

MORROW & DESEORA TOWN

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1 Background

1.1 Town and Character Information

For my final project for *MUSI 26819: Video Game Music as Play and Discipline (1980s to Present)*, I created two town themes for a hypothetical role-playing video game. The first of these themes is for MORROW TOWN, and the second is for DESEORA TOWN, each briefly described in Figure 1.1.

| | <i>Slogan</i> | <i>Description</i> |
|---------------------|--|---|
| MORROW TOWN | <i>Drawing from the past as we look to the future.</i> | A small, oceanside village surrounded by rolling green plains. Balmy and breezy, the weather is temperate year-round. Although undeniably hardworking and motivated, its residents enjoy a tranquil life away from the hustle and bustle of the city. |
| DESEORA TOWN | <i>A haven of hope.</i> | A once-bustling town devastated years ago by the sun-blocking ashes of an unexpected volcanic eruption. Those who survived still live there to this day, working hard to make the barren land hospitable once again. |

Figure 1.1: Town Information

For this project, I focused on one critical mechanic that this hypothetical video game would have: the ability to switch freely between multiple characters in the player’s party at will. I describe three such characters in Figure 1.2.

1.2 Project Concept

The main conceptual idea that guided this project was the notion that art is inseparable from the observer. Each town in the game has a distinct ethos, hinted at by the description in Figure 1.1. However—much the same as in real life—the way that each character experiences the town varies vastly from one to the next: for any given town, the characters’ personalities, life experiences, and interactions with the town all contribute to an entirely different perception of the town’s ethos. To reflect this truth musically, I composed a different version of each town theme for each of the three characters described in Figure 1.2. There is no “official” version of the town theme in the game; there is only how the theme is perceived by the different characters. In other words, there is no way of divorcing listener experience from the “true” nature of the music being listened to—the town’s music exists only insofar as it is perceived by those who enter it.

To tie this in with actual gameplay, I turned to Elizabeth Medina-Gray’s description of musical modularity [1]. She describes the process of modular music as starting from a fixed set of modules and rules, being assembled via some specified mechanism, and ultimately sounding for the listener to hear. In this game, the modules are each of the six tracks that I composed (one per character per town). On the most basic level, this music is modular because it changes depending on the player’s

| | <i>Class</i> | <i>Description</i> |
|-----------------|--------------|--|
| MARIELLE | Scholar | A scholar dedicated to exploring historical cultures via their musical practices, MARIELLE is a rising star at her university—she just hopes her tenure reviewers think so too. Her passion for the past leads her to explore areas far removed from the ivory tower of her university, and she has become a skilled field anthropologist because of it. Although typically shy, MARIELLE excitedly leaps into any discussion that involves music or history. |
| FELIX | Hunter | With his remarkable bowmanship, light and nimble frame, and great ability to navigate the outdoors, FELIX makes for an incredible hunter—or, rather, he would, but he can never bring himself to hurt the furry friends he makes in the forest. Instead of doing his official duty as a hunter, he can usually be found gracefully strolling and dancing about the forest, collecting rare plants and berries to sell at the market. A real sweetheart, FELIX has attracted more than a few admirers—but he doesn’t seem interested in a relationship right now. |
| CORDELIA | Warrior | Fierce, powerful, and brave, CORDELIA stops at nothing to achieve the goals she sets for herself. To her friends, she is a fiercely loyal ally through thick and thin, but, to her enemies, she is often a harbinger of misfortune. Although newly-appointed, CORDELIA is quickly becoming a favorite of the royal family in her duty as one of their protectors. In her free time, CORDELIA likes to spend time relaxing and talking with her closest friends. |

Figure 1.2: Character Information

location (from one town to the next). However, turning to guiding concept of the project—the inseparability of art and observer—the modules also respond dynamically to the player’s choice of character; in other words, character choice is an integral part of the modular assembly. Switching from playing as MARIELLE to FELIX, for example, immediately and seamlessly switches the music from her interpretation of the town theme to his; the music crossfades from one variation to the next without starting from the beginning again.

Lastly, as a personal creative restraint, I restricted myself to having only three simultaneous notes sound at any given time in the core themes of the towns (that is, ignoring the characters’ extra music, as described in the next section). The result of this constraint can be seen in the provided reduction scores and sound files.

2 Implementation

There are two primary tasks that I had to complete to implement the concept outlined in the previous section. First, I needed to successfully evoke the ethos of each town in its theme. Then, given that theme, I had to arrange it for each of the three characters in accordance with their perception of the town. The tricky part of these tasks is that the towns’ ethoses needed to be distinctly recognizable in each of the arrangements, while also allowing for significant variation in

musical style to match the characters’ lived experiences.

The primary conceptual tool that I leveraged to achieve these goals was Isabella van Elferen’s ALI model [2]. I wanted to immerse players in the towns of the gameworld as experienced by each of the characters, and, as such, I found the theoretical framework of immersion that van Elferen puts forth in her ALI model to be quite helpful. In the following two sections, I address how I specifically used van Elferen’s treatment of musical literacy in an attempt to evoke specific affective reactions to both the town themes as well as their interpretations by each of the characters.

Before doing so, however, I would like to detail the general structure of each character variation. First, each variation has a set of “core instruments” that plays the town’s theme. These notes are the same for each of the characters, but precisely which instrument plays which part of the theme varies from one piece to the next. Second, each piece has an additional “extra” section tailored to each of the characters that layers additional music on top of the actual town theme. The core instrumentation as well as the extra musical additions are described in Figure 2.1.

| | <i>Core instrumentation</i> | <i>Extra instrumentation</i> |
|-----------------|--|--|
| MARIELLE | String trio <i>violin, viola, cello</i> | Basso continuo on harpsichord and lute |
| FELIX | Wind quartet <i>flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon</i> | Harp |
| CORDELIA | Brass quartet <i>trumpet, French horn, trombone, tuba</i> | Percussion section |

Figure 2.1: Instrumentation

2.1 Musical Literacy and Town

Because each town theme is arranged with radically different instrumentation for each variation, I could not rely on instrumentation to evoke town ethos. Instead, I had to turn to the less “physical” parameters of melody, harmony, and rhythm—and, of course, musical literacy. For ease of reading this section, I have provided a reduction of the scores of each of the town themes without any of the extra character music to obscure the core theme.

For the MORROW TOWN theme, I aimed to evoke two affective responses: nostalgia and tranquility. The piece begins with an ascending tonic triad motif followed by a short melodic phrase. These two musical passages draw heavily from pastoral imagery that is hopefully understood—at least implicitly—by virtue of the listener’s musical literacy: the former from an awakening morning fanfare, and the latter from a shepherd’s whistle. Harmonically, the introductory melody features a IV-iv-I progression, a classic signifier for bittersweetness or nostalgia. Drawing on this motif, the major-minor chord shift recurs though the rest of the theme.

To best match the sweet and peaceful ethos of MORROW TOWN, I did my best to minimize any sense of disorientation or disruption of tranquility in its music. The main part of the piece is in simple binary form, with each half composed of two standard eight-bar periods. The harmony of the piece doesn’t feature anything too dissonant or otherwise “crunchy”; there are some somewhat unexpected chord changes, but nothing far outside the realm of standard, expected western tonality. Similarly, the rhythm is relatively simplistic, featuring no polyrhythm or anything too complicated, and the tempo is kept at a brisk but not fast *andante moderato*. To keep the piece upbeat, I ensured

that at every eighth-note division of the rhythm, at least one of the voices plays a new note (a technique inspired greatly by the works of early video game music composers working on limited hardware).

Melodically, I liberally use chromatic neighbor tones and grace notes, which, to me, contribute to the overall affect of sentimentality. I also incorporate aspirational leaps upward in the melody, climbing ever higher, culminating and resolving in the consequent of the second period, right before the piece loops back to the beginning.

For the DESEORA TOWN theme, I took the opposite approach to that described above in nearly every way. To start, the tempo is slowed down significantly, and the polyrhythm present in the piece can be relatively jarring. Chromatic tones are used not just as neighbor tones, but critical melodic notes, creating a sense of disorientation and lack of key. Formally, the piece is an extended period, with the antecedent being six bars (rather than the more standard four bars) of music, followed by a six-bar consequent that dissolves into an additional three bar coda before looping back to the start.

Harmonically, the DESEORA TOWN theme is somewhat atypical in that I focused primarily on voice leading rather than harmony in its creation. I composed the upper two voices first, with only a vague sense of what the harmony could be. Only later did I add in the bassline, making it as “functional” as possible—i.e., as close to traditional western harmony as I could. And, indeed, the piece can definitely be analyzed using classic functional terminology (tonic, predominant, dominant)—but only barely so.

In the DESEORA TOWN theme, I rely on the musical expectations of the listener as a source of norms to subvert; rather than relying on musical literacy in a positive way to induce a particular affect, I attempted to use it to negate listener expectations and instill a sense of disorientation and despair, matching the tragic backstory of DESEORA TOWN. However, I still wanted the piece to be relatively pleasant to listen to, so I did not (and could not) abandon all expected norms of music—I believe the piece to still be comfortably within the genre expected of a video game, even if it is unusual for a town. I also did not want the piece to evoke pure despondency beyond hope; just as DESEORA TOWN is “a haven of hope” (Figure 1.1), I wanted its music to contain glimmers of hope. For example, the bass in the final bar of the six-bar consequent to the main period (m. 12 and m. 24) descends into an unexpected $\flat 6$ scale degree, which provides a much brighter resolution than the antecedent’s $\flat 6$ (m. 6 and m. 18). Another example of this hope (or perhaps yearning/desperation) is the ending of the piece, which climbs ever higher and increases in excitement and energy—but ultimately dies back down as the piece loops back to the start.

2.2 Musical Literacy and Character

For the character themes, I had a different set of tools available to me to convey specific affect. Now that the form, harmony, rhythm, and main melody were all set, I could only work with instrumentation and additional musical textures and countermelodies. I once again relied heavily on musical literacy in my endeavor to compose the character variations. For this section, I recommend looking at the full character scores, which represent the full music as sounded in-game.

For MARIELLE, the scholar, I modeled the variations after a Baroque trio sonata: three stringed instruments with basso continuo accompaniment; I did my best to make the basso continuo authentic (voice leading, constant motion, etc.), but had to compromise given the modern nature of the rest of the piece. Nonetheless, ideally, my choice of instrumentation and accompaniment should successfully trigger the musical literacy of listeners to recognizing it as something Baroque—or at least “old”—to match MARIELLE’s passion for history. Moreover, the fact that MARIELLE is a scholar adds another layer of resonant signification to the string trio: in popular culture, classical

western string instruments employed as such are typically regarded as emblematic of intellectualism or scholarship.

For FELIX, the hunter, I wanted to capture a sense of light and quick nimbleness in my arrangements. I found the airy woodwinds to be a perfect fit to capture this essence, along with the harp, with its long association with angelic breeziness (FELIX is inspired by the Greek god of hunt Artemis, so the divine reference is fitting as well). In both the town themes, the accompanying harp in FELIX's variation is unobtrusive, adding texture and filling out the harmony. As such, it blends into the background of the piece, just as the hunter FELIX must blend into the forest.

For CORDELIA, the warrior, I included the more-or-less obvious choice of instruments signifying heroism: brass and percussion. For both variations, I imagined a regal procession with CORDELIA accompanying the royal family as the brass and percussion plays alongside them; as such, I tried to keep the percussion at a steady, unrushed pace with forward momentum. Although not strictly related to evoking my desired affective response to the character of CORDELIA, something unexpected that I ran into while composing her variation for DESEORA TOWN was the remarkable ability of the trumpet to evoke a sense of desperation and panic; I include it only in the final bars of the piece, but, when it jumps in, it sounds to me like a desperate cry for help, culminating in a final scream ending on the high E, and dying out as the piece returns to the beginning.

By leveraging the theoretical concepts of musical modularity from Medina-Gray (to allow for dynamism in the sounding music) and the ALI model from van Elferen (to guide the use of musical literacy for particular affective reactions), it is my hope that these character variations both preserve the ethos of the town upon which they are built as well as instill a noticeable sense of personality for each character.

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References

- [1] Elizabeth Medina-Gray. Modularity in Video Game Music. In Michiel Kamp, Tim Summers, and Mark Sweeney, editors, *Ludomusicology: Approaches to Video Game Music*, pages 53–72. Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2016.
- [2] Isabella van Elferen. Analysing Game Musical Immersion: The ALI Model. In Michiel Kamp, Tim Summers, and Mark Sweeney, editors, *Ludomusicology: Approaches to Video Game Music*, pages 32–52. Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2016.