, and Grace.

III. Sound Design

It's incredibly important to mention the sound designer Steve Johnson as well, for his work played an integral role in maintaining the sonic landscape of the game. One thing that becomes prevalent in the game early on is the sensation that your character is small and alone. I believe Steve Johnson was aware of this when designing his sounds, which in fact allowed him to be resourceful and record lots of foley in the game right from his studio. The sound of the player's footsteps, for example, was rarely recorded using feet. Normal footsteps on sand were made simply by Steve Johnson tapping his fingers into a cardboard box filled with sand that he had collected at the beach. Footsteps on stone were made using a hacky sack, and footsteps on metal were recorded by merely tapping on the side of an old metal desktop computer. Giving your character these small sounds makes the player feel fragile and delicate, which in turn provides a more emotional relationship to the small red figure on the screen.

Contrary to the sounds of your character, the ambient sounds from JOURNEY seem vast and hollow, reflecting the wide desert of your surroundings. The entire third level of the game, a hot open desert, includes ambient sound created from recording the room tone of a large warehouse and processing it to appear hissy like the sand dunes around you. More intricate ambient inclusion can be heard once your character has finally reached the mountain and must now trek it's cold, windy terrain. There, the ambiences were highly adaptive to triggers in the game. There were in fact 16 different sounds which varied depending on the intensity of the wind in the game and the different locations on the mountain. This variety helps the sound to reflect the world more precisely and enhance player immersion.

Two more important game elements are the sounds of the cloth strands and cloth

creatures, and the giant stone monsters that eat them called "war machines". As mentioned

before, these cloth strands and creatures help to guide the character on his or her journey, while

also replenishing the amount of energy in your scarf on contact. The general theme found, sound

design-wise, across these cloths is to process the sound of high-pitched animals, like birds or

whales (for larger cloths). According to Steve Johnson, the original sound design for these

creatures simply included a large pool of randomized, similar, sounds. This however was not

good enough, as the beautiful cloth fish floated about but sounded random and unorganized.

Through painstaking hours spent with one of the programmers, he was able to recreate the

sounds and tie them to events in the game, making it sound like the fish were actually trying to

communicate with the character. Now, there are sixteen different categories of sounds for each

fish, including sounds for things like, "come here", "uh-oh", "found something!", "help!", "I'll

pick you up", etc. Suddenly, upon giving these creatures a voice, you empathize with them,

making it much more horrific when you encounter the war machines, who consume cloth. These

enormous, menacing stone sentinels appear towards the latter half of the game, and will scan

your surrounding area looking for you, or any bits of cloth they could eat up. They have different

sounds for the different game mechanics and parts of their body. Firstly, they have a "moan"

sound, which was comprised of humpback whale noises and leopards, heavily processed, and run

through a Kaoss Pad (a MIDI control surface and signal processor manufactured by Korg). They

have an attack sound that emits from their heads which was made by combining different animal

roars and processing them through a vocoder, and Johnson included near and far variations of the

sound to differentiate between situations where you are being attacked and when you are

watching your companion be attacked. They also have three sound-emitting points on their

bodies that emit low throbbing "power throb sounds", made by gating bass drones with a square wave. These help give the war machines an ominous sense of direction as they hover above you, especially when combined with a Doppler effect.

The most interesting thing about the sound design from JOURNEY, however, is the emphasis on collaboration between Austin Wintory and Steve Johnson during the development process. Many sound mechanics in the game seem to fit as musical components of the score, the reason being that Wintory played a major role in creating several of the sounds in the game. One game mechanic in particular is the "singing" system, which was briefly mentioned earlier. By holding the Circle button on the game pad for different lengths of time, the player can sing at an intensity directly proportional to how long you hold down the button. Johnson divided them as so, a light quick button creates a "coo", a hard quick button creates a "chirp", holding the button longer creates a "call", and holding the button down for a long amount of time will generate a "shout". Each of these has a unique sound of varying length, and there is yet another level of variation as well. When playing the game cooperatively with another player, the pitch of your singing will drop down, and your companion's will rise slightly in response, creating a type of conversation between you and the stranger playing beside you. Another pitched sound asset from the game can be found when climbing the snow-capped, windy mountain. There you can find stone pillars, which the player must use to hide from war machines or take cover from the treacherous wind. Originally, they were slated not to have any sound, but Johnson noticed their resemblance to giant resonators. Ultimately, he wound up creating the sound for these pillars by blowing on bottles, and filling them with water for different notes. He tuned them to the key of the music using a guitar tuner app on his phone.

IV. Instrumentation & The Recording Process

Choosing the instrumentation for the game JOURNEY was a very difficult and intricate

process for Austin Wintory. The level design and different locations in the game all have very

established notions of what their music should sound like from film and other medias. One could

typically assume that vast deserts with sandstorms and buried ruins would imply an Arabian

theme, or that the great empty temples could imply a far east Asian influence on the music.

Wintory, however, decided that it would be an even better idea to throw away these

preconceived notions of what the music would sound like, and create a brand new, more

universal, musical texture for the game. Wintory explains:

> "… I gradually eliminated localizing concepts from the score to make it as universal and
> culture-less as possible. Inevitably there are fragments but by and large, I just wanted to
> make something that felt right, without needing to justify any choices based on references
> to cultures, etc."

This was a very important concept to maintain throughout the scoring process, which led

to a very atypical instrumental layout. The first piece of music Austin sent to Jenova was quickly

recorded at his studio for solo cello (played by Tina Guo). Interestingly enough, it was written

within days of being brought on to the project, and this cello recording laid the foundation for the

entire score to the game. It is also this same cello recording that can be heard on the original

trailer for the game. The second most prominent instrument in the score is the bass flute, which

is sometimes replaced with a regular C flute. (Played by Amy Tatum). As the game progresses,

more live instruments are brought in, such as the harp (Charissa Barger), viola (Rodney Wirtz),

and one very bizarre instrument called the serpent (Noah Gladstone). The serpent is an unusual

brass instrument because it is actually made from wood, but has a similar mouthpiece to brass

instruments and a similar timbre as well, but with holes similar to those found on a woodwind instrument. It is referred to as a predecessor to the tuba.

Surprisingly, most of these instruments were recorded directly at Austin Wintory's studio using nothing more than a Rode NT-2 microphone. A large portion of the game's music is also electronic, mostly in the implementation of low pads that serve to underscore the soloists and add to the mood of the environment. The final element to the score was the inclusion of a full orchestra. The orchestra used was the Macedonia orchestra, which led to Austin depicting one of the greatest realities of modern day orchestral recording:

> "(This recording) was actually probably the most 21st Century recording I could imagine. The orchestra was thousands of miles away (8 hours ahead), but listening in via Skype was Thatgamecompany up in Los Angeles, producer Kellee Santiago in Virginia, and producer Robin Hunicke with Jenova Chen, who were in China speaking at GDC"

To recapitulate, the full instrumentation for JOURNEY included subtle electronic synthesizers, the Macedonia orchestra, and four soloists, each playing the cello, viola, harp, and bass/C flute respectively.

The game JOURNEY revolves entirely around the player and their quest to reach the glowing peak of a distant mountain. Other elements play important roles as the game unfolds, like large white deities you confront at the end of each level, the ribbons sprawled across the world and their many different embodiments, and of course the menacing war machines who would rip the ribbons from you and terrorize the would-be peaceful environments. Jenova Chen was smart, however, in focusing solely on the character himself/herself. One thing that helps reinforce this personal aspect of the game is the fact that Austin Wintory decided to include only one theme in his score. He does not emphasize the arrival of new creatures or mechanics with a new theme as you often do in film, television, and games with a larger scope. Instead, he keeps one theme and wrote many variations of it, which play at different points in the game; changing and evolving much in the way that a person on an adventure would.

(See "Nascence" transcription page for main theme)

The theme lays an enormous groundwork for the game, establishing the tone and something incredibly unique for a video game, a key signature. It is in B minor, which is very apparent because of the B which begins and closes the theme, and the ascended F and C notes, playing F# and C#.

The first iteration of the theme plays during the opening sequence of the game. Here, the camera drifts around revealing your surroundings and a burst of light rushes out across the desert until finally, you find your character sitting alone. The music lets out a faint iteration of the theme using only the cello in the mid-high register, before starting an enormous crescendo of electronic synths and the orchestra that follows this burst of light that traverses the desert. Austin

Wintory has said that the purpose of this crescendo is to wipe the slate, and completely refresh your mind before beginning your journey. However, it does more than simply this. From having completed the game, I know that once you reach the peak of the mountain, you become an enormous burst of light and energy that shoots out from the mountain and crosses into the desert. For someone who is experiencing the game for the first time, you would not realize the implication of the theme playing at the start of the game, besides perhaps establishing the theme for later iterations. In fact, it also implies that you are that burst of light, right from the first moment of the game. This is just one of the powerful uses of using only one theme throughout the game.

Variations on the theme occur throughout the entirety of the game, but the most prominent iteration can be found, actually, in the official launch trailer of the game. This is the track that Austin Wintory based the theme and melodies from himself, so I will use it here as well to identify the main theme. The reason why it is in the trailer, rather than directly opened with in the game, is because it was in fact the first thing Wintory wrote for Jenova Chen the day they discussed JOURNEY. The music was actually first used in an animated trailer that Thatgamecompany used to pitch the game and have it greenlit from Sony. This track is also the opening song to the game's soundtrack, and is called Nascence.

One of the enormous benefits of having one theme is, of course, having a solid key signature. This comes into play very heavily not only because of how the music is being implemented in JOURNEY, but because of the enormous effort taken to keep the sound design from clashing with the music. I had mentioned the "singing" game mechanic before, in which a player can sing, or coo, or chirp by pressing the circle button on the gamepad. These all fit within the key of the game, and they had to since they all have musical aspects in their sound design. In

total there are 17 different singing sounds if you are playing alone, each falling under the categories discussed earlier, separated by how hard the circle button was pressed and for how long. The quickest, softest ones, for example, are all based around an A, B, or C#. These fall well within the scale of B minor, so the player can run around the map all he wants tapping circle without ever interrupting the music.

One could argue that the reason this method of having one theme only works because the game is, in fact, quite short. A casual gamer could beat it within two hours, and someone who has already played the game could beat in one. However, I have found that Austin Wintory did enough of a good job distinguishing the variations of the theme from each other that it instead plays out much like a play, or a symphony. It also reinforces one golden rule of the game, which is that it is only about the player and his/her journey. So much like someone who is growing, or changing through his or her adventures, the music does as well. Wintory does an excellent job by starting the game with a massive crescendo and leaving you blank, only to hear a cello and a bass flute until you progress further in the game. Then, slowly as you progress, new instruments are introduced, and new time signatures, and all sorts of things to make every level feel new, yet within the same realm. The full orchestra does not even return after the opening crescendo until the second half of the game.

VI. The Interactive Score

One of the benefits of video games as an interactive medium is the ability to present music and create storytelling devices by non-linear methods. This is as true in storytelling as it is with music. JOURNEY features a linear storyline, with a non-linear score. This is evidenced by the fact that, although your character is not on rails and is free to roam each level to your pleasure, there is ultimately one destination at the end of each level, guiding you to the end up until you reach the game's finale. Your progression is predetermined, and the game has mechanics that will force you back on track should you try to explore in a direction outside of your objective.

The music, however, is non-linear. It's easy to think of music as being on a horizontal plane. Most digital audio workstations and audio sequencers portray audio in this way, since sound is a combination of frequency over time. This is a perfect way to work when it comes to scoring for film or songwriting, but it is not sufficient for video games. The reason is that unlike in films, a video has no preset duration. Yes, JOURNEY is a linear game, but how long it takes each person to complete a level cannot be known. Austin Wintory had to work around this when designing the music for the game, and for that we get a combination of two techniques that are commonly used in the video game scoring industry. The first is "horizontal resequencing", also known as "branching". This is a method of audio implementation wherein segments of music are lined up one after another and are cued to play sequentially, typically in a random order to avoid repetition. What you get is a song that never seems to end, because as soon as an audio file finishes, another one will start playing. This method can provide a lot of variety to keep people from thinking the music is looping, but falls behind when it comes time to syncing with game

events. The second form of audio implementation, and the most commonly used in JOURNEY, is called "vertical re-orchestration". With this method, it's best to think of the music not as one audio file like the mp3's on your computer, but as a song that has had all of it's component ripped out and spread on a table in front of you. In a pop song situation, you can think of it as having one audio file for the vocals, another for the guitar, another for the bass, and a last audio file for the drums, then having them all play at exactly the same time so that together, they form the full song. All of these audio files would be called "stems", and using this method creatively, you realize that you are not limited to simply separating parts of a song.

JOURNEY takes from these methods, and creates a beautiful score that seems to adapt to its surroundings and never gets old, or feels like it is repeating. A good example of the music's interactivity in JOURNEY is shortly after the first level begins. You are alone in a vast desert graveyard, and all that is playing is a quiet synth pad that loops repeatedly and arrhythmically. After collecting your first strand of cloth, however (the first in the game), a cello begins humming the beginning of the main theme. Beyond this point, for the duration of the level, as you explore not only do you hear the pad, which continues to loop, but you hear occasional lines from the cello or bass flute. These play at seemingly random intervals, yet never collide with each other, still without sounding scripted to play after a certain duration of time. This implies that the cello and bass flute lines have been recorded, and are vertically mounted above the synth pad, yet only play after a certain duration of time (horizontally).

Another great example of interactive music in the game involves solving a puzzle to create a large cloth bridge. Upon completion of the puzzle, the player must cross this bridge of cloth to get somewhere that was previously out of reach. Now remember, touching cloth makes your character capable of using your scarf to glide through the air, making this a very magical

moment in the game as you float far above the ground. Here, the music that had previously been playing does not stop, but rather a horizontally sequenced rhythm section comes in, combining loads of percussion and cymbals. They play only as you glide across the bridge, and once you reach the other, the percussion stops without the need of a fade out. This means that the percussion has been branched and laid out one after the other, until the player reaches the end of the bridge, when the samples discontinue looping.

At one point during the beginning of the second half of the game, you are introduced to the war machines. Here, the music has a strikingly different tone. It is much more minimal, as you creep through a very large dark abandoned temple. This is one situation in the game where the music is prepared and synced to specific events. As you explore, you see ancient stone statues that resemble the war machines, but occasionally real machines will burst from the sand, letting out a terrifying shriek. These points also have music play precisely when the machines come out of the sand, which is easy to do since the background music has no rhythm.

However, implementing an interactive and adaptive musical score did have unforeseen consequences. Everyone from Thatgamecompany was aware of how beautiful the music was, and just like in film, there had to be a time when the soundtrack came up in conversation. This presented a very interesting challenge, since one couldn't simply capture the audio from a playthrough of the game and put it on a CD. In the context of an album, the score really didn't make any sense. So Austin Wintory had to collect all the different musical cues present in the game and piece them together in a way that did.

In all honesty, he did an excellent job. The album plays completely like a big symphonic show, and never feels inappropriate or awkward. In fact, piecing the music together in this way allowed for almost an omnipotent perspective on the music of the whole, like laying it all out in

front of you to see. It still manages to progress in the same way the game does, and when listening to the soundtrack, you remember each level and all of your adventures without the need of any visual cues. This just goes to show how powerful and impactful the music in JOURNEY really was, and reinforces how great of a job Wintory did in creating a sonic landscape that evolves and grows with you as you push forward in the game. Pieces at the end of the soundtrack sound and feel as though they should be there, more mature and texturally more dense, while the early tracks feature more solo instruments by themselves and sometimes cheery moments.

One exciting thing about preparing the soundtrack was having the opportunity to play back cues that were never meant to overlap in the game, but fit perfectly well together. With regards to the track named "Threshold", Austin writes,

> "This is a track that you may have not heard in the game like this. For example, you may not have heard all five soloists playing at once, rather each one coming in as a reaction to events in the game. The duet (in Threshold) between Amy on C flute and Charissa on the harp occurs only on this album, and is impossible to reproduce in-game. The performances are in-game, but this duet had to be put together specifically for the album."

The novelty of moments like these in the soundtrack makes it a brand new way to listen the game's score. It's refreshing, but also perfectly depicts the game and it's objective. I also think that it makes JOURNEY, apart from a game with a beautiful score, a benchmark for how interactive video game soundtracks should be. For despite the musical content of the game being segmented and branched out into many stems that respond to the game's events, it is also capable of working on a linear timeline if given a bit of musical editorial skills and patience.

<u>VII. Conclusion</u>

JOURNEY is a complex and emotionally driven game. It starts you off mystified and searching for answers, and slowly answers them without a single line of dialogue ever spoken. It makes you attached to your small robed figure, and has you flying through deserts, ruins, caves, and mountains. It implements multiplayer in a way that makes you feel for the other player on the screen and try to collaborate with them, even though they may not need your help at all. Overall I believe that all of these sensations and feelings would have been enormously diminished had it not been for the quality of the music in this game.

JOURNEY was in production for three years, and Austin Wintory began working on it from before Sony had even given it the green light. It is thought that having plenty of time to work on music can be very good for a composer, but in fact it was a great challenge for Austin, and I believe would have been for any composer. In an interview with IndieGames Podcast, he explains,

> "When you actually live through a sizeable chunk of your life, side by side with someone (TGC employees), you actually grow as people. So, your collaboration will grow as a side effect of that… I would write a piece for an area of the game, we made (JOURNEY) somewhat sequentially, so the music that is in the early parts of the game I wrote the longest ago… I would be tempted to go back a year and a half later, I would listen to a piece and go, 'I have changed a lot as a composer in a year and a half, I feel like that's not representative of who I even am anymore'… I would feel self-conscious about music that there would technically be no problem with... (But), this game is about that process. This game is a metaphor of the hero's journey."

This brings me to one of the most beautiful things about this game, and one of the reasons why I believe it won so many accolades and is so influential. It is absolutely authentic. Not only was so much effort invested in bringing this game together, not only was it a group of talented people working together, it was a literal journey in the lives of the developers and artists.

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