"Select Your Instrument": Musical Character Customization in *Divinity: Original Sin II*

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Keywords

music, characterization, instrument, role-playing, leitmotif, *Divinity: Original Sin II*

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Video game music is as varied as video games themselves. In video games, music receives an added layer of complexity because it is often created to respond to a player's focus and individual playthrough, placing demands on continuity and adaptability. Music can give important feedback to a player (Guanio-Uluru 2022, 278) and, like film and TV scores, can emphasize or create subliminal messages and convey a character's thoughts and feelings to the recipient (Green 2010, 83). The importance of video game music for characterization and identity is further shown through the popularity of live concerts based on video game music (Austin 2016), demonstrating how musical scores provide dramatic support and contribute to emotional experiences in and beyond video game play.

In role-playing video games, players are used to customizing their character's gender, appearance, weapons, and voice, and in *Divinity: Original Sin II* (Larian Studios 2017), players can also customize their character's "origin instrument". In contrast to character customization of weapons, gender, and voice in role-playing video games, these instruments do not have corresponding diegetic representations. Complementing composer Borislav Slavov's grand score, the instruments of choice are the bansuri, the cello, the oud, and the tambura. Players are prompted to "Select your instrument" based on audio samples in the character creation screen and this will be the lead instrument throughout the character's adventures. This presentation begins the analysis of cultural and narrative implications of being able to choose an instrument as part of character customization.

The first part demonstrates how the four origin instruments – their historical and geographical context and traditionally communicated style, mood, and key – contribute to the video game's medieval fantasy world-building project. The instruments in *Divinity: Original Sin II* largely correspond with the 2015 role-playing video game *The Witcher III,* in which (mostly Slavic) folk instruments create a "raw" "neo-medieval" sound (Lamb and Smith 2018). This part of the presentation considers cultural implications in these design decisions, connecting it to video games' strained history with representation (see e.g. Gray and Leonard 2018; Mukherjee 2018) and *Divinity: Original Sin II*'s attempt at musically diversifying representation (Slavov 2018).

The second part of the presentation examines how origin instruments participate in the way the game plays and the process of characterization. The score's adaptive music system reflects changes in the way the player plays, for instance by changing from major to minor key when entering a dangerous area, but the feature of musical character customization also creates continuity and narrates a part of the character. The instrument itself becomes a leitmotif; a repeated theme associated with a certain character (or place, situation, emotion, as explained in Green 2010, 86). The instrument as the defining feature instead of a specific theme is further emphasized by how compositions with different origin instruments not only replace the instrument on the same tune but have distinct solos that suit the style and historical context of the instrument. Such subtle changes in style can have dramatic effects on the overall experience of play (Atkinson 2019b). Similarities and variations in dynamic, key, notation, orchestration, and transitions will be exemplified in the presentation with transcriptions by the author.

A preliminary analysis reveals how the player's ability to control music by choosing their instrument reflects *Divinity Original Sin II'*s narrative of increasingly powerful and unique individuals with the ability to ascend to godhood. Video game music can build characters from anti-heroes to protagonists through variations in instruments and chord keys (Atkinson 2019a) and has been shown to compose (and gender) tropes of heroism (Owens 2022). The solo instrument melodies stand out from the rest of the orchestration, which could be seen as a disruptive aural performance (Smith 2020) that demands attention. However, the score continues to push back this view because it does not disrupt gameplay and it reiterates melodic content and orchestration associated with simplified, pastoral scenes – linking the player character more to a bard than a god. In this sense, the music of *Divinity: Original Sin II* both reflects and shapes the many possible choices for what kind of character the player wants to be.

Interacting with music in various ways is not a novel feature in video games. The technical possibilities of platforms and socio-cultural context of video game development inspire new ways of producing, composing, and consuming music (Fernández-Cortéz 2021; Oliva 2019). Video games can function as musical instruments (Austin 2016), and when interfaces are less explicitly musical, players can switch radio stations (Jørgensen 2008), modify the video game to add or change in-game music, and even turn off in-game music in favor of listening to their own music (Guanio-Uluru 2022). This work-in-progress expands on these understandings of musical identity and interactivity to include the musical character customization in *Divinity: Original Sin II*. Examining specific instruments' qualities and their broader narrative and cultural implications shows how musical character customization pushes the limits of conceptualizations of video game characterization.

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