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Article Title: Voices, Combat, and Music: Identity, Camaraderie, and Relationships in *Final Fantasy FFXV*

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Abstract:

Role-playing video games can highlight a sense of player identification with a pre-made player-character through the inclusion of the voice; this can include diegetic character dialogue, the non-diegetic sung voice, and voice-overs. Ensuring that the player can connect with their player-character on an individual level is key to forming a suspension of disbelief and immersion with a game.

Final Fantasy XV emphasizes collaboration between the player, player-characters, and non-playable characters during combat, cutscenes, and exploration. This camaraderie effect actively engages the player with multiple characters through the constant use of the diegetic spoken voice to communicate between the player-character, Noctis, and the three other character identities, Prompto, Ignis, and Gladiolus. The game's opening rendition of Ben E. King's 'Stand by Me', performed by Florence + the Machine, provides the player with four narrative themes that are present throughout the game. These themes include a coming-of-age story, character relationships, and the development of a greater evil within the narrative. Unique in its position as a pre-composed song, 'Stand by Me' plants the idea that the player will not be alone in their journey, as character allies will stand by Noctis, from the beginning of the game.

Final Fantasy XV uses vocalizations in both the diegetic and non-diegetic audio space in order to reflect the characteristics of the playable characters. The vocal relationship

between the player's characters provides directional feedback and information for the player within combat, alongside foretelling the stories of certain characters.

Introduction

The player's sense of identity when engaging with a game world can often be related to identifying with particular characteristics of their playable character. Identity is the complex and fluid view that a person may have of themselves, directed by experiences that shape their understanding of qualities such as sexuality, gender, personality, appearance, fashion aesthetics, and vocality. A person can find aspects of their identity reflected in a variety of day-to-day experiences, including music. When playing video games, the player may recognize aspects of a character which mirror their chosen identifiers, including a character's personal beliefs; gender; sexuality; ethnicity; clothing; character personalities and personal development. Ragnhild Tronstad considers that the player's identification in a video game occurs through two factors, 'Empathic Identity' and 'Sameness Identity':

> There are different ways of understanding ''identification.'' On the one hand, identification with one's character may be understood as the player entering a state where he or she has an experience of ''being'' the character [sameness identity]. On the other hand, identification may be understood as experiencing what the character experiences, but without the feeling of being identical to it - that is, with a consciousness of the character as an entity other than ourselves, but with which we can identify [empathic identity].[1]

Tronstad's 'empathic' and 'sameness' identification, and a player's depth of sense of self with a character, can depend on the type of playable character offered by the game. Casey Hart recognizes that playable characters can often represent the player's sense of self through

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[1] Ragnhild Tronstad, "Character Identification in World of Warcraft: The Relationship between Capacity and Appearance", in Hilde G. Corneliussen and Jill Walker Rettberg, eds., *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader* (London: MIT Press, 2008), 251.

myriad player decisions, including moral and dialogue decisions, and aesthetic attributes. [2] When the player is provided with a customisable avatar, Hart examines that players do not always create an avatar that represents themselves, but often experiment with identity and self through physical and psychological projections:

> [H]umans use avatars as vehicles by which to express themselves or experiment with alternative self-concepts. The data seems to suggest that it is much more common for individuals to use avatars as facilitators for experimentation than for vehicles for direct projection. Even when compared to a subject's perception of what is ideal, in most cases it does not appear that individuals are uniformly likely to create avatars that represent their own personality characteristics. [3]

Avatars can be customizable, with typical options including their sex, gender, skin colour, fashion, and other aesthetics, so players can be creative with their design and thus, as Hart suggests, can create a unique character that might not represent their own characteristics but characteristics they desire to temporarily identify with; as the player has control of character customisation, they may be more likely to identify with an avatar's characteristics through Tronstad's 'sameness' identity. It is helpful to distinguish between avatars and player-characters. The former are vehicles for players to project their identity onto, and present greater freedom of choices surrounding identity. Unlike avatars, player-characters are usually set in their design by developers with an existing agency, backstory, and personality. The player has less of a 'vehicle for direct projection' in this case, but they can still identify with the character's experiences, rather than aesthetical design, through Tronstad's 'empathic' identity. The distinction between the avatar and player-character can directly

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[2] Casey Hart, "Getting Into the Game: An Examination of Player Personality Projection in Videogame Avatars," *Game Studies* 17, no. 2 (2017), http://gamestudies.org/1702/articles/hart.

[3] Casey Hart, "Getting Into the Game: An Examination of Player Personality Projection in Videogame Avatars," *Game Studies* 17, no. 2 (2017), http://gamestudies.org/1702/articles/hart.

affect the type of vocalizations that the player hears. The avatar's status as a blank, customizable, model means that it is usually vocally silent, or has a customizable voice, so that the avatar's vocal and physical attributes do not contrast. On the other hand, the player-character is often a set design but can vary between being a silent protagonist that does not offer the player linguistic voice, and a fully-voiced character that has a vocal agency to match their set experiences and personalities.

Audio in a video game can also develop identifying characteristics that the player can recognize and engage with. Anahid Kassabian considers personal identification as a process, rather than an immediate effect, that creates multiple pathways to identification based on musical meaning making for an audience.[4] Kassabian's consideration of branching pathways to identification, through music, highlights the fact that identification is not the process of engaging with every characteristic attribute of a fictional character, but being flexible in identifying with some of these characteristics. Voices in video games can engage with a person's fluid identity and their identification process. When discussing the 'queer voice', and the spaces it inhabits, Jarman-Ivens considers that when a person hears their own voice, they define their own vocal characteristics through hearing differences between their own and others vocal qualities.[5] Jarmen-Ivens suggests that listeners attribute gender and other aspects of identity to the disembodied voice in light of their personal experiences.[6] The non-gendered voice is further examined by Annette Schlichter who explains that there is a lack of notable differences between the qualities of male and female voices in the English language. Schlichter builds on the work of scholar Pamela Hendricks who considers that 'vocalization

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[4] Anahid Kassabian, *Hearing Film* (London: Routledge, 2001), 2–8.
[5] Freya Jarman-Ivens, *Queer Voices: Technologies, Vocalities, and the Musical Flaw* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 33.
[6] Jarman-Ivens, 3.

in itself does not provide enough information to the listener to communicate gender.'[7] This perception of a person's vocal identity can cause issues for the voice. The listener may attach cultural or gendered stereotypes to the voice from their own experiences, rather than accepting the voice as a fluid identifier of a person's self. Jarman-Ivens refers to the 'third space' as a site of negotiation in which the sound of the voice, having left the producing body, is subject to interpretation in terms of cultural context and subjective experiences. Narrative media adds a frame to the narrative world's fictional culture, as well as the listener/player's own cultural understanding. The 'third space' thus sits between the character and audience, rather than initial speaker and listener, as a space for fictional cultural perspectives to inhabit the voice embodied by the character, as seen in Figure 1.
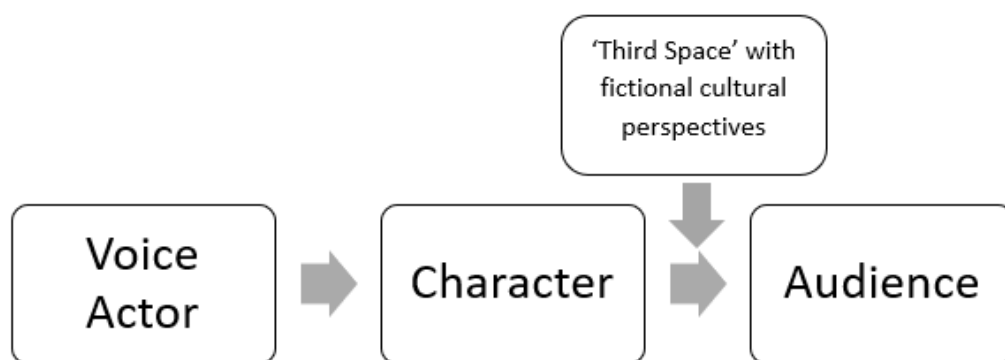
Figure 1: The 'third space' between character and audience, as opposed to speaker and listener.

The existence of the 'third space' between the character and audience, in animated media, allows the audience to attribute aspects of the character's identity to the culture of the world rather than the voice actor. This allows the audience to suspend their disbelief and

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[7] Annette Schlichter, "Do Voices Matter? Vocality, Materiality, Gender Performativity," *Body & Society* 17, no. 1 (2011): 44, http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1357034X10394669.

engage with the voice as though it belongs to the character, providing them with a vocal agency.

The focus on a character's identity in a video game world, through a successful suspension of disbelief between actor and character voice, and through the interpretation of markers of identity from vocality, can build player relationships with the character, non-playable characters, and the game world's culture. This article considers the inclusion of character voices in video games. Through the discussion of the myriad inclusion of voices in role-playing games (RPGs) this article demonstrates how voices can embody video game characters in order to provide identities through the example of *Final Fantasy XV*.

Voices in Video Games

When provided with recorded voice, player-characters gain aspects of character and identity that would otherwise be imagined or actually provided by the player. William Gibbons recounts an experience of the transition between silent, synthesised, and recorded voice acting when playing Japanese role-playing games. Before the inclusion of voices, Gibbons and his childhood friends would provide their own voice acting for non-vocal Japanese RPGs. However, when the group encountered a remaster of the game *Luna: Silver Star Story Complete* (1996), voices were included and thus their narration of characters ceased. Gibbons draws parallels with Michel Chion's discussion that the inclusion of voices can reduce the role of the audio-viewer's own imagination, which occurred with Gibbons

childhood creations of character voices.[8] While recorded voices in video games may affect the player's creativity, the inclusion of the recorded voice in a game's aural world can positively affect the characteristics of a character, as professional voice actors can provide a character with a vocal agency through providing an embodied voice. As a familiar sound, the voice can impart information to the player directly through language or emotional meaning.

There are several ways in which character voices can provide aural feedback and personal identifiers to the player, ranging from death cries and vocalizations, to trivial conversations or narrative direction. The number of vocalizations that emit from the playable character, however, can depend on the type of character the player is given, the player-character or the player avatar. In games which include an avatar, the player often has significant options for the customisation of their in-game character (as noted above), but the avatar is not always provided with a voice, such as in *Xenoblade Chronicles X* (2015) and *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011). In these RPGs, the player-character apparently speaks, but we do not hear them: the player must interact with other characters through selecting pre-defined text-only dialogue options, which often prompt a vocal reaction from non-playable characters (NPCs). In other RPGs, albeit more rarely, the player's avatar may have a voice but the player can customize their vocal qualities, such as the decision the player has between a 'Wizard Voice', 'Rogue Voice', or 'Warrior Voice' for their character in *Divinity: Original Sin* (2014). Games such as *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt Red, 2015) and *Horizon: Zero Dawn* (2017) provide the player with a player-character which has an existing narrative agency and personality, and are often fully voiced by a voice actor; the player can take charge of certain moral decisions that occur throughout the game with these characters, but the main direction of the character's narrative goal is often set by developers. The player can also be

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[8] William Gibbons, 'Song and the Transistion to 'Part-Talkie' Japanese Role-Playing Games', in *Music in the Role-Playing Game: Heroes & Harmonies*, ed. by William Gibbons and Steven Reale (New York, London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 9–10.

given a silent protagonist, a variation of a player-character who, due to genre or technological constraints of a game, does not speak. The silent protagonist, such as in *Bastion* (2011) and *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask* (2013), is a player-character, rather than an avatar, as they still have personal goals and set aesthetics like their voiced counterparts; the silent protagonist should not be assumed mute as other characters in the game world often respond as though they do speak, but the player is not privy to their vocality.

Whether performed by the player's character, an NPC, or as part of the non-diegetic soundtrack, vocal performance can help to build a coherent and organic vocalized world. Vocal performances can define characters through various aspects of sung materials, including lyrical meaning, musical connotations, and character development through speech and song. The significance of vocal performances is their ability to be used in both musical and non-musical contexts and game worlds to involve the player in fictional cultures, whilst highlighting specific characters or narrative moments. *Crypt of the NecroDancer* (2015) uses a vocal performance to lure the player towards the game's shop (and a safe area). The player may not be able to necessarily see the shop during gameplay, but they can often hear the synthesized song of the shop keeper when nearby to direct them to this space.

Voices as Identifiers

It is common for games with a richly-detailed expansive game world, like those of many RPGs, to include numerous NPCs who exhibit their own identities and motivations separate to those of the player. As the player is attempting to achieve the goals of their player-character, they can become disconnected with the needs, livelihoods, cultures, and characteristics of the game world's NPCs. However, while the player may easily ignore the

majority of NPCs and their daily habits, the characteristics and vocal representations of NPCs can help to articulate the fictional culture and environment of the world. Through vocal traits such as inflections and accent, NPCs of a game world can reflect their culture, class, gender, and other aspects of their representation. In *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, the player is able to orientate themselves in the world through the accents of the NPCs; in the North, players are presented with standardized Northern 'British' accents (a mixture of Yorkshire, Lancashire, Liverpool, and Newcastle accents), whilst when the player is in the rural, farming villages of the marsh environments, the player will hear English West Country accents (often stereotypically used to represent medieval peasantry). The level of vocal engagement from NPCs can differ depending on several factors. Firstly, the technical decisions made by the developers can change the amount of communication that can occur between player and characters, ranging from mute NPCs to extensive vocal expression. Secondly, it is common in RPGs for NPCs to react differently to the player-character depending on decisions the player makes throughout the game. For example, in *Final Fantasy XV* (Square Enix, 2016), if the player draws their weapon outside of combat near another party member, the characters will respond with comments like 'Watch where you're going!' and present realistic reactions to the situation. Finally, characters may react to the player indirectly, making comments towards them, rather than to them, as the player moves through an NPC's field of view. NPCs are able to influence the player's experience in the game world through their vocalizations, providing comfort, familiarity, or marking otherness through their voices, alongside providing characteristic information through real-world associations such as a recognizable language and accent. When a video game developer wants the player to experience negative or uncomfortable emotions, the player is often isolated with their playable character, something which is often used in the horror genre. Mark Sweeney discusses this discomfort and isolation in the survival horror game *Dead Space* (EA Redwood Shores, 2008), in which the

game uses unnerving 'music and sound effects – sonically, sometimes indistinguishable from one another' that create a blurred soundscape that emphasises the vocal silence, and isolation, of the protagonist.[9] The solo character, or isolation of a character, outside of the horror genre is used in games to provide reflective experiences; William Gibbons' experience of the sonically minimalist game *Shadow of the Colossus* (SCE Japan Studio and Team Ico, 2005) focuses on his ability to 'do nothing but embrace this solitude and consider the meaning of my journey, reflecting on the past and anticipating the future.'[10]

Vocal directions, whether from NPCs or the player's character(s) can negate this feeling of isolation, alongside providing evidence of their character's identity, even within a game world empty of NPCs, like in *Transistor* (Supergiant Games, 2014). The action RPG *Transistor* follows the story of the player-character, Red, throughout a cityscape game world that is devoid of NPCs. Red is perceived as a silent protagonist from the beginning of the game, and the main voice of the world is emitted from a sword, known as Transistor, which harbours an unknown male voice. Although the player controls Red, Transistor commentates on the player's movements and actions throughout, providing vocal narrative, directional, and combat feedback for the player (which they can choose to ignore); see Table 1.

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[9] Mark Sweeney, "Isaac's Silence: Purposive Aesthetics in 'Dead Space'", in Michel Kamp, Tim Summers, and Mark Sweeney, eds., *Ludomusicology* (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2016), 172.
[10] William Gibbons, "Wandering Tonalities: Silence, Sound, and Morality in Shadow of the Colossus", in K.J Donnelly, William Gibbons, and Neil Lerner, eds., *Music in Video Games: Studying Play* (London: Routledge, 2014), 122.

Narrative	Directional	Combat
'…I'm so sorry Red.'	'C'mon just go.'	'Nice…!'
'They took your voice.'	'Let's have a look downstairs.'	'Get out of here.'
'Poll's a little out of date.'	'Wait want to check the Channel back there?'	'Gross.'
'Think I know where we are.'	'Unmarked alley… East of the bay…'	'OK get ready.'
'…When I first saw you up on that stage back there it was like…everyone loved you.'	'Sea Monster's really the only choice here.'	'I guess we're done here…'

Table 1: Transistor: Narrative, directional, and combat dialogue from the Transistor.

The direction by Transistor stops the game from being silent, and the voice narrates Red's story and her identifying characteristics. Through Transistor's communication, the player realises that Red is not a conventional silent protagonist but a character who is mute after her voice was stolen in an attack by the antagonist, the Camerata. Although Red cannot speak, the Transistor reveals her backstory by talking to Red throughout the game and narrating the player's actions. The voice also reminds Red of her own identity as a performer before her muteness. The soundscape of *Transistor* also uses Red's performative past to

highlight her identity as a vocalist through the inclusion of her songs during short cutscenes; these pre-existing songs emanate in Robynn J. Stilwell's notion of the 'fantastical gap' that music can occupy between a strictly diegetic or non-diegetic status.[11] It is intentionally unclear to the player whether or not Red is hearing these songs in her own head, and thus reminiscing. Red's song 'We All become' is cued during a cutscene where Red remembers the attack on herself by the Camerata. The song identifies Red as a popular artist and singer, and the lyrics examine her political viewpoint which is the cause of the Camerata's attack; the lyrics 'we all become one' is a direct reference and criticism of the Camerata's removal of characters from cloudbank who openly oppose their governmental style rule.

As seen in *Transistor*, the inclusion of voices in video games, whether vocalizations, dialogue, or performance can create the identity of characters, and the game world, that are non-customisable. Returning to Tronstad's discussion of the two types of identification with a character, players do not need to engage with all characteristics of a character in order to feel an empathic or shared identity. As shown, the voice can be used to identify characteristics and agency of characters for the player, depending on the type of game and playable character given. The remainder of this article examines how voices develop characteristics in *Final Fantasy XV*, and engage the player with the identities of characters, through the lyrical signposting of the opening song 'Stand by Me' and through the vocal interactions of characters.

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[11] Robynn J. Stilwell, 'The Fantastical Gap between Diegetic and Nondiegetic', in Daniel Goldmark, Lawrence Kramer, and Richard D. Leppert, *Beyond the Soundtrack: Representing Music in Cinema* (London: University of California Press, 2007), 186–87.

Final Fantasy and Combat Systems

Final Fantasy video games are a series of Japanese RPGs with independent stories and characters situated in fantastic game worlds. Musically, the series is known for its use of cued combat, environmental, and narrative loops alongside leitmotifs. Thematic writing is a staple for the *Final Fantasy* series and contributes to the identity of the games, alongside being a contribution to character identity, as outlined by Mark Richards in relation to films:

> Themes are one of film music's most memorable and iconic elements. Not only do they fulfill an associative role that adds emotional depth to characters, relationships, places, and the like, but from a broader perspective, they also become part of an entire film's identity, to the point where they are often referred to as "the theme from" the film in question.[12]

Final Fantasy was originally a turn-based RPG with combat systems which required the player to navigate a battle menu in order to choose character actions. The player and their enemies would take turns to give orders to characters such as attack, defence, and use special abilities or items. The unknown length of these turn-based battles complimented the looped, leitmotif style of the soundscape. As the series progressed and developed, players were provided with real-time action combat. More recent *Final Fantasy* games, such as *Final Fantasy XII* (2006) and *Final Fantasy XIII* (2009), use real-time turn-based combat. This style of action waits for character meters to be filled before any action is taken.

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[12] Mark Richards, "Film Music Themes: Analysis and Corpus Study," *Society for Music Theory* 22, no. 1 (2016): 1.

Final Fantasy XV

Final Fantasy XV is a real-time action RPG with music composed by Yoko Shimomura, best known for her compositions for the Japanese RPG *Kingdom Hearts* series (2002–2019). The combat style in *Final Fantasy XV* (*FFXV*) complements the inclusion of voices amongst the audio of combat. The combat requires players to input commands in real time, which also trigger co-operative and identifying communication between the hero player-character Noctis and other characters. Although characters communicated with another in previous *Final Fantasy* games, during combat, the flow of real-time combat here provides a naturalistic prompt for the voices which are directly integrated into the action, and reveal character personalities and identities alongside useful combat information for the player.

Final Fantasy XV's combat system uses direct commands from the player to prompt the characters' actions, without the need for navigating a menu (except for the item menu which freezes game time). Unlike previous *Final Fantasy* games, the player does not need to wait for character or enemy turns, meaning that they can complete actions whenever they desire. This change to action-based combat is significant for the series and reinforces the message that appears for the player when they first start the game, 'A Final Fantasy for Fans and First-Timers'. The developers' inclusivity in creating a game that can be enjoyed by those new to the series is mirrored in this subjectively simplistic battle system; the player only needs to hold one button for attack and a separate button for defence. Although seasoned players can engage with deeper action-based tactics in combat through actions like warping, blocks, magic, parries, and weapon skills, the player and fan reception of the combat system is varied.

The player has one directly controlled player-character, Noctis Lucis Caelum, the Crown Prince and heir to the throne of Lupis, and his royal guards, three indirectly controlled characters, Prompto Argentum, Ignis Scientia, and Gladiolus Amicitia. The game uses character voices to engage the player with all of the combat system's mechanics; if the player focuses on character co-operation, they are likely to deal more damage to enemies through collaborative techniques. The player fills a co-operative meter when attacks and blocks are successfully performed. When the meter has filled to an appropriate amount the player can direct Noctis to attack in tandem with another character, who will perform a 'technique' (special ability). Noctis initiates this co-operative attack by vocally communicating with the character chosen by the player, to perform a joint attack that deals great damage to the enemy. The game constantly reminds the player to make use of their fellow characters in this way during combat through directive vocal lines; there is an opportunity for the game to trigger a voice line by Gladiolus, in combat, who shouts 'You forget about us? Tell us what to do!'. As well as this communication, the characters bring forward their unique characteristics and identifiers in combat with quips and commentary on the fight, for example: 'Yeuch. Not a fan of mushy desserts', or 'This is gonna take a while', using noticeably colloquial phrases such as 'mushy' and 'gonna'. Although these comments may not seem useful for the player in the moment, they are used to focus the player's attention to the type of enemy they are in combat with; the dessert comment refers to an enemy known as a 'Flan', and the comment signifying the time it will take to complete combat refers to the enemy's strength and resistance. The player does not feel isolated during combat, when their party is present, as the constant discussion between the characters vocally identifies that Prompto, Ignis, and Gladiolus are there to support Noctis and the player in combat.

Voices during the combat of *FFXV* are often directive for the player, and act to engage them with various mechanics and ways of dealing damage to enemies. Outside of

combat, the player can freely explore an open-world environment and, although *FFXV* is hardly empty of NPCs, the player's exploration can take the band of adventurers away from inhabited areas. The audio of the game thus uses vocal conversations from the three other characters to stop the game from feeling isolating and lonely. One of the main distinctions of *FFXV* is the lack of multiple party members, which are provided in previous single player installations. The player cannot change their playable character in the main game and are only given control of the other party members in extra downloadable content; the player cannot actively remove or replace any of the four main characters. Character identities, and their relationships, are emphasized significantly throughout the game's narrative, combat systems, and consistent use of the voice in the soundscape. *FFXV*'s development of realistic character relationships between Noctis, Prompto, Ignis, and Gladiolus encourages an engagement with the camaraderie of Noctis and his friends. This emphasis on relationship is enhanced through engagingly-acted dialogue, and non-diegetic vocal performances which identify characteristics and foretell narratives.

Directive dialogue is not contained to the combat, however, as Noctis is continuously surrounded by the three royal guard companions during exploration. The three characters use their voices to portray their wants and needs throughout the journey, including urging the player to engage with their own interests, such as cooking with Ignis, or taking pictures with Prompto. Like in *Transistor*, the characters do not dictate what the player does but their voices encourage the player to engage with all aspects of the game world. The player's companion characters are given enough vocal agency to portray their identities through their actions, which builds a game world with believable characters. Chris Carter considered this integration of the characters, their voices, and world exploration when reviewing the game on its release:

[…] we're given the static viewpoint of Noctis and his boys. That would fall completely flat if Square didn't actually make that static cast interesting, but it did. I quickly picked up on certain cues and tropes and welcomed them, like Gladiolus' sense of overprotectiveness. Organic quests pop up not because they feel arbitrary, but because of, say, Prompto's love of photography.'[13]

The link between the player-character and companions, through dialogue, encourages the player to bond and identify with each character's characteristics. The personal interests of each character moves them from world-building tools to personalities in their own right as they achieve unique characterisations. Again, these are highlighted and exhibited through dialogue, such as Ignis' vocal exclamation whenever the player collects a new ingredient that can be used in cooking, 'That's it! I've come up with a new recipe!'.

Relationship Building

Although *FFXV* diverges stylistically from previous games, the music continues the series' tradition of a predominantly western-style orchestrated soundtrack that focuses on leitmotifs and emphasizes music associated with characters. However, because of the open-world and action gameplay of *FFXV,* the audio gains new dimensions of storytelling through reactive audio and voices. When the player begins the game, they are presented with the musical cue 'Hellfire' whilst shown a foretelling message, "The Tale of the Chosen King, Saviour to the Star". Low brass and a synthesized choir perform in a minor key as the sound of heavy breathing comes to the forefront of the soundscape. A male character, clad in black,

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[13] Chris Carter, "Review: Final Fantasy XV," *Destructoid*, November 28, 2016, https://www.destructoid.com/review-final-fantasy-xv-399859.phtml.

is finally presented as Noctis Lucis Caelum and the music erupts into a major fanfare as

Noctis' name appears on screen, a small level of hope in the dissonant scene, see Figure 2.

Figure 2: The foreshadowing of Noctis' future. FF XV's opening shot of Noctis Lucis Caelum.
Screengrab by Author.

The player is forced in and out of gameplay and cutscenes throughout this initial

sequence as characters are introduced; Prompto Argentum, Ignis Scientia, and Gladiolus

Amicitia. As the party of four struggle in their battle with the fantastic fire creature (summon)

Ifrit, the narrative quickly switches to a flashback scene where a younger Noctis says farewell

to his father, the king of Lucis. After the player witnesses Noctis say goodbye to his father,

and thus begin his coming-of-age journey, the scene yet again changes to Noctis, Prompto,

Ignis, and Gladiolus arguing over needing to push their broken-down car through a dessert

environment. Immediately, the naturalistic vocal argument occurring in this scene, coming to

the player via Jarmen-Ivens' disembodied 'third space' begins the work of implying aspects

of the characters, and furthermore, the culture and setting of the game world. The player must

hold a button to make Noctis and the team painfully push the car forward at a slow pace. This

ensures we pay attention to the character voices as they quarrel about menial issues, such as

who should be driving or pushing the car, to no avail, see Figure 3; though superficially

inconsequential, this dialogue serves the vital purpose of establishing the player's

understanding of, and relationship with, the characters. This comical scene is juxtaposed by

the vocally angelic non-diegetic song 'Stand by Me', performed by Florence + the Machine.

Figure 3: The introduction of the player to the comical dynamics and personalities of the

three characters. Screengrab by Author.

It is not uncommon for a *Final Fantasy* game to include a performance by female

vocals; *Final Fantasy VI* uses the chiptune sounds of the Super Nintendo Entertainment

System console to synthesize the vocal performance of an operatic aria by the character

Celes. However, these performances are often introduced several hours into gameplay, rather

than in the opening. 'Stand by Me' is thus positioned distinctively in the opening scene and highlights the camaraderie that will occur between the four characters throughout the game. Although this is a non-diegetic performance of the pre-existing popular song, 'Stand by Me' made famous by Ben E. King (1961), it also integrates pre-existing musical materials from the *Final Fantasy* series, including a deconstructed version of the series' 'Prelude' theme on the harp (Example 1).

Example 1: Final Fantasy XV: The original arpeggiated 'Prelude' theme. Transcription by Author.

The original B♭major arpeggiated 'Prelude' theme, seen in Example 1, is given a unique variation in *FFXV's* 'Stand by Me' cover. The 'Prelude' iteration consists of a slower, rising arpeggio in A Major, rather than its iconic rising and fallowing pattern (see Example 2). The relaxed tempo is juxtaposed against the diegetic arguments of the characters, and it

becomes clear that the familiar element of this cue is not to serve as *FFXV*'s identifying

theme but is secondary to the voice and its lyrics.

Example 2: Final Fantasy XV: 'Prelude' theme in 'Stand by Me' with only its rising

arpeggio to begin. Transcription by Josh Dibble.

Lyrical Identifiers

The female vocals in the track 'Stand by Me' combats the male-centricity of *FFXV*

and highlights the conventional signifiers of 'the feminine' that are associated with Noctis

and his narrative love-interest. The use of the female voice in 'Stand by Me', both stands in

notable contrast with the familiar reference point of Ben E. King's original recording, and

allows for the lower frequencies of the bickering male voices to be heard below the song

whilst not disrupting the clarity of song's lyrical communication. 'Stand by Me' replaces the

introductory rhythm and blues bass line of the original with the deconstructed 'Prelude'

theme, yet the chorus of strings from the Ben E. King version remain and are incorporated

into the accompanying orchestration. The performance neatly integrates two sets of musical references – the *Final Fantasy* prelude and the original song – in a way that they complement, rather than compete with each other.

Rather than using an instrumental version of 'Stand by Me', incorporating the lyrics increases the likelihood that the reference will be recognized, and allows the lyrical content of the song to comment on the narrative and characters we see.[14] There are four narrative themes which can be identified in the lyrics of 'Stand by Me', drawing parallels between itself and the characters:

1. *When the night has come*

2. *And the land is dark*

3. *And the moon is the only light we'll see*

4. *Stand by Me*

The character names relate to the lyrics, and their narrative parallels, through their translation from Latin to English. Noctis translates to Night, and his coming-of-age story refers to the ever-encroaching evil, and thus literal darkness, throughout the game: referring to 'when the night has come, and the land is dark'. As the player completes chapters, the day-night system of the game shifts so that night falls earlier in the evening. The game consistently attempts to communicate with the player, through character dialogue, that exploring during the night is dangerous as high-level enemies, known as Demons, will spawn and defeat the player. This visual and gameplay disturbance acts as a signifier for a greater unknown evil in the game. Darkness acts both as a narrative signifier and a danger to the player's gameplay.

As darkness and demise are foreshadowed visually during Noctis' journey, the lyrics 'and the moon is the only light we'll see' counters this by focusing on the player-character's

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[14] In the original Japanese version of the game 'Stand by Me' is still the English Florence + the Machine cover.

initial quest to meet with Noctis' bride-to-be Lunafreya Nox Fleuret (Luna), translating to Moon. Luna's involvement with the player-character's coming of age journey significantly affects the player's view of his identifying characteristics. As the Oracle, Luna's role is to keep peace between lands, communicate with the gods, and summon the aid of the gods to protect the world; Noctis receives gods as summons throughout the game which can be used as a combat mechanic by the player. From childhood friend to political bride, Luna acts as guidance to the player-character, and is a crux of Noctis' identity.

Foreshadowing Identities

As suggested by the track 'Stand by Me', the voice is used as narrative and emotional guidance for the player, as their gameplay and journey are supported by Prompto, Ignis, Gladiolus, and Luna. Not only does Luna guide Noctis through his coming-of-age journey, but she also provides the player with new combat mechanics, including the summons mentioned above. One of the most narratively significant coming-of-age moments is the first battle between Noctis and the god Titan, who resides in the centre of the open world. Luna guides Noctis, through visions and dreams, to Titan where he speaks to Noctis in an ancient language only Luna understands. As Titan begins Noctis' test of strength, to determine whether he is worthy of Titan's help, 'Apocalypsis Noctis' is cued. The musical cue begins with a quick flute and piccolo staccato ascending rhythm quickly followed by a syllabic chanting of a choir. With the exception of the spoken voice, the male voice is only heard during tracks that include a choir. This gives the track a unique and grandiose quality which highlights the magnitude of Titan, both in size and narrative. Eventually the cue includes a complex orchestration, with *FFXV*'s main theme 'Somnus' (foretelling Noctis' eternal sleep)

performed on the violins whilst the piano, brass, and woodwind provide textual and harmonic accompaniment. Written and performed in Latin, in keeping with the *FFXV* theme, the lyrics of 'Apocalypsis Noctis' are at the forefront of the cue whilst not overpowering the co-operative diegetic dialogue between Noctis and Gladiolus; the sound design of *FFXV* is careful when handling the dynamics of diegetic and non-diegetic sound so that the player can always hear their companions.

The lyrics of the piece comment on the confrontation between Titan and Noctis, singing as though through Titan's voice, directly communicating Noctis' destiny from 'the one who sends the stones and rules all lives'; see Table 2.

Latin	English
Specie tua tantum carnem adme omnes habet cultum.	Through you alone there will be worship.
Ego sum qui mittit petras et gubernat omnes vitae. Caelum, Terra, aversione.	I am the one who sends the stone and rules all lives. Heaven, earth, aversion.
Magna, Parvus, reversusque. Fortis ductor, praecipio.	Great, small, return. Strong leadership and command.
Quod ligabis lucem vocis.	That binds to the voice of light.
Cum omnibus lucis plenus, Apocalypse finibus.	With all full light, the end of apocalypse.
Victum unus qui comedit hic vitae omnia: tenebris.	That which devoured all life, darkness.
Malum incarnatus surgit.	Evil increases bringing death.
Adducentes secum mortem.	For! For! For! For!
Para! Para! Para! Para!	

Fortis Rex, Bellator, in manus gladio.	The mighty king, warrior, with the sword in his hands.
Bellum in virtute, victum quod hostibus.	Battles in virtue, survives the enemy.
Magis mortem venit primum. Quod est quidam venire.	But death comes first. It is certain that it will come!
Para omnes! Para omnes! Para omnes!	
Nunc est tempus, haec est locus ubi nos obstandum, omne tandem ex nobis unum! Omnes!	To all! To all! To all! Now is the time, this is a place where we are established, finally, each of us! All!

Table 2: Lyrics for 'Apocalypsis Noctis'. Translation partly by James Cook and partly gathered through an online fan translation.

Through the assertive words of the choir, Noctis' narrative fate is foreshadowed. Darkness, apocalypse, and light already outlined in 'Stand by Me' confirm that Noctis will be the combatant with the perceived greater evil and darkness of the game. Further to this, the lyrics foreshadow Noctis' coming-of-age, describing him as a 'mighty warrior', but also describing his demise through lyrics such as 'death comes first' and 'it is certain that it will come'. Non-Latin speaking players are unlikely to understand these lyrics due to the language barrier, being unable to translate the lyrics in the moment, or through being distracted by the combat rather than analysing the lyrics. However, the use of Latin can be seen as a link between the player and the character in this moment. Titan does not speak in any known language and thus cannot be understood by Noctis even though he is giving him a message.

Arguably this language barrier is occurring simultaneously for the player as they are denied any translation of Titan's words and the foreshadowing lyrics of 'Apocalypsis Noctis'.[15]

'Apocolypsis Noctis' is not unique to the god Titan, however, and is used during Noctis' combat with the Leviathan god. However, this time the player is provided with a subtitled translation of Leviathan's words because of Luna's presence in the cutscene. The musical cue acknowledges the different combat situation, including a different god and the appearance of Luna. However, until the player and Noctis have been initially defeated by Leviathan, with Noctis losing consciousness, another combat cue is triggered. After Noctis' failure, Luna (who is fatally wounded) summons her remaining energy to call on the old kings of Lucis and grant Noctis extra power. It is during this power surge that, the renamed 'Apocalypsis Noctis', 'Apocalypsis Aquarius', is cued as Noctis begins to live up to his foreshadowed identity from the 'Apocalypsis' lyrics. The cue includes the exact lyrics outlined in **Error! Reference source not found.**, but the instrumentation has been adapted to outline 'the feminine' in order to identify Luna's presence, and her role, during this fight. The opening of the track loses the staccato woodwind and focuses on the tremolo strings. The cue's characteristics shift to accentuate the increase in Noctis' power, outlined by the emphasis strings rather than woodwind; the given solo in 'Apocalypsis Noctis' changes from an oboe to a violin in 'Apocalypsis Aquarius'.

In order to provide narrative insight for players, the non-diegetic sung voice is used in tandem with the spoken voice to create a form of narrative commentary. The combination of English and Latin lyrics, within pre-existing and newly written music, provides recognizable identifiers to the player and narratively rewards those who seek translations outside of

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[15] Players who are interested in the translation and meaning of these lyrics can easily find an online translation due to the famously enthusiastic *Final Fantasy* fan base. The creators of *FFXV* would know in advance that the fan community would translate and distribute the lyrics online, and thus avid fans and players are rewarded with additional layers to the narrative.

playing the game. Although Luna's involvement with Noctis appears sonically connected with the Latin-based cues, 'Apocalypsis Noctis' and 'Apocalypsis Aquarius', Luna's relationship with the well-known song lyrics in 'Stand by Me', 'and the moon is the only light we'll see', identifies her as Noctis' guide and a part of his own identity; as Noctis comes of age throughout his conquering of Titan, Luna's guidance is a focal point. However, Luna's individual agency creates an identity crisis for Noctis after the Leviathan combat. During Noctis' fight with Leviathan, Luna suffers as is typical for female support characters in *Final Fantasy* games. In other *Final Fantasy* games, female characters are often stereotyped as support or magic-casting characters, who have low physical stats and healing abilities which aid other members of the player's party. These female characters often have tragic plights which directly affect the male protagonists of the games, especially the player's character. The tragedy of the feminine in *Final Fantasy* games often comes with their relationship to death, or near-death experiences: Celes' attempted suicide in *Final Fantasy VI*; Aerith's death in *Final Fantasy VII*; Yuna's potential sacrifice if she summons the Final Aeon (which she chooses not to do) in *Final Fantasy X*; Nora Estheim's death in *Final Fantasy XIII*, and so on. Luna appears no different to these previous female characters, as she acts as a support for Noctis' growth. Luna, however, has her own agency in the game world. Although Luna supports Noctis, she is not a part of the player's party and is traveling the world on her own. The player only sees present-day Luna just before the Leviathan fight, part way through the game. Luna follows the tragic pattern of previous female characters of the series, becoming fatally wounded during the leviathan fight, and when Noctis fails to bargain with Leviathan, and is defeated by the rampaging sea monster; Luna gives her remaining life force to save Noctis, see Figure 4.

Figure 4: Before and after the fight with the Leviathan god. Luna's resolve and her demise. Screengrabs by Author.

Luna thus dies in order to allow the male player-character to live and allow the player to continue on their journey. Even though Luna sacrifices her life for the protagonist her agency is not taken away like with Aerith, Celes, Yuna, and Nora. Luna chooses to sacrifice her life for Noctis, and inevitably the sake of the world, rather than dying solely from her mortal wound. Instead of Luna losing her agency, her death causes Noctis to fall into a

depression when he recovers, causing conflict with the party because of his attitude. Noctis loses his agency to continue his quest because of his grief and anger in losing his bride-to-be; the light of the moon (Luna), in the terms of the lyrics of 'Stand by Me', has been removed, and thus the relationship and agency of the four characters has been negatively affected. Luna's relationship to Noctis' identity effects Noctis and his wellbeing, effecting the player's engagement with the other characters.

The 'Stand by Me' lyrics and overarching theme of support from various characters emphasizes the lack of success of a solo Noctis. Noctis' successful progression through environments, quests, and narratives is aided by his relationship with Prompto, Ignis, and Gladiolus; the player themselves are expected to co-operate during combat. Although the crucial significance of camaraderie may not be initially apparent during the title sequence, due to the player's lack of experience with the game, the use of 'Stand by Me' during the final cutscene provides it with emotional weight.

After Noctis enters an eternal slumber at the end of the game, the character arguments from the opening scene where the four are pushing the car, return with a black screen. 'Stand by Me' plays for one final time with the ending credits accompanied by photographs that Prompto and the player have taken throughout the game. The comments from players in Table 3 outline the emotional weight attached to the cue 'Stand by Me', with some players being surprised with how involved they became with the characters after the opening song.

Name	Comment
ohnosnakes	"Me before playing: This looks fun, but I can't see myself enjoying these boyband characters very much Me 1 minute into this song: If any of these precious boys is harmed in any way it will destroy me"

JAE 700	"Anyone still EMOTIONALLY SCARRED by this song?"
Mr. Fluffles	"This song really fits the game. When you hear it the first time when they are pushing the car, it's like, "oh that's cute they're friends" but it means so much more when it plays during the credits, and it means even more after playing through the Episode DLCs, because you get to watch them make the promise to protect Noctis no matter what, and to always stay by his side. The story of FF FFXV rivals even the best titles in the series, leaving players old and new astounded at the storytelling ability of this beautiful game, and the amazing people who made it."
Tony Joestar	"Game start: "Oh hey this is neat song, it goes with sticking by your friends" Game end: UGLY CRYING"

Table 3: YouTube user comments from the official Florence + The Machine - 'Stand by Me' video.

The significance of character relationships in *FFXV* and the focus on character identities is reiterated in the use of 'Stand by Me' and provides a point for players to identify with the habits and voices of the characters, through Tronstad's idea of 'Empathic' identity.

Conclusion

Forming a sense of identity for an audience member or player in a moving image can often depend on genre and narrative style. The voice's natural ability to enhance identity through grain and style can be problematic in RPGs as the player must interact with set identities. As a video game which uses set player-characters with pre-existing aesthetics, personalities, narratives, and vocal styles, *FFXV* uses dialogue and song to highlight character identities and attempt to form a bond between the player and player-character. The

spoken voice acts to communicate realistic mannerisms from Prompto, Ignis, and Gladiolus. Enjoyable at its best, the natural conversations engage the player with various game mechanics and the overall narrative. The player rarely has a moment of silence as the characters comment on whether the player should set-up camps for nightfall, singing of the 'Chocobo theme' by Prompto, and Ignis exclaiming that he has come up with a new food recipe. When the narrative removes Noctis from the other characters, the player may feel uncomfortable without the regular character support network, similar to the horror game tactic of isolation.

Character dialogue is reinforced by the use of non-diegetic tracks such as 'Stand by Me' and 'Apocalypsis Noctis' to outline overarching themes and narratives. The lyrics in 'Stand by Me' immediately highlight a focus on character relationships in the game. The player may not be aware of these messages because of the lack of hours played and language barriers but by the ending cut-scene this becomes clear. As the player spends more and more hours engaged with Prompto, Ignis, and Gladiolus then it is more likely that their sense of identity in the game aligns to their narrative and emotional goals. These uses of voice exist within a strong narrative and the RPG genre. As video game RPGs have the option to be more cinematic and narrative, the voice can be used as an interactive player tool that encourages involvement in the game. As the player spends more time vocally interacting with each game character then a sense of involvement, suspension of disbelief, immersion, or joint identity may be accessible.

Voice is an important communicative tool used by games in order for players to understand and ultimately identify with player-characters. Voice is particularly useful because of its ability to imply identity, relationships and semiotic contexts beyond the semantics, as Jarman-Ivens has detailed. Here, was have explored how geographies and cultures are communicated by voice and accent in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, and the

narrating voice of Transistor in the game of the same name provides narrative backstory of the character. The example of *Final Fantasy XV* uses voice in several important ways. During combat, the vocal exchanges between non-player-characters and the player-character serve both functional ends (as in indicating moments of attack), but also imply relationships between the characters. In addressing the player-character, Noctis's comrades speak to both the player, and the player-character at once, binding them closer together. The combat dialogue articulates character relationships, especially the sense of camaraderie inducting the player into a relationship with their player-character and the other non-playable characters of the world.

Final Fantasy XV also uses lyrical allegory in songs to further communicate the characters' relationships. 'Stand by Me', bookends the game. At the beginning, the song serves as a common reference point for the game and the great many players who will be familiar with the song. The song provides associations of comradeship and hints at the plot to come. The familiar song, combined with music from earlier *Final Fantasy* games, immediately provides a point of identification between the player and the game. When it returns at the end of the game, players retrospectively reflect on the time shared with the player-character and the long adventure. The game also includes newly-composed songs with lyrics in Latin, and which reward players who investigate the lyrics (beyond the playing time of the game) with additional narrative commentary.

As Tronstad notes, for satisfying identification with a player-character, we do not need to identify ourselves as 'being' the character, but instead able to comprehend the consciousness and subject-position of that character. This brief investigation has revealed many ways in which voice can further that project. In other words, it lets us 'Stand by' our player-characters.

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