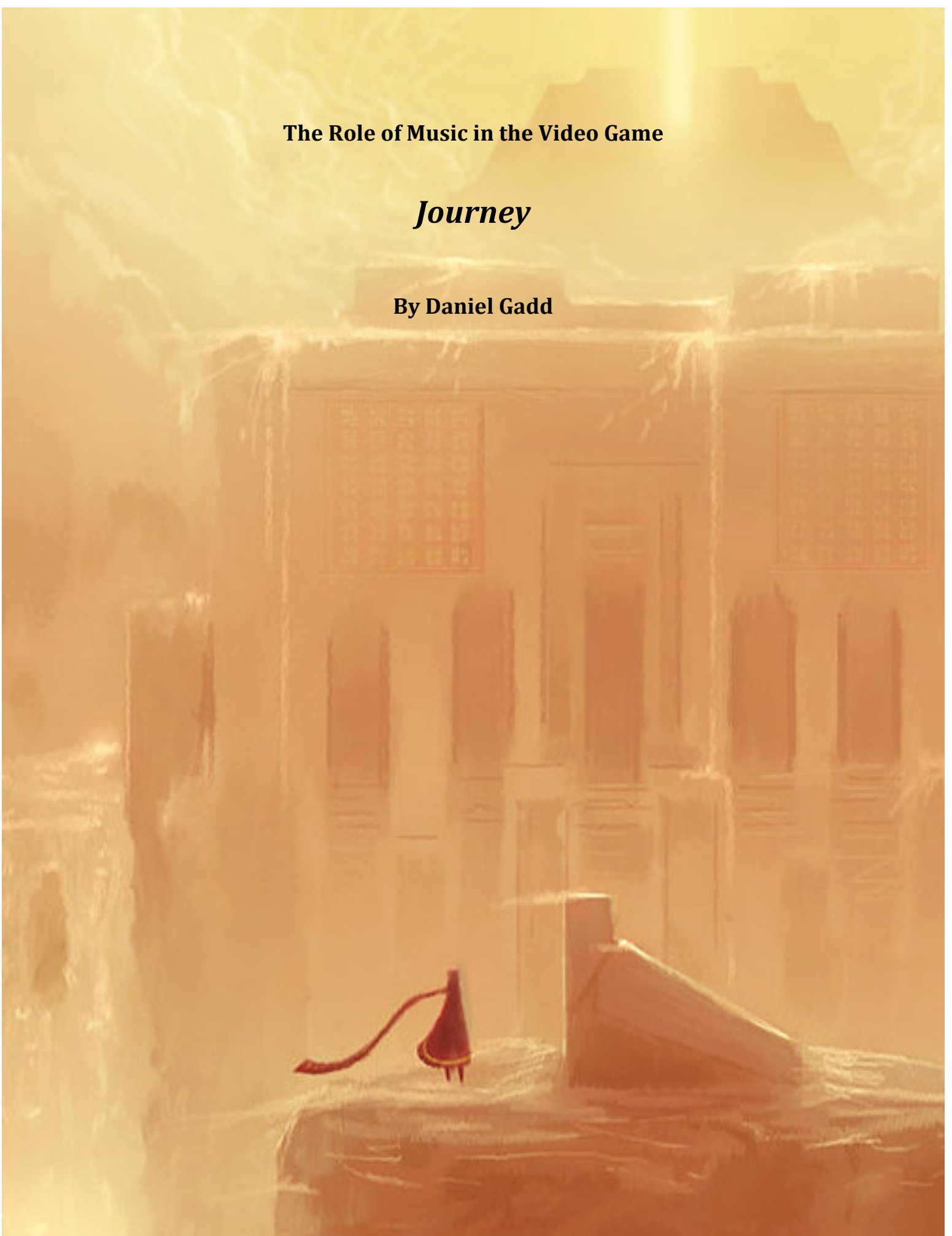# The Role of Music in the Video Game

# *Journey*

## By Daniel Gadd

**Introduction**

*Journey* is a video game developed by *thatgamecompany*. It was created for the

PlayStation 3 platform and was released in March 2012. Since its release, it has

received enormously high praise from critics and players worldwide. What is

especially significant about this game is that it seeks to provide each player with a

unique emotional experience equivalent to that of a painting, piece of music, film,

short story, or poem and for this reason it is often cited as an example of a video

game functioning as a work of art. The mission statement of *thatgamecompany*, as

seen on their official website, is to "create timeless interactive entertainment that

makes positive change to the human psyche worldwide" and their philosophy shines

through in this delicately crafted game.

Both the visual art and music were heavily lauded for their beauty and contribution

to the overall aesthetic and emotional arc of the game. American composer Austin

Wintory composed the musical score, which made history for becoming the first-

ever Grammy-nominated video game score.

This paper will take a close look at the various roles of the musical score within

*Journey* and discuss the methods by which the composer and the developers worked

together to solve the problems inherent in making the music flexible and adaptable

to the physical restraints determined by the unique gameplay structure, while still

creating the impression of a large, organic piece of music serving to set the tone for

each shifting element of the game. Initially, key elements of the storyline, gameplay

and philosophy of *Journey* will be explained in order to better understand the

musical instrumentation, form and style choices made by the composer. Following

this, there will be a more detailed discussion of the methods used by the composer

to create interactive music that serves both a psychological and narrative purpose.

Where necessary, techniques and terms specific to video game scoring will be

defined and discussed within the context of this particular game. Finally, the

primary musical theme will be analyzed, followed by several examples of how this

theme is treated and transformed throughout the game.


## Story, Philosophy and Gameplay


### Story

*Journey* is described by its developers as an "interactive parable".  The player takes

control of a robed figure and begins alone upon a sand dune in a vast desert with no

clear sense of direction, but soon sees a mountain in the distance. This provides the

player with a destination and in an ingeniously natural and subtle way, without any

explicit in-game instruction, the player is given a goal. The steady path to the

mountain is divided into several game levels and as the player makes their way

through them, they discover ruins and remnants of a lost civilization.

The player navigates through the desert and explores various levels of the remains

of a huge ancient city, gradually learning more and more about the civilization that

once inhabited the place, until eventually reaching the foot of the mountain. They then have to begin ascending as the weather becomes cold and unforgiving and they are faced with snow and strong winds. As they desperately but determinedly make their weary way to the peak of the mountain, the player's character collapses in the snow and for a moment it seems as if the journey is over. But figures in white robes appear and revive the player, providing them with a magical energy and in a final, exhilarating section of gameplay, the player flies to the mountain summit and the screen fills with white light.

The game's credits play over a cinematic depicting a shooting star that rises from the mountain peak and flies steadily back along the traveler's path down the mountain and through the ruins and desert, passing other robed figures that are making their way up. The star finally comes to rest at the sand dune where the game began.

**Philosophy**

There is a universal theme to the game that is highly influenced by Joseph Campbell's "Hero's Journey". This theory describes the monomyth, which is a narrative structure that is common to mythical, religious and folk stories from all over the world and dates back to mankind's earliest recorded history. Put very simply, this myth describes a protagonist who leaves home, overcomes challenges and ultimately returns with newfound power. It is a myth essentially about the process of life transformation. It is about a pilgrimage through the unknown and

about what is lost and gained through adversity and in this way, it is a theme that is universally relatable.[1]

It is clear how the setting of a lone character in an empty desert journeying to a distant mountaintop elegantly ties in with this philosophy. There is another interesting philosophical approach taken by the developers that is worth noting. While most video games are designed around giving the player a feeling of power, *Journey* subverts this idea and instead aims at making the player feel small and in awe of the huge world around them. It seeks to instill in the player a sense of wonder. The developers wanted players to feel a genuine loneliness at the outset of the game and have questions about who they are in this strange world – questions that are actually equally pertinent to real life.[2]

**Gameplay**

The game was deliberately and skillfully designed to contain no dialogue or language. This means that all storytelling and directional cues are provided either by the visuals or by the audio.[3]

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[1] L. Alexander, 'In-Depth: Journey's rare and magical success', http://gamasutra.com/view/news/163143/InDepth_Journeys_rare_and_magical_success.php, 2012, (accessed 9 July 2014).

[2] K. Van Ord, 'Journey impressions', http://www.gamespot.com/articles/journey-impressions/1100-6266636/, 2010, (accessed 9 July 2014).

[3] Ibid.

The gameplay controls are extremely simple. The player has the ability to freely walk and jump as well as control the camera. One button also causes the character to shout, or sing, a musical call.

A fascinating element of the game is that at certain points the player may meet one other player, temporarily connected to the same in-game world via an online connection, who is also heading towards the mountain. This player could be any age, from anywhere in the world but there is no way of identifying them or communicating with them at all outside of the wordless interaction within the game. This creates a connection with another person through exploration rather than talking or fighting. The multiplayer aspect of *Journey* also led to an extremely interesting musical decision that will be discussed later.

The entire game can be completed in just two to three hours.

**The Music of Journey**

**Development and Production**

In 2009, three years before the game's release, Austin Wintory met with Jenova Chen, the lead game designer and co-founder of *thatgamecompany*. They discussed philosophical and literary influences, particularly the work of Joseph Campbell. Chen had a concept and he asked Wintory for a musical theme that was able to encapsulate the idea emotionally, establish the game's tone and help the design

team to creatively define the game.[4] Already, this is an unusual amount of

responsibility to give the composer so early on and an unusual understanding of the

power of music on the part of a game designer. That same day, Wintory wrote a

piece of music that came to serve as the basis for the entire score and helped to

define the style of the game itself.

While the concept of Campbell's "Hero's Journey" was certainly a grand one,

Wintory felt that the game did not need an epic, massive score to be effective but

rather called for something more intimate and personal[5] and this first piece of music

came from Wintory's feeling that the emotional qualities Chen was looking for called

for a solo, mournful solo cello. He left a voicemail to himself singing the theme that

he envisioned and quickly called his friends Tina Guo and Amy Tatum to play the

cello and bass flute respectively. Together they recorded the first version of the

main theme that same day, before the game had even really begun to be developed.[6]

From this point on, Chen would regularly call Wintory and describe the section of

game that they were working on, always taking care to make clear exactly what

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[4] B. Kuchera, 'Musical DNA: how Austin Wintory wrote the song that helped create Journey',
http://www.penny-arcade.com/report/article/musical-dna-how-austin-wintory-wrote-the-song-
that-helped-create-journey#/entry/signin, 2012, (accessed 9 July 2014).

[5] A. Wintory, 'A musical journey', http://blog.us.playstation.com/2012/01/05/a-musical-journey/,
2012 (accessed 9 July 2014).

[6] K. Stuart, 'Sound as story: Austin Wintory on Journey and the art of game music',
http://www.hookshotinc.com/sound-as-story-austin-wintory-interview/, 2012, (accessed 9 July
2014).

emotions he wanted the player to be feeling. Wintory would then sit with a very rough prototype of the game and compose to what he imagined the final product would look and feel like. Sometimes the music would be different to what the developers were expecting, but often for the better – and they would redesign the level based on the emotional experience that Wintory's music was providing. Often over the course of a scene's development, there would be an ongoing process of re-writing the music as a scene was being redesigned. Using this reiterative process over such an extended period of time, the music became truly integrated into each and every aspect of the game.[7]

Though much of the score makes use of subtle electronic synth sounds and electronically treated acoustic samples, all orchestral sections and real instrumental solos were recorded live, with real players.[8] The recording session for the music of *Journey* was a great example of teams working remotely from different locations across the world. The orchestra used was the Macedonia Radio Symphonic Orchestra, conducted by Oleg Kontradenko in Skopje, Macedonica. The composer was based at the mixing stage of Sony's San Diego Studio, remotely linked with the orchestra. Simultaneously, they were skyping with the game's core development team in Los Angeles, producer Kellee Santiago in Virginia and lead designer Jenova Chen in Shanghai, China.[9]

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[7] Ibid.
[8] Kuchera, Musical DNA.
[9] Wintory, A musical journey.

**Compositional Process**

The medium of video games is unique for a composer in that the music is actually able to drive the player's experience. The music in *Journey* is constantly functioning to provide a compelling emotional narrative, while at the same time being highly interactive, almost to the point of functioning as a game mechanic[10] and it was crucial for Wintory to decide from the beginning whether the player is triggering the music or whether the music is functioning narratively and independently of the player.[11]

As a film composer, Wintory's process is to watch the movie repeatedly in order to fully feel the pacing and rhythm of the film. He takes this same approach to game scoring and believes that the artistry of scoring for games lies in the composer's ability to immerse him or herself in the design process and create something that truly belongs to that project.[12] Also, if a game composer is working ahead of production, the nature of the music can end up influencing the game's design. This was certainly the case with *Journey*, where certain parts of the game were practically designed around the music.[13]

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[10] P. Dane, 'Inside the gaming studio – Austin Wintory, first video game composer nominated for the "best soundtrack" Grammy', http://whatculture.com/gaming/inside-the-gaming-studio-austin-wintory-first-video-game-composer-nominated-for-the-best-soundtrack-grammy.php, 2012, (accessed 9 July 2014).

[11] Kuchera, Musical DNA.

[12] Stuart, Sound as story.

[13] Dane, Inside the gaming studio.

Of course, unlike a film, the pacing and rhythm of a game are variable from player to

player and it is important when scoring for games to see everything from a player's

point of view and to understand that different players will interact with the same

space in different ways. When scoring *Journey*, Wintory would try to visualize two

points in a player's progress, A and B. As a composer, it was his job to emotionally

capture the experience of moving from point A to point B and then allow the music

to naturally change into the next scene.  The challenge of this lies in the fact that the

player could do anything between those two points. They could run through as

quickly as possible, or run around exploring and take their time. Wintory's solution

to this was to play through the scenes over and over, timing himself with a

stopwatch. In this way he could find out the shortest way to get from A to B and use

the information to make compositional decisions. For example, if an area lends itself

to a player's meandering exploration, perhaps the best solution is to create a

composition that loops. Wintory is not averse to using loops, but he believes that

looping is simply a tool to be used in the right situation. In fact, there are many areas

of the game where, rather than looping, Wintory simply uses a one-off cue that lasts

for the most likely approximate time that a player will be in the area. If they stay

longer, the music simply runs out and they play in silence. This allows the cue to end

like a real, organic piece of music. However, every cue is treated according to its

context and some cues do loop, while others make use of layering and branching

techniques.[14] Often, a one-off musical phrase will serve as a beat-synchronous

transition between two cues.

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[14] Ibid.

Many of the open-ended areas of the game, such as the initial bridge level in the desert, make use of layering. As the player progresses through stages of a puzzle and reaches certain landmarks, another instrumental layer will be added to the music. This is often so subtle that it goes unnoticed, but it serves to create a sense of interest and progression in the music that unconsciously contributes to the player's experience.[15] The stems of each instrumental layer here are also constantly branching. In this particular level, the initial electronic pad is joined by pizzicato cello followed by a bass flute layer. The cello and bass flute play fragmented melodies, often very long. Several of these phrases were composed, and the game engine randomly determines which order they are accessed and heard in game. This musical branching means that there are many different interplays between different layers that are possible at any given time. Every playthrough will therefore yield different musical results. The composition is constantly writing itself. When the puzzle has been solved and the bridge is completed, the player triggers a musical change into a faster, more energetic piece. This transition is seamless and demonstrates the ability of the game's music engine to synchronize the player's actions and the music with extreme accuracy.

Care was taken to make sure that each second of every moment of the game was accompanied in an organic and natural-feeling way, and whichever technique gave

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[15] J. Broomhall, 'Heard about: Journey', http://www.develop-online.net/analysis/heard-about-journey/0117627, 2013, (accessed 9 July 2014).

the best result was used.[16] The developers would always provide Wintory with

precise instructions regarding the implementation of each piece of music and as a

gamer with a programming background, communicating ideas was not problematic.

Wintory would place mockups into the game and then begin the continuous process

of tweaking and refining each piece of music and it's relationship to the game's

system.[17] The three years working on the project gave him the time needed to try

different things and discover what worked and what did not.

The approach to the scoring of the multiplayer aspect of the game is also amazing

and worth mentioning. The harp and viola soloists only enter when another player

is present and serve to create an emotional bond between players. However, there is

no way to predict when two players will encounter one another. Layers and

branches of harp and viola parts therefore had to be written over almost the entire

score, so that they could be accessed by the game's engine when needed, if ever.[18] As

some players might choose to play single-player, this is an entire aspect of the

musical score that may never even be heard and while the musical experience is still

just as good in single player mode, it is yet another available variation that

demonstrates the huge amount of work that went into creating a truly interactive

score.

[16] Dane, Inside the gaming studio.

[17] Nofi, 'Interview: Composer Austin Wintory on Journey',
http://www.thesixthaxis.com/2012/03/15/interview-journey-composer-austin-wintory/, 2012,
(accessed 9 July 2014).

[18] J. Broomhall, Heard about: Journey.

**Instrumentation**

With regards to the instrumentation choices, Wintory's goal was to make the music feel organically linked with exactly wherever the player is hearing it in the game. This may be a completely subjective choice, but the most important thing is that the intention is there. In the first level of the game, the player steps into the desert and sees the mountain and a meteor in the sky. The music is a gentle wave of electronics followed by a bass flute solo. The bass flute has a spacious, open sound, with a lot of reverb. Wintory explains in an interview how a dry, brittle sound could also have suited the desert landscape, but he chose the former sound for its spiritual, ringing quality. Although this was just one musical choice of many, it was still of the utmost importance to make the sound seem as if it belonged.[19] It was also always important to maintain the right tone. The music should never be exactly sad, but always have a solemn, lonesome quality to it.

While it certainly would have made sense to make instrument choices based on ancient civilizations due to the setting of the game, Wintory deliberately tried to avoid suggesting or referencing specific cultures, but rather focused on creating a score that could be universally appreciated and understood.[20]

There are five solo instruments that feature prominently in the game: cello, flute, viola, harp and serpent (an ancient brass instrument). All of these instruments have

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[19] Dane, Inside the gaming studio.
[20] Nofi, Interview: Composer Austin Wintory on Journey.

their own definite meaning within the game and their use in the score is always

deliberate.

The cello is used to symbolize the player's character throughout the game.

Essentially the game is all about the player: their interaction with the world, with

other people and with themselves. This ideology is perfectly mirrored by the form of

the score, which can be seen as a huge cello concerto. The player is the soloist and

the world and other players around them are the orchestra.[21] The bass flute features

almost as prominently as the cello. It has a definite spiritual symbolism and is often

heard in connection with the white-robed ancient people that appear in visions. The

serpent is the only brassy sound in the score and is used very sparingly. It features

prominently in the underground cave level of the game, where the score becomes

alien and detached from the rest of the music, mirroring the sudden change of

environment and disorientation in the game. Even the ever-present cello

disappears. Here Wintory overdubs the serpent into a five-part brass chorale to

beautiful effect – even when scary or hostile, the world is still beautiful. The harp

and viola feature heavily as soloists in the multiplayer aspects of the game, and the

interplay between them serves to create a subtle, even unconscious connection

between the two players.

The other instrumentation used in the score includes a full string section as well as

recorded percussion and gentle synthesized pads. The instrumentation of the score

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[21] Ibid.

changes as the game progresses.  At the outset of the game, a giant orchestral

crescendo follows the solo cello theme and builds up into nothingness, wiping the

emotional palette clean. The player is left with a blank canvas. The musical score

then begins with gentle, buzzy electronics and some solo bass flute melodies. The

orchestra is not heard again until the second half of the game. Slowly, more

instruments and layers are introduced as the player makes their way through the

world. The introduction of new instruments is linked with the character's growth

and transformation. By the time the final level is reached, we are hearing the theme

with the full orchestra behind it.


**Sound Design**

One further aspect that must be considered in video game music, as with film music,

is the sound design and Wintory worked very closely with sound designer Steve

Johnson over the course of *Journey's* development. While the music is functioning as

a narrative device, good sound design is crucial to making the world feel real and

believable to the player.[22] The snowy mountain area of the game is a great example

of the sound and music working together. The music is highly textural, with

aleatoric string tremolos, while the sound of the wind and thunder is rising and

dropping in level and the sound and music are in a constant state of flux. In this

level, things are becoming legitimately threatening and the world is threatening to

overpower the music. The singing and shouts of the player character were also very

carefully designed. Wintory provided musical and vocal samples, which Johnson

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[22] Ibid.

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always maintaining a sense of continuity. It is in 4/4 time and in the key of B natural

minor. It is always played extremely expressively and is most often heard in its

fullest form by the cello, bass flute and string section. The theme takes on many

transformations and is played by every instrument at some point over the course of

the game.

In the cave level of the game, the serpent and double bass section play a dark,

foreboding, chromatic variation of the theme that compliments the tense, hunted

atmosphere of the level:



**Melodic diminution of the main theme transposed, as heard played by the double basses and serpent.**

In contrast, a lighter, more exotic version of the theme is heard in the large "whale"

room of the game, where the player jumps on the back of a ribbon whale. In this

room, occasional cello solos can be heard playing a rhythmic variation of the theme:



**Rhythmic variation of the main theme transposed, played by high-register solo cello.**

The transcriptions found in Appendix A and B[25] represent the treatment of the

theme at the outset of the game and at the end. They are entitled *Nascence* and

*Apotheosis* respectively. *Nascence* states the theme and introduces the character and

desert environment perfectly, while *Apotheosis* is heard in the final level of the

game, as the hero is flying towards the summit of the mountain and is a variation of

the theme filled with excitement and joy.


**<u>Conclusion</u>**


For Wintory's musical score to be fully integrated into the game, it had to be able to

be broken down into stems and phrases that could be scripted to accompany player

decisions and lead to a truly interactive experience. At the same time, it had to

sound like a real, organic music performance and function linearly.  These are two

seemingly contradictory ideas: modularity and linearity. Wintory wanted players to

be able to have the benefit of feeling real musicians giving a performance as they

played the game, but achieving these two goals is far from easy.[26]

*Journey* proves to me that it is most definitely achievable, and the effect is incredible.

When a game can fully immerse a player in an experience and that experience is

perfectly accompanied by music, it is a truly great achievement by the composer.

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[25] Audio files of Appendix A and B are attached with this document.
[26] Stuart, Sound as story.

Austin Wintory spent three years working on the music for *Journey*, constantly revising and personalizing the music to each new stage of design over the course of the game's development.  I honestly believe that the dedication and genuine, heartfelt investment into the integrity of the music and the game is what makes this project a work of art. *Journey* is clearly a labour of intelligence, skill and love on the part of everyone involved in its development and the results can clearly be seen in the reactions of those who have played it and been deeply affected by it. For me, it is inspiring to see that projects like *Journey* are being created and allowing for music and art to move forward in new, interesting and genuinely moving directions.

# Nascence

Except from *Journey*

Transcribed by Daniel Gadd

Austin Wintory

Change to C Flute

# Apotheosis

Extract from *Journey*

Appendix B

Transcribed by Daniel Gadd

Austin Wintory

**<u>References</u>**

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