Torched Song: The hyperreal and the music of *L.A. Noire*

Andra Ivănescu

Abstract

Film noir is a genre that is essentially conflicted: not only does it have both love and death at its essence, but it is also a story about impending failure enveloped in style, beauty and smoke. This contradictory core is also reflected in a number of ways in the paradoxes of one of the most prominent noir games of recent years, the appropriately titled *L.A. Noire* (Team Bondi and Rockstar Games, 2011): the seemingly open world contradicts the linear narrative and, while the gameworld is firmly rooted in a meticulously researched historical past, it is also heavily stylized and grounded in a cinematic legacy. This is also reflected in the music of the game: along with the original soundtrack composed by Andrew and Simon Hale (with additional songs written by The Real Tuesday Weld), borrowed music helps place the game both in a particular place and time and in a particular genre. In this article, I explore the multiple functions that music plays in *L.A. Noire*, acting as temporal signifier but also reflecting the themes and tropes of film noir. Finally, I argue that Baudrillard's concept of the hyperreal can be used to better understand how appropriated music in video games relates to music history.

Keywords

temporal signifier

hyperreal

narrative

appropriated music

L.A. Noire

video game music

video game

Three-piece suit-wearing, fedora-clad Cole Phelps leaves yet another gruesome crime scene in 1947 Los Angeles. The radio is playing in his police vehicle and amidst fragments of authentic historical news reports and fictional advertisements he hears Tex Williams's 'Smoke, Smoke, Smoke that Cigarette'. While this is a song that topped the real-world charts in 1947 and reflects true music history, it also works as a humorous commentary on what film critic Roger Ebert named one of the ten identifiers of film noir: smoking. In his 'A guide to film noir genre' (1995), Ebert lists smoking as a key feature of film noir: 'Everybody in film noir is always smoking, as if to say, "On top of everything else, I've been assigned to get through three packs today"'. 'Smoke, Smoke, Smoke that Cigarette' is an example of the multiple functions that appropriated music fulfills in *L.A. Noire* (Team Bondi and Rockstar Games, 2011), both reflecting a real time in popular music history, and also reflecting the themes and tropes of the film noir genre in the appropriately titled video game. This scene could take place at any place in the game, as the player-character only needs to enter a vehicle for the randomized sequence of songs to start playing. The songs are thus not related to specific moments, nor do they have a practical function within the game, like the musical fragments that indicate the presence of clues at crime scenes, for instance. Appropriated music is, however, part of what Greg Singh identifies in another noir game – *Max Payne* (Remedy Entertainment, 2001) – as the 'complex interplay between real-world referentiality and generic verisimilitude', giving footsteps as an example:

The sound of footsteps corresponds directly to the footfalls of the Payne avatar, adhering not only to real-world rules but also those of film noir: it is not just the sound of footsteps, but the sound of a smartly adorned foot falling on

wet asphalt, echoing in an empty street or stairwell, the sound of countless gumshoes and private dicks walking alone those very lonely streets. (Singh 2009: 97)

This article explores how music in *L.A. Noire* highlights the same type of complex interplay between real-world and cinematic references and analyses how the selection of appropriated music relates to French philosopher and cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard's concept of the *hyperreal*. In doing so, I argue that the fundamental reality-genre duality at the core of *L.A. Noire* and reflected in its appropriated music reveals and reinforces assumptions about popular music history.

The paradoxes of *L.A. Noire*

The scene described above is typical of the reality-genre duality that can be observed throughout *L.A. Noire*, which tells the story of detective Cole Phelps as he rises through the ranks of the Los Angeles police department, despite his inconvenient morality. Cole does not remain untainted by the corruption of the city and its police force, but in the end he sacrifices his life while trying to make the city a better place. Even from a brief description of the plot, it becomes clear that film noir influences are prevalent; these will later be shown to be at the core of the paradoxes of the game. The characteristics of noir are so ubiquitous that film scholar James Naremore's list of identifiers of film noir reads almost as a checklist of tropes present in *L.A. Noire*: from noir characters and stories, such as private eyes hired by femmes fatales (Phelps's PI friend, Jack Kelso, becomes a playable character later in the game when he is hired

by the femme fatale, Elsa), to particular costumes, the use of real-world places (particularly Los Angeles), certain musical styles and the use of flashback scenes (2008: 2). Other themes and plot elements that can be found in *L.A. Noire* have also been identified by film critic Raymond Durgnat as typically noir: crime and social criticism in the form of a corrupt penology (Phelps struggles with his corrupt superiors), as well as psychopaths (the serial killer character Garrett Mason, for instance) ([1970] 2003).

While these characteristics help *identify* a film noir, the genre seems to resist straightforward definitions: as Naremore stated, 'it has always been easier to recognize a film noir than to define the term' (2008: 9). Nevertheless, a functional definition would contain what film scholar Paul Schrader called 'its primary colors (all shades of black), those cultural and stylistic elements to which any definition must return', which include: war and post-war disillusionment, post-war realism, the influence of German cinema and the hard-boiled tradition (1972: 55–56). In other words, film noir is born out of a difficult post-war socio-political environment and is influenced visually by German expressionism, while its literary influences include the hard-boiled fiction of writers like Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. While these characteristics closely describe the initial wave of film noir in Hollywood in the 1940s and 1950s, many of them also describe the subsequent waves of neo-noir which started emerging in the late 1960s and have since developed into a wide variety of transnational media, including video games.

Noir video games themselves span a variety of game genres, from third-person shooters like the *Max Payne* series (Remedy Entertainment, 2001, 2003; Rockstar Studios, 2012) to survival horror such as *White Night* (OSome Studio, 2014) and mobile puzzle games including *Framed* (Loveshack Entertainment, 2013), with a

considerable number of adventure games embracing noir, from earlier examples like the *Tex Murphy* series (Access Software, 1994–1998) to critically acclaimed games like *Grim Fandango* (LucasArts, 1998). Despite the fact that many of these games differ greatly in terms of gameplay, it can be argued that they belong to a broader, overarching genre: game noir. Most games noir belong to the neo-noir tradition, not only in the sense that they are new media exploring noir, but also in the sense that they often adapt and combine noir with other genres or visual styles, or introduce contemporary or futuristic settings. *L.A Noire* thus becomes an exception, in that it pays a very faithful and straightforward homage to the films noir of the 1940s and 1950s, seemingly ignoring its neo-noir progeny; it is set in Los Angeles, the characters are traditional noir figures and the game makes special effort to refer to the post-war disillusionment that is a core part of the noir genre. For instance, in *L.A. Noire*, the legacy of the war is at the source of conflict and crime: surplus morphine stolen by servicemen returned from World War II is being sold to fund a suburban development programme pretending to create housing for returning servicemen. As Schrader stated: 'The war continues, but now the antagonism turns with a new viciousness towards the American society itself' (1972: 55–56).

L.A. Noire thus exhibits many of the characteristics traditionally associated with film noir in terms of visual style, characters, plot and narrative. Moreover, the game seems to reflect some of the genre's more contradictory qualities. Naremore describes film noir as a paradox, in that it is 'both an important cinematic legacy and an idea we have projected onto the past' (2008: 11). In other words, film noir is more than a series of films with common features that has left its mark of film history, it is also a cultural construct developed out of film criticism. *L.A. Noire* is a game that is born out of this

paradox and, by projecting this cinematic legacy onto the past, becomes a game that also has multiple paradoxes at its core.

One paradox is that, in terms of gameplay, *L.A. Noire* gives the illusion of an open world game while being a fundamentally linear one. The game presents the player with an open map of 1947 Los Angeles, which can be explored by driving around and admiring architecture, commandeering vehicles and fighting street crime. However, the game is linear in terms of narrative: there are a number of cases that the player needs to go through in a certain order for the story to advance. Events unfold in a certain way, in a certain order and there is only one possible ending to this tragedy. Irrespective of how individual cases play out, the game has the same outcome, so the skill level of individual players cannot influence the outcome of the game in any substantial way. The player can achieve different degrees of success in individual levels/cases by correctly following clues and reading facial expressions (both important mechanics in the game), but if the storyline demands that Phelps arrest the wrong people, he will do so, no matter what the player does, even if the highest possible score on a case is obtained: there is no winning, just completing the game. In other words, while many open world games have relatively linear main stories,[1] *L.A. Noire* is different because it forces the player to repeatedly make the wrong choice. While the character may not be conscious of the injustice he is unwittingly committing, the player can become increasingly aware of the mistakes she is forced to make. The feeling that there is an inescapable destiny, a single path to be followed, that leads to destruction, is yet another trope of film noir: Naremore mentions a 'downbeat ending' as a basic and familiar ingredient of the genre (2008: 202) and Roger Ebert also notes that a film noir is 'a movie which at no time misleads you into thinking there is going to be a happy ending' (1995). Singh argues that video games exacerbate this quality,

offering 'an insight into perhaps the more "noirish" of affective responses – the sense of "no way out"' (2009: 94), consequently drawing a parallel between film noir and single-player games, arguing that 'for the single-player, anticipation of wave upon wave of unknown assailants, as well as the constant knowledge of possibly impending "death", produce a very similar affect of resignation' (2009: 95). Different games noir accentuate this sense of inevitability in different ways. For instance, *Heavy Rain* (Quantic Dream, 2010) does not allow a player to replay scenes until the game is over, meaning that a player's choices or lack of skills may lead to seemingly permanent consequences, including character deaths.

The second paradox of *L.A. Noire* is that it participates in both realism and noir, seemingly opposites which work together in evocative ways. *L.A. Noire* was the first game to be shown at the Tribeca Film Festival (Tribeca 2011), placing the game within a cinematic tradition. Its screening can be seen as an indication of both the heightened cinematic realism, which can now be achieved by game technology and the quality of the actors' performances. While voice performances from established actors are certainly not new in the context of video games (*Fallout 3* [Bethesda Game Studios, 2008] features voice performances from Liam Neeson and Malcolm McDowell, while Max von Sydow plays Esbern in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* [Bethesda Game Studios, 2011]), in *L.A. Noire*, well-known actors such as Aaron Staton (Cole Phelps) and John Noble (Leland Monroe) also contribute their likeness to their characters and give physical performances that are captured with innovative technology. The game used new technology in the form of MotionScan, allowing 32 surrounding cameras to capture the actors' performances, in addition to the more familiar Motion Capture, which records actors' movements and actions. MotionScan technology is in fact central to the game's interrogation mechanic, where the player must interpret whether

the characters being interrogated are telling the truth or lying based on their facial expressions and body language.[2] While the results of these interrogations do not influence the overarching story, they do influence the level of detail that is revealed regarding individual cases. Another aspect of the game's realism derives from the research involved in creating the gameworld, which is firmly rooted in a historical past. A large amount of research was conducted in order to reproduce the surroundings as faithfully as possible. Architectural details, police-issue vehicles and weapons, even traffic patterns in various parts of Los Angeles were meticulously researched. Moreover, even some of the crimes the player-character investigates in the game are inspired by real crimes that took place in 1940s Los Angeles (Rockstar Games 2011).

The game is rooted in reality, but it is also rooted in noir, creating the same type of complex interplay mentioned by Singh in relation to *Max Payne*; the line between a real historical past and a cinematic legacy is even blurred in the game's marketing. Production design details revealed on the game's website show that film and TV costume designer Wendy Cork was employed early on, while even the props in the game were 'real Hollywood props':

> Before any case was written or any dialogue fleshed out, Wood [Production Designer Simon Wood] had to create a prop list of all furniture and set dressing items expected to be seen in the game. 'It was a huge undertaking but our core reference was great and we knew we'd have a great mixture of residential and commercial locations in the game. So I laughed and started with the word 'Chair' and the list grew from there… actually it grew quite a bit.' Wood and the team had an extensive photo shoot over four full days in

Los Angeles, 'We hired almost every conceivable vintage prop from the biggest Hollywood prop houses in the business. Ben was photographing items as quick as the Prop Men could get them off the truck'. (Rockstar Games 2011)

While the attention to detail is undeniable, the question of which 'reality' the game refers to is much more debatable: the game purports to be an 'extremely faithful recreation of 1940's Los Angeles' (Rockstar Games 2011) but much of its 'authenticity' seems rather to mirror Hollywood, such as the use of studio props and costumes. While these may be considered details that can be easily overlooked by players, they all contribute to the distinctly cinematic flavour of the world of *L.A. Noire*. The noir qualities of the game can even be enhanced by the in-game filter that a player can activate in order to turn the game black and white, reinforcing yet another quality mentioned by both scholars and critics as typical of film noir. While Ebert stated that films noir are 'movies either shot in black and white, or feeling like they were' (1995), Naremore notes the artistic and cultural associations of black and white: 'black and white had long been regarded as a stylized medium – a sign not merely of realism but also of abstraction, bohemia, aestheticism, and avant-garde taste' (2008: 174).

The world of *L.A. Noire* is, thus, one grounded in the real world but tinged in Hollywood noir, with genre elements seeping out into the world and its music: it is not merely a real world in which a film noir story is set, but a world that is itself distorted, it is itself part of the narrative. An example of the narrative contaminating the world is the set of the D. W. Griffith film *Intolerance* (Griffith, 1916). While in real life the set had been demolished prior to 1947, it is still standing in the gameworld of *L.A. Noire*. The game's

website describes the anachronism as a 'nod to this great piece of Hollywood history' (Rockstar Games 2011). However, a reference to this particular film through its set carries with it more complex connotations. *Intolerance*, D. W. Griffith's follow-up to the controversial *The Birth of a Nation* (Griffith, 1915), is not only a film by a famously controversial director; it is a film that is famous for its expensive and lavish sets, its ambitiously complex plot, but perhaps more importantly for its inability to engage mass contemporary audiences and its ultimate failure at the box office. It can thus be interpreted as a metonym for Hollywood itself, encompassing both its ambitions and its follies. The *Intolerance* set does not simply stand as window dressing or a delightful ruin in which to set a new Indiana Jones-like chase scene. It stands as an embodiment of Hollywood itself: its inflated egos and its decadence, its reliance on the public, its prejudices and its unpredictability. This anachronism stands as a tragedy in itself, underlining the beauty, the grandeur and the deadly inevitability of film noir. The *Intolerance* set is most likely not the sole anachronism in the game, but it is one of the most prominent, and it is one of the most conspicuous examples of how popular culture is used to underline narrative themes pertinent to the film noir genre.

The paradoxes of *L.A. Noire* reveal how extensively noir permeates all aspects of the game: the cinematic legacy that is emulated visually and the inevitability of the linear plot are both part of the film noir influence that is felt throughout. The contradiction at the heart of the game is derived from the simultaneous representation of elements of the real world and elements of cinematic heritage. Baudrillard argues that 'concurrently with this effort toward an absolute correspondence with the real, cinema also approaches an absolute correspondence with itself – and this is not contradictory: it is the very definition of the hyperreal' (1994: 49). Film noir is an illustration of this hyperreal in that, as Naremore argues, it is, to a certain degree, a projection onto the

past (2008: 11), its cinematic legacy constructed, a simulation itself. The referent seems so far removed that *L.A. Noire* exemplifies the hyperreal, the 'generation by models of a real without origin or reality' (Baudrillard 1994: 1). The music of *L.A. Noire* is part of its hyperreality; stylistic and lyrical influences from film noir merge with appropriated music which further situates the narrative within a historical time and place. The following sections discuss how these influences function in the three distinct areas of the game's music: the original score, the three original songs and the appropriated music.

La musique noir

The original soundtrack was written by Andrew and Simon Hale with additional music by Woody Jackson. While the *L.A. Noire* website describes it as 'inspired by the sweeping orchestral scores from the great films of the 1940s' (Rockstar Games 2011), the score is at times more reminiscent of neo-noir soundtracks and composers like Jerry Goldsmith. The main trumpet theme is particularly reminiscent of *Chinatown* (Polanski, 1974).

Figure 1: Main theme from *Chinatown* (excerpt).

Figure 2: Main theme from *L.A. Noire* (excerpt).

In his 2008 article on film noir scores, film scholar Richard Ness identifies how these neo-noir soundtracks differed from older noir in that they 'made use of small combinations of instruments, augmented by electronic instruments, which create an ominous and otherworldly atmosphere' (2008: 53). While a neo-noir film soundtrack often employs small ensembles and the atmosphere can certainly be described as otherworldly, the original score of the game is more traditional in terms of orchestration and harmony than more recent films of the genre. Electronic instruments and effects that have become more and more prominent in more recent examples of neo-noir like Brian De Palma's *Femme Fatale* (De Palma, 2002) and Robert Rodriguez's *Sin City* (Miller and Rodriguez, 2005) barely make an appearance in the game. The main theme has an intimate sound, occasionally appearing just as a trumpet theme accompanied by gentle piano chords and arpeggios, while other tracks on the soundtrack employ slightly larger jazz ensembles or even a full symphonic orchestra.

While the original score has elements that are reminiscent of actual film noir soundtracks, it also reflects an almost mythical 'film noir sound'. Film scholar David Butler describes the role jazz plays in noir: 'for many people, if film noir does have a specific sound, then it is jazz. Jazz dominates assumptions about the music used in film noir and it is particularly prevalent in contemporary references to and recreations of film noir' (2013: 308). In other words, a sole trumpet in the night may not be as pervasive in film noir as it is in parodies of it and it may be more emblematic of neo-noir scores like Jerry Goldsmith's *Chinatown* (Polanski, 1974) or *L.A. Confidential* (Hanson, 1997) than what is considered classic film noir, but it can be as recognizable as a trench coat and a fedora. Film noir sound is thus part of both the cinematic legacy and the cultural construct of noir, all part of the architecture of hyperreality.

There are, however, additional reasons why jazz is so closely associated with film noir. Butler argues that jazz is used as a 'recognizable metaphor for sex and criminal behaviour' (2013: 310). Ness also argues that jazz is used as a signifier for the 'decadence of the nocturnal urban environment' and later for 'the erotic undercurrents of the genre and the character of the femme fatale', but also 'to generate a sense of nostalgia for films of the past' (2008: 55).[3] Setting aside the classist and racist undertones of jazz signifying threat, as well as the misogyny that surrounds the trope of the femme fatale and the female performer, it becomes clear that the stylistic appropriations are powerful semiotic tools that, in the case of *L.A. Noire*, reveal information about the gameworld and its characters.

La musique fatale

While it may not be a trope of the genre in statistical terms, the musical woman can be found throughout film noir, bringing to mind memorable performances from Veronica Lake (*This Gun for Hire* [Tuttle, 1942]) and Lauren Bacall (*To Have and Have Not* [Hawks, 1944]). Robert Miklitsch even notes that 'for most viewers, of course, the dominant image of source music in the period is not, say, a singer–piano player but a female vocalist backed by a big band' (2011: 15). The femme fatale is sometimes even introduced with a performance, such as Rita Hayworth's appearance in *Gilda* (Vidor, 1946) and Jessica Rabbit's introduction in the noir parody *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (Zemeckis, 1988). The femme fatale is often a singer in noir parodies, which exaggerate tropes and solidify them as key features, confirming the perception of the musical woman as an integral part of the genre.

It then comes as no surprise that the femme fatale in *L.A. Noire* – Elsa Lichtmann – is a singer at high-class nightclub The Blue Room, a profession that many femmes fatale embrace, almost as cinematic shorthand for their promiscuity.[4] As Miklitsch explains:

> the canary, as the lone woman in an otherwise all-male band and working outside the sacrosanct precincts of hearth and home, signified sexual and economic autonomy, precisely because of this separation from the family and domestic sphere, she also conveyed sexual availability and emotional vulnerability – at least on stage. (2011: 16)

Not only is Elsa the only woman in an all-male band, she is a German refugee playing with black men, both parties reinforcing each other's otherness. Moreover, she becomes a direct threat to the traditional family, as her affair with the lead character becomes an essential part of his downfall.

Elsa's three stage performances reinforce what is already revealed about her personality and they firmly place her in the male gaze, while at the same time allowing her control she rarely experiences offstage. The moments function as they do in film, and as Adrienne McLean describes:

> She does not at that moment represent only sexual difference which the narrative drives relentlessly to investigate, to control, to punish. Nor is she only a spectacularized one-dimensional fetish, fascinating us across an

irreducible distance. Instead, because she is singing, she becomes an active communicating subject. (1993: 4)

In other words, she can express herself uninterrupted onstage, while offstage she is often interrupted by violence or the threat of violence as she tries to defy the corrupt authorities. Onstage everyone listens and she is no longer just a victim. Even the player is forced to listen to Elsa, however briefly, as the singing moments occur during cut-scenes.

The cut-scenes in *L.A. Noire* are numerous and adopt what Singh identifies as a typical '"letter-box" widescreen effect, suggesting a mode of representation to the player that is somehow inherently cinematic rather than televisual'. Singh further argues that this 'lends cinematic authenticity to the cut-scenes by evoking the embrace of wider screen formats in the neo-noir era' (2009: 95). Thus cinematically framed, Elsa's performances become even more evocative of similar moments in films noir.

There are three original songs that Elsa performs throughout the game: 'Guilty', '(I Always Kill) the Things I Love' and 'Torched Song'. While the songs only play in their entirety over the end credits, fragments of varying lengths can be heard during different missions: only a verse is omitted from 'I (Always Kill) the Things I Love' during the mission titled 'A Walk in Elysian Fields', while only one verse and the chorus of 'Torched Song' are included after 'The White Shoe Slaying' case and only the final seconds of 'Guilty' can be heard during 'House of Sticks'. The moments are relatively short and focus on Cole rather than Elsa: the 'camera' focuses on Cole as he watches Elsa and not on Elsa herself. As '(I Always Kill) the Things I Love' is sung, Cole and a

corrupt detective talk, the latter making threats while our protagonist never looks at him, his gaze staying on Elsa for the entire scene. 'Torched Song' can only be heard faintly until the protagonist enters the bar, suggesting the player not only sees but hears from Cole's perspective. This may suggest the power of the male gaze but it may also be a question of maintaining the third-person perspective of the rest of the game as it focuses on the protagonist, perhaps encouraging the player's identification with the player-character. Moreover, the songs become prophetic with regards to the characters' destinies, making their repetition over the end credits even more poignant and underlining the inescapable tragedy of noir.

All three songs are written by Stephen Coates and performed with his band The Real Tuesday Weld and singer Claudia Brücken. The jazz influence typical of noir can be felt in both Brücken's sultry voice and singing as well as through the stylistic features of the swung rhythms. The orchestration and production are similar to that of the rest of the original soundtrack.[5] The songs are reminiscent of other film noir songs such as *Gilda*'s 'Put the Blame on Mame' because of their self-incriminating and defiant lyrics. The lyrics to 'Put the Blame on Mame' describe the mythical Mame as a character whose sexuality seems to be culpable for natural disasters:

Mame kissed a buyer from out of town

That kiss burned Chicago down

So you can put the blame on Mame, boys

Put the blame on Mame.

A woman's sexuality is similarly deadly in '(I Always Kill) The Things I Love':

I love the chase, 'til the minute I win it

A beautiful face 'til there's love for me in it

Give me your heart and baby I'll bin it

'cause I always kill the things I love.

The lyrics can also be interpreted as forewarning the violence and disaster of the story itself, turning the metaphorical meaning of the songs literal. *L.A. Noire*'s 'Torched Song', for instance, uses fire as a metaphor for love and desire, but the plot of the game involves stopping a serial arsonist:

And I need something

to quench this fire

before it becomes

a funeral pyre

Yeah I'm burnin'

with yearnin' so much for you

Coates describes writing the lyrics to the songs according to the brief he received:

> Lyrically, many songs from that era follow the same pattern – they are either straight out love songs or love songs wrapped in some metaphor – food, gardening, dancing, moonlight or whatever. For *L.A. Noire*, obviously that metaphor would be 'Crime'. (Actually, there are many songs already like this – 'Murder, she said', 'Pistol Packing Mama' etc.). (2011)

In other words, while the songs are written to musically resemble songs of the 1940s, their lyrics are meant to evoke the violent themes of the game itself as well the film noir genre. An example of the way Coates uses the crime metaphor are the lyrics to 'Guilty':

Baby you know I'm Guilty.

Cops, judge, and jury they all agree

If love's the crime, I'm doing time

And I don't look like I'll ever get free

Yeah baby you know I'm guilty.

Film noir influences can thus be perceived throughout the music of *L.A. Noire*: the original score stylistically emulates a 'film noir sound' and the three original songs reference film noir tropes through their diegetic context and lyrical content. Additionally, while appropriated music seems to play a different role, situating the narrative in a historical time and place, it is nevertheless tinged with noir.

The way it never sounded

Appropriated music is not typically used in noir video games, perhaps because relatively recent noir games like the *Max Payne* series, *Fahrenheit* (Quantic Dream, 2005) and *Heavy Rain*, adopt a neo-noir aesthetic and are set in the current day, while *L.A. Noire* uses appropriated music as part of its array of temporal signifiers.

In *L.A. Noire,* appropriated music can be heard on K.T.I. Radio, the sole radio station in the game, which plays in most vehicles the player enters, as well as buildings that have a radio. Radio stations have been used as a design element in a number of games, most notably *Fallout 3* and *Fallout: New Vegas* (Obsidian Entertainment, 2010), as well as Rockstar's *Grand Theft Auto* series, *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North, 2014) featuring seventeen in-game stations. Kiri Miller argues that the music in the later *Grand Theft Auto* series can 'encourage players to associate particular music with particular characters and places' (2012: 55). Similarly, in *Fallout 3* certain radio stations are associated with particular factions in the game – Enclave Radio is a propaganda station run by the Enclave, for instance, and musicologist William Cheng describes how its 'anthems and marches resonate as bombastic examples of patriotic

American music' (2014: 28). In *L.A. Noire*, however, appropriated music is not associated with specific characters, factions or places. Unlike the *Fallout* or the *Grand Theft Auto* games, *L.A. Noire* features only one radio station and the player has no control over it – the radio plays automatically in vehicles (or buildings). Popular music in *L.A. Noire* seems to be what Michel Chion would describe as neither empathetic or anempathetic. It does not 'directly express its participation in the feeling of the scene', as empathetic music would, nor does it 'exhibit conspicuous indifference', as anempathetic music would; it rather has both 'an abstract meaning' and 'a simple function of presence, a value as signpost' (Chion 1994: 8–9). It has an abstract meaning in the sense that it is strongly connected to the noir narrative and aesthetic, while its value as signpost is rooted in its function as temporal signifier. The selection of 32 songs is chronologically accurate: the majority of the songs charted in the United States in 1947, like Tex Williams's hit 'Smoke! Smoke! Smoke! That Cigarette', but there are also a number of earlier hits, like Count Basie's 'One O'Clock Jump' and Gene Krupa's version of 'Sing Sing Sing', creating a diverse, rounded image of the world. The soundscape that it builds is also one that is stylistically diverse: there are a variety of genres represented on the list, from country music to big band, including bebop and pop. The variety of artists and styles that are represented distracts from their commonalities, aspects of reality overshadowing the noir.

Nevertheless, the noir influence can be felt in the popular music in *L.A. Noire*, specifically in its paramusical fields of connotation, which are those described by musicologist Philip Tagg as existing '*alongside* or *in connection with* the music, as an intrinsic part of musical semiosis in a real cultural context' (2013: 229). Tagg considers lyrics to be part of this paramusical domain, and it is from the lyrical content of these songs that the noir themes emerge. As Stephen Coates mentions, crime is already a

theme that can often be found in songs of the time. For example, a song included in the game is 'Stone Cold Dead in the Market (He Had It Coming)', where an episode of domestic violence leads to murder:

Last night I went out drinking.

When I came home I gave her a beating.

So she catch up the rolling pin and went to work on my head

Until she bash it in.

Glimpses of racial tension can be observed in other appropriated songs, like 'Manteca' and also Fats Waller's '(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue', performed not by an African American artist, but by Frankie Laine, an American singer of Italian descent. In 'Black and Blue', the protagonist laments the difficulties of facing racism in the United States:

I'm white inside, but that don't help my case

Cause I can't hide what is on my face.

I'm so forlorn. Life's just a thorn.

My heart is torn. Why was I born?

What did I do to be so black and blue?

Furthermore, moral corruption is depicted in 'Maybe I Should Change My Ways' and 'Wolf on the River', alcoholism is the theme of Cootie Williams's 'Juice Head Baby' and seductresses are portrayed in 'Red Silk Stockings and Green Perfume'.

Out of the 32 appropriated songs in the game, the only ones that do not evoke images that could be related to the film noir theme explicitly are the instrumental ones. Moreover, other paramusical connotations can play a role in the meaning expressed through these songs: Hank Williams's 'Move It on Over', for instance, does not only evoke images of marital discord, but to a few it may also bring to mind images of excess and death because of the prominent singer's well-known untimely demise at age 29, which involved both drug and alcohol abuse. The prevalence of songs that discuss alcohol abuse and seductresses, songs that evoke criminal activities and songs that wrap love in violent metaphors indicates a predilection towards the film noir themes that are explored in the game.

Relevance to the game's narrative themes is likely not the only criterion that has influenced the selection of appropriated songs within the game. Other criteria may include practical reasons such as licensing, or aesthetic reasons such as a need for diversity in terms of musical genre. Less famous songs from well-known performers like Billie Holiday, Peggy Lee and Louis Armstrong may have been chosen over more familiar titles by these artists in order to avoid pre-existing connections or associations with other popular culture artefacts. However, there are recognizable standards that are included. For example, 'Sing Sing Sing' has been included in numerous films and TV series, as well as earlier noir-influenced game *Mafia II* (2K Games, 2010). This song also has strong semiotic connections with World War II as well as the periods that immediately precede or succeed it.

All of these possible criteria suggest a distorted soundscape, one that represents a historically accurate musical soundscape, but at the same time illustrates the themes and motifs of a film noir game and perhaps avoids music that is not directly working towards its narrative. This is not 1947 Los Angeles, it is *L.A. Noire*, the *e* at the end perhaps suggesting the city itself is a femme fatale, an illusion that is both beautiful and duplicitous. This is hyperreality. In his *More Than a Game*, Barry Atkins stated that:

> The possibility of immersion proves to be more than a consequence of technical sophistication. The players stay 'in' the game-world not because they have confused it with the real, but because its very 'unreality' is attractive. This is a seductive, rather than deceptive, fictional form. (2003: 142)

In the same way it can be ascertained that players do not actually believe that they are driving around 1947 Los Angeles, or even an accurate representation of it. The gameworld is a seductive fictional environment with an illusory soundscape.

The hyperreal and the music of *L.A. Noire*

The seductive 'unreality' of *L.A. Noire* is reinforced constantly through the film noir influences that permeate all aspects of the game, making Baudrillard's description of Disneyland particularly relevant: 'It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology) but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus

saving the reality principle' (1994: 13). A parallel between the *L.A. Noire* and Disneyland can easily be drawn, because they can both be characterized as models of 'all the entangled orders of simulacra' (Baudrillard 1994: 12); they are both prime examples of worlds which, through their very falseness reinforce the perception of the outside (extra-game) world as real. As Atkins suggests, video games are not confused with the real. Even as they become increasingly accurate in representing real life through increased visual photorealism and meticulous research, they constantly reinforce their 'unreality' through cinematic visuals, narratives and sound, thus preserving the 'reality principle'. Disneyland and *L.A. Noire* thus become analogous, particularly because of their relationship to Los Angeles. Baudrillard argues that 'Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation' (1994: 13). Similarly, *L.A. Noire* is presented as a cinematic representation of Los Angeles, as imaginary, as opposed to the *real* Los Angeles. The influence of cinema is certainly not concealed, being emphasized from the very title of the game to its smallest details; its paradoxes only reinforce its status as fiction, as fake, as simulation. *L.A. Noire* can thus be seen as a virtual Disneyland, as one of the 'imaginary stations that feed reality' (Baudrillard 1994: 13).

Music history is part of this 'reality' that is being fed, but music history it is in itself hyperreal. The biases of the musical selection in *L.A. Noire* or other games distract from the limitations of more 'objective' selection criteria. Musical selections that are considered more 'objective' or 'representative' are often based on canons and charts, repeatedly disregarding their limitations and biases.[6] Canons and charts both give value and worth to particular works over others. While charts could be viewed as purely

commercial structures, French economist Jacques Attali explains the subtle power of 'hit parades' to 'give value, channel, and select things that would otherwise have none, that would float undifferentiated' (1989: 108), making them quite similar to canons, which musicologist William Weber argues 'can refer to anything deemed essential to a society or to one of its parts in establishing order and discipline and in measuring worth' (2001: 338). Both charts and canons are flawed structures, as biased, perhaps, as any other selection of works based on any criteria. Marcia Citron explains the limitations of canon in her *Gender and the Musical Canon*:

> The values encoded in a canon affirm a particular cultural group or groups and are not necessarily meaningful for other groups. Thus by virtue of its particularity a canon is not universal. Nor is it neutral. In its representativeness it is partial, and partiality precludes neutrality. In other words, its selectivity translates as a particular point of view. (1993: 21)

The question of whose point of view canons represent certainly raise issues regarding gatekeepers, while charts raise different problems. Issues of race, disproportionate representation of genre, payola and even recent discussions regarding streaming all put the validity of charts into question. Perhaps charts and canons are useful tools however, not because they reflect musical history but because they influence it. As Ernest Hakanen describes in his article regarding the evolution of charts, they are, to a certain extent 'a separate construction of the perception of popularity, manipulated with the consumer, not the business, in mind. Manipulation of the charts distinguishes it as science, following a universal law of perception or a constructed system of

thought' (1998: 105). Nevertheless, both charts and canons prove to be distorted images of our musical past. These structures, perhaps as biased as in *L.A. Noire*, may be more harmful because of the covert values and ideologies attached to them. In this case, Baudrillard's concept of the hyperreal acts as a reminder of the shortcomings of our perception of music history. Just like Baudrillard claims Disneyland's obvious unreality serves to give the impression that the external world is real, when it is actually hyperreal, so *L.A. Noire*'s obviously constructed music history implies that other representations of music history outside the game are real, when they are actually constructed, biased canons and narratives.

The hyperreal becomes increasingly more relevant as games become more realistic in both visual and sonic representation. As video games continue to offer increasingly faithful tourist experiences through progressively vast open-worlds, many grounded in history, the comparison of these obviously constructed worlds with what is apparently 'reality' becomes inevitable. This comparison fuels the reality principle. The real–virtual duality, the inevitable 'compare and contrast' strengthens the impression of the hyperreal (that is, the constructed music histories outside the game) as unbiased and real. The increasing use of appropriated music (including more appropriated music in a single game and more games that use appropriated music), the representation of aspects of musical history in games, reinforces assumptions about music and music history.

Video games may function as charts do, shaping music history through their use, but they may also reinforce pre-existing structures like charts and canons, either by reproducing or by contradicting them. Perhaps the biggest challenge when investigating how selections of appropriated music in video games relate to music history is taking into account preconceptions about music history itself. The trappings

of these preconceptions can perhaps be avoided by considering why musical works, genres or styles are considered representative beyond chronological accuracy. Potential avenues for research would require intertextual approaches analysing the social, political and cultural context behind a musical work's production and reception, as well as its recontextualization, potentially taking into account previous uses in a variety of media as well. Music history is a complex narrative; to paraphrase Baudrillard, music history is our lost referential, that is to say our myth (1994: 43). It is by questioning the myth that we can discover what the way we see our past can reveal about our present and our future.

References

Access Software (1989–1998), *Tex Murphy* series (*Mean Streets, Martian Memorandum, Under a Killing Moon, The Pandora Directive, Tex Murphy: Overseer*) (PC), Salt Lake City: Access Software Incorporated.

Atkins, B. (2003), *More Than a Game: The Computer Game as Fictional Form*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Attali, J. (1989), *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (trans. B. Massumi), Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Baudrillard, J. (1994), *Simulacra and Simulation* (trans. Sheila Faria Glaser), Ann Arbr, MI: The University of Michigan Press.

Bethesda Game Studios (2008), *Fallout 3* (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360), Rockville: Bethesda Softworks.

____ (2011), *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360), Rockville: Bethesda Softworks.

Butler, D. (2013), 'In a lonely tone: Music in film noir', in A. Spicer and H. Hanson (eds), *Companion to Film Noir*, Somerset: John Wiley & Sons, pp. 302–17.

Cheng, W. (2014), *Sound Play: Video Games and the Musical Imagination*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Chion, M. (1994), *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen* (trans. C. Gorbman), New York: Columbia University Press.

Citron, M. J. (1993), *Gender and the Musical Canon*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Coates, S. (2011), '*L.A. Noire* revisited', http://theclerkenwellkid.blogspot.co.uk/2011/05/lanoire-revisited.html. Accessed 4 November 2014.

Cook, K. M. (2014), 'Music, history and progress in Sid Meier's *Civilization IV*', in K. J. Donnelly, W. Gibbons and N. Lerner (eds), *Music in Video Games: Studying Play*, New York: Routledge, pp. 166–82.

De Palma, B. (2002), *Femme Fatale*, France: Warner Bros.

Durgnat, R. ([1970] 2003), 'Paint it black: The family tree of the *Film Noir*', in A. Silver and J. Ursini (eds), *Film Noir Reader*, New York: Limelight Editions, pp. 37–51.

Ebert, R. (1995), 'A guide to film noir genre', http://www.rogerebert.com/rogers-journal/a-guide-to-film-noir-genre. Accessed 16 June 2014.

Griffith, D.W. (1916), *Intolerance*, USA: Triangle Distributing Corporation.

Griffith, D.W. (1915), *The Birth of a Nation*, USA: Epoch Production Corporation.

Hakanen, E. A. (1998), 'Counting down to number one: The evolution of the meaning of popular music charts', *Popular Music*, 17:1, pp. 95–111.

Hanson, C. (1997), *L.A. Confidential*, USA: Warner Bros.

Hawks, H. (1944), *To Have and Have Not*, USA: Warner Bros.

Kamp, M. (2013), 'The civilization IV history of western music', at *Music and the Moving Image 2013*, New York University, New York, 31 May.

Loveshack Entertainment (2013), *Framed* (iOS), Melbourne: Loveshack.

LucasArts (1998), *Grim Fandango* (Windows), San Francisco: LucasArts.

McLean, A. L. (1993), '"It's Only That I Do What I Love and Love What I Do": "Film Noir" and the musical woman', *Cinema Journal*, 33:1, pp. 3–16.

Miklitsch, R. (2011), *Siren City: Sound and Source Music in Classic American Noir*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Miller, F. and Rodriguez, R. (2005), *Sin City*, USA: Dimension Films.

Miller, K. (2012), *Playing Along: Digital Games, YouTube and Virtual Performance*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Naremore, J. (2008), *More Than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts*, 2nd ed., Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Ness, R. R. (2008), 'A lotta night music: The sound of film noir', *Cinema Journal*, 47:2, pp. 52–73.

Obsidian Entertainment (2010), *Fallout: New Vegas* (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360), Rockville: Bethesda Softworks.

OSome Studio (2014), *White Night* (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One), Santa Monica: Activision.

Polanski, R. (1974), *Chinatown*, USA: Paramount Pictures.

Quantic Dream (2005), *Fahrenheit* (PC, PlayStation 2, Xbox), New York City: AtarI, Inc.

_____ (2010), *Heavy Rain* (PlayStation 3), Minato: Sony Computer Entertainment.

Reale, S. B. (2014), 'Transcribing musical worlds; or, Is L.A. Noire a music game?', in K. Donnelly, W. Gibbons and N. Lerner (eds), *Music in Video Games: Studying Play*, New York: Routledge, pp. 77–103.

Remedy Entertainment (2001), *Max Payne* (Windows, PlayStation 2, Xbox), Texas: Gathering of Developers and Rockstar Games.

____ (2003), *Max Payne 2: The Fall of Max Payne* (Windows, PlayStation 2, Xbox), New York City: Rockstar Games.

Rockstar Games (2011), 'Features', http://www.rockstargames.com/lanoire/features/production-design/. Accessed 28 July 2015.

Rockstar North (2015), *Grand Theft Auto V* (Windows, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360), New York City: Rockstar Games.

Rockstar Studios (2012), *Max Payne 3* (Windows, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360), New York City: Rockstar Games.

Rockstar (various studios) (1997–2015), *Grand Theft Auto* series (Various platforms), New York City: Rockstar Games.

Roderick, K. (2013), 'Mass historia: Rewriting (music) history in *Civilization IV*', *Ludomusicology Conference*, Liverpool, 12–13 April.

Rodman, R. (2010), *Tuning in: American Narrative Television Music*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Schrader, P. (1972), 'Notes on film noir', *Film Comment*, 8:1, pp. 8–13.

Singh, G. (2009), 'From lonely streets to lonely rooms: Prefiguration, affective responses and the Max Payne single-player', in M. Bould, K. Glitre and G. Tuck (eds), *Neo-Noir*, London and New York: Wallflower Press, pp. 90–102.

Tagg, P. (2013), *Music's Meanings*, New York and Huddersfield: The Mass Media Music Scholar's Press.

Team Bondi and Rockstar Games (2011), *L.A. Noire* (Windows, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360), New York City: Rockstar Games.

Tribeca (2011), '*L.A. Noire* in *Film Guide*', http://web.archive.org/web/20120327155333/http://www.tribecafilm.com/filmguide/archive/la_noire-film36882.html#.UkGAwT-c6Lc. Accessed 16 April 2015.

Tuttle, F. (1942), *This Gun for Hire*, USA: Paramount Pictures.

Vidor, C. (1946), *Gilda*, USA: Columbia Pictures.

Zemeckis, R. (1988), *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*, USA: Touchstone Pictures.

Weber, W. (2001), 'The history of musical canon', in N. Cook and M. Everist (eds), *Rethinking Music*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 336–55.

Welles, O. (1947), *The Lady from Shanghai*, USA: Mercury Productions.

2K Games (2010), *Mafia II* (Windows, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360),Novato: 2K.

Contributor details

Andra Ivănescu is currently undertaking a Ph.D. with the Cultures of the Digital Economy Institute at Anglia Ruskin University in Cambridge, looking at uses of appropriated popular music in video games. Her research interests include musical quotation, semiotics and video game music. She previously completed an M.Phil. in popular musicology at the University of Salford.

Contact:

Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge Campus, East Rd, Cambridge, CB1 1PT,

United KingdomE-mail: andra.ivanescu@student.anglia.ac.uk

Notes

[1] In *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, for instance, while the player is presented with a number of choices from the beginning, including which faction to align with, there are quests that must be finished in a certain order for the story to progress, such as the initial dragon slaying that gives the player-character the magical abilities necessary to advance. Also, there is only one possible conclusion to the player character's story: they defeat Alduin (the villain, a powerful dragon) in Sovngarde (a version of Valhalla) with the help of legendary heroes of old. While the player has a numerous choices throughout the gameworld, choice is severely limited within the main story.

[2] The role musical cues play during these interrogation scenes has been examined by Steven B. Reale in his 'Transcribing musical worlds; or, Is *L.A. Noire* a music game?' (2014: 77–103).

[3] The use of jazz as a signifier for urban environments is also noted by musicologist Ronald Rodman, who examines it in relation to television programmes, noting that 'the correlation is cemented by its encoding of the representation of jazz in the urban detective drama in films and television' (2010: 230).

[4] Elsa's name may be a reference to Rita Hayworth's character in *The Lady from Shanghai* (Welles, 1947) – Elsa Bannister.

[5] Stephen Coates's recordings of the same songs for his own albums ('I Always Kill The Things I Love' features on *Songs for The Last Werewolf*, 'Torched Song' on *Moon Setting* and 'Guilty' was later featured as an Audio Christmas Card as part of *Seasons Dreaming 2013*)

are strikingly different in vocal style (Claudia Brücken does not feature on any of them),

orchestration and production.

[6] The idiosyncrasies of the musical selection in *Civilization IV*, for instance, have been

discussed at length by a number of scholars (Kamp 2013; Roderick 2013; Cook 2014).