Chapter Four
Landscapes in *Skyrim*

Figure 4.1: A Characteristic Landscape from *Skyrim*¹

Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.

—William Blake, *Auguries of Innocence*

Through his characteristically paradoxical aphorisms, Blake’s unorthodox Christian vision reminds the reader of man’s desire to connect the physical, temporal world with the transcendental. The relationships he draws between time and space are profoundly subjective and are contingent on

the state of mind of the beholder. Drawing on recent work on music and landscape, I will show how the music to the fantasy RPG, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios/Bethesda Softworks, 2011), composed by Jeremy Soule, contributes to a particular sense of landscape.²

Landscape has been the subject of much discussion within videogame studies and musicology, though there has been little crossover to date.³ My conception is primarily geopolitical, as the landscapes in question are very closely associated with a particular socio-cultural group within the game’s world—the ‘Nords’. However, the music also creates a specific sense of time and place, or rather, a state of consciousness in which awareness of these dimensions is somehow heightened. Before any substantial interpretations can be made regarding the music, it is first necessary to gain an understanding of the landscape and what it means to the people of the region. This involves its geography and climate, and its history, mythology and lore.

Forging Identities

*Skyrim* is the fifth major release in a large and popular series of games, *The Elder Scrolls*. The lore and history of the games is extensive, in a similar vein to J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, but because there is no centralized compilation aside from a fan-run wiki website, references

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across the various games are often vague and sometimes contradictory. The games (see Table 4.1) are set predominantly on the continent of Tamriel (Figure 4.2) of the fantasy world, Nirn. The continent is divided into nine provinces, each home to a native race. The term “race” is problematic used to mark out various different sentient species with similarly troubling distinctions to those made in The Witcher. As Skyrim is the northernmost province of Tamriel, its geography and climate are similar to that of the Scandinavian Peninsula. The indigenous Nords who live there still are clearly modelled on Scandinavian culture, and specifically, the Vikings. An Empire based in Cyrodiil still attempts to assert its authority across Tamriel.

![Tamriel Map](image)

**Figure 4.2: Tamriel**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>TES: Arena</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>TES IV: Oblivion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>TES II: Daggerfall</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>TES Travels: Oblivion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>An Elder Scrolls Legend: Battlespire</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>TES IV: Knights of the Nine</td>
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<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>TES III: Morrowind</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>TES V: Skyrim</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TES III: Tribunal</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>TES V: Dawnguard</td>
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<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>TES III: Bloodmoon</td>
<td></td>
<td>TES V: Hearthfire</td>
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<td>TES Travels: Stormhold</td>
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<td>TES V: Dragonborn</td>
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<td>2004</td>
<td>TES Travels: Dawnstar</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>TES Online</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TES Travels: Shadowkey</td>
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</tbody>
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**Table 4.1: The Elder Scrolls (TES) Release Timeline**

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4 Conflicts in the history of the Elder Scrolls can be found here: [http://elderscrolls.wikia.com/wiki/Timeline](http://elderscrolls.wikia.com/wiki/Timeline). Both Figures 4.2 and 4.3 were taken from the ‘Cosmology’ section of The Elder Scrolls Wiki, retrieved from [http://elderscrolls.wikia.com/wiki/The_Elder_Scrolls](http://elderscrolls.wikia.com/wiki/The_Elder_Scrolls), accessed 20/09/2012.
The world order of The Elder Scrolls is founded on a classic dualism. However, unlike the unequal Abrahamic good and evil, the games draw on a variety of Eastern and pre-Christian Western traditions with a concept of order and chaos. This duality has various parallels in the games, the most clearly stated being that of stasis (unchanging continuity) and force (unknowable energy, or change). Tamrielic religions tend to be based on creation myths that invariably start with the interaction of order and chaos. Like real-world mythologies, these absolutes are deified in mythological characters whose procreation or conflict brings about the creation of the world. This world includes several separate dimensions or planes of existence, including the realm of Oblivion (ruled by immortal god-like beings known as Daedra) and the mortal realm of Mundus (see Figure 4.3). The concept of time is generally conceived of as a synthesis of continuity and change.

Figure 4.3: The Elder Scrolls Universe

The Aedra (‘our ancestors’) were the original spirits of the world who participate in these creation myths, alongside their negation, the Daedra (‘not our ancestors’). These spirits are known throughout Tamriel as the Eight Divines, a pantheon of six gods and three goddesses:

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6 “Aedra” is derived from Scandinavian “Aeldre”, meaning elders.
Akatosh  The Dragon God of Time and chief god
Arkay    God of Life & Death
Dibella  Goddess of Beauty
Julianos God of Wisdom and Logic
Kynareth Goddess of Nature
Mara     Mother Goddess and Goddess of Love
Stendarr God of Mercy
Zenithar God of Work and Commerce

Table 4.2: The Eight Divines

However, worship of the Eight Divines was not consistent across Tamriel, with various factions adopting their own versions of the creation myth, and some disregarding the Eight altogether. Such religious divisions are a crucial part of the geopolitical landscape of the game.

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The physical geography of the region and its location on the continent is another important context to understanding the people. Playing on Louis Althusser’s *For Marx*, Doreen Massey’s argument *For Space* counters the traditional modernist conception of space as a static political landscape and rests on three propositions:

*First*, that we recognise space as the product of interrelations, as constituted through interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny.

*Second*, that we understand space as the sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity in the sense of contemporaneous plurality; as the sphere in which distinct trajectories coexist; as the sphere therefore of coexisting heterogeneity.

*Third*, that we recognise space as always under construction. Precisely because space on this reading is a product of relations-between, relations that are necessarily embedded material practices which have to be carried out, it is always in the process of being made. It is never finished; never closed.7

These premises are also relevant to both the ludic and musical sense of aesthetic play in the player’s construction of the form of the virtual world and its possible meanings. For example, when analysing a videogame’s structure it is important to keep in mind that the virtual space is

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constructed by individual players in specific play sessions. Massey notes that what is special about a place, or landscape, is ‘the unavoidable challenge of negotiating a here and now (itself drawing on a history and a geography of thens and theres); and a negotiation which must take place with and between both human and nonhuman.’ In *Skyrim*, this is a negotiation between the player (through their avatar) and the virtual landscape, as well as other AI characters, human and nonhuman. It is also a multimedia negotiation, not an exclusively visual one, although the visual mode is often privileged. Michel Chion, for example, argues that music adds value to the audio-visual contract by simply generating ‘empathetic’ or ‘anempathetic’ effects. However, Chion does not provide a clear distinction between music and sound effects, an issue that will be picked up in Chapter 5.

Figure 4.4 is one of many unofficial (fan-made) maps of Skyrim, marking the principal geographic features, as well as most of the cities and settlements in the game.

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8 Massey, *for space*, p. 140.
10 This map was created by Gamebanshee and was retrieved from <http://www.gamebanshee.com/skyrim/mapofskyrim.php>, accessed 20/02/2013.
Four out of five of Tamriel’s highest mountains are located within Skyrim, ‘The Throat of the World’ (H6) being the highest and most important. There are other mountain ranges, a large coastline, tundra, pine forests and lakes. Early in the region’s history, the province was divided up into nine geopolitical regions known as holds, each governed by a jarl: Eastmarch, The Pale, Winterhold, Hjaalmarch, Haafingar, The Reach, Whiterun, Falkreath, and The Rift (these are also outlined on the map above).

At the heart of Skyrim lies Whiterun, bordering six of the eight holds.11 Giants roam the plains and herd great mammoths. Fertile plains support satellite farms around the huge central hill of Whiterun (G5) and provide most of the food for Skyrim. While the landscapes of Skyrim are diverse, they also make up a coherent, self-consistent whole. However, even the plainer and less

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11 Figure 4.5 was taken from <http://skyrim.nexusmods.com/images/11342>, accessed 14/03/2013.
obviously attractive locales have an idealized, Romantic feel to them. Virtual landscape imagery in
videogames is invariably idealized and has long been prized by players, many of whom make their
own timelapse videos to showcase the virtual world, often accompanied by selected numbers
from the soundtrack. These tributes to the game’s landscapes are themselves real (and virtual)
creative acts in which players position their characters and cameras at certain times of day in the
virtual world in order to frame specific compositions for their screenshots or video captures.

Of course, the attention requirements of actual gameplay form an important counter-
balance. Much like the real world, time, space and safety from external distractions are all
prerequisites for the enjoyment of landscape. That said, the “combat” music employed in this
game is surprisingly in keeping with the overarching sense of space (and time) of the saga. There
is no attempt to synchronize it to the action as was the aim in *Crysis*, and therefore, cues are
more generic and inevitably become repetitive. As such, they provide a simple ludic signal to alert
the player to danger, and then immediately fade into the peripheries of the player’s attention.
Furthermore, the surroundings are often an important part of the gameplay, especially when
encountering difficult enemies. For instance, it is often necessary to take cover or break the line-
of-sight between the player’s character and their target. The nature of RPG combat also means
that, while attention is required, it is of a different sort to the combat systems in an FPS, for
instance. What is represented on screen is just that—a representation of the actual mathematical
fight between the player’s statistics (their health, damage, armour etc.) and those of their
enemies. It is for this reason that RPGs often look unrealistic to the extent that swords

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12 See, for instance, the *Skyrim* page on the website, [GamesLandscape.com](http://gameslandscape.com/skyrim-landscape), retrieved 15/09/2012. Further collections of images can be found here: [http://imgur.com/a/Tf4mS](http://imgur.com/a/Tf4mS), accessed 20/09/2012. Figure 4.6 was taken from the thread [http://www.overclock.net/t/1185158/gamepur-skyrim-icenhover-confoirmed-first-jaw-dropping-screenshot/30](http://www.overclock.net/t/1185158/gamepur-skyrim-icenhover-confoirmed-first-jaw-dropping-screenshot/30), accessed 14/03/2013. See also TheCrypticMedia, ‘Skyrim - The Beauty of Skyrim,’ on YouTube (24/11/2011), retrieved from [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a5kYV8j6EBY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a5kYV8j6EBY); SlimReaction, ‘Skyrim Beautiful Graphics Montage [HD] [Mods, High Settings],’ on YouTube (13/12/2011), retrieved from [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bgdU4EUpZk8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bgdU4EUpZk8); Sc Klan Srbija, ‘Beautiful Skyrim World,’ on YouTube (17/11/2011), retrieved from [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s2OmD0dPhSeY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s2OmD0dPhSeY); Wrenthereaper, ‘Oh Gorgeous Skyrim,’ on YouTube (20/11/2011), retrieved from [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=plQL2sS5nfu](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=plQL2sS5nfu), all accessed 15/11/2012.
4. Landscapes in *Skyrim* The Aesthetics of Videogame Music Mark Sweeney

occasionally swing in broad motions and then pause, waiting for the cooldown before the player can activate another attack. In any case, there is certainly a case to be made that landscape is in the minds of the majority of players, if not at all times.

Bethesda’s game engine for *Skyrim*, The Creation Engine, can be accessed through their community modding toolkit—Creation Kit. This is often used as a tool to adjust the time-of-day, lighting, and other features in order to generate particular images without having to travel about in game itself. In addition, the Creation Kit allows modders to add fan-made modifications (mods) to the game, one of the largest categories of which is visual effects. These modders spend a great deal of time and effort creating free mods for other players to enjoy, improving everything from textures and foliage to fluid physics and lighting. Landscape, in this context, is a subjective experience, and not merely an objective geographic location.\(^\text{13}\) This implies that the subject-position of the beholder is more than simply a point from which their perspective radiates, rather it also frames certain qualities of the visual landscape.\(^\text{14}\) Although some images are customized in the Creation Engine, many images of Skyrim are taken from within the game, through the perspective of the protagonist—an avatar for the player, customized by the player.

It should be noted that similar attention is paid by the community to the musical and other audio aspects of the game, although this specialty undoubtedly occupies fewer people. Regardless, for *Morrowind*, *Oblivion* and *Skyrim*, there are various fan-made mods that add new original music and even the ability to perform musical instruments in the game.\(^\text{15}\) However, for

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\(^\text{13}\) ‘In his volume on the future of environmental criticism, Lawrence Buell differentiates place and space, writing that space is merely a “spatial location” whereas a place has gathered meaning either from an individual, or an imagined community. The role of world history then, is to document the “history of space becoming place.” Buell’s perspective is primarily literary, but I contend that music fills the cultural role that he describes.’ Lucille Mok, ‘An Iron Road from Sea to Sea: Oscar Peterson’s *Canadiana Suite* (1964),’ at *Hearing Landscape Critically* (Conference Paper, University of Oxford, 2012).

\(^\text{14}\) As Carina Venter puts it, ‘Landscape... need not be constructed as an object to be feasted upon by an “eye”, but as a living space folded into and flowing from the body of an “I”.’ Carina Venter, ‘The Twilight of Vision: an “Eye” for an “I”,’ at *Hearing Landscape Critically* (Conference Paper, University of Oxford, 2012).

\(^\text{15}\) For a selection of audio mods for *Skyrim*, see <http://skyrim.nexusmods.com/mods/searchresults/?cat=61>, accessed 20/03/13.
the most part this functionality does not impact greatly on the issue of landscape and in any case, lies outside of the original gameplay experience.

Landscape sunsets commonly composed by players often frame a post-Nietzschean image very much in keeping with the player’s saga. As is common in modern fantasy sagas such as this, in order to present a realistic and consistent virtual world with serious and adult themes, the developers sometimes force the player to make decisions with ambiguous or controversial moral components, often depriving them of sufficient information. The player’s choices, whether they be black and white, or more often shades of grey, tends to push the protagonist’s personal narrative towards a Nietzschean Übermensch—a superman somehow beyond or superior to those who misguidedly hold on to clear-cut moral codes. This is in accordance with the lore of the game, which is based on an amoral dualistic system, despite the fact that moral aspects pervade the religious and political elements of the game. Some players advocate role-play by prescribing a particular character for their avatar from the outset and then attempt to conform to the most likely decisions that character would make. Many more only play games

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16 Nietzsche’s analogy of the sun as God—the deterministic source of world order—is a crucial part of his explanation of the death of God. He viewed the world as aesthetic art in the sense that it does not follow pre-determined rules. His poem, *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (1891) also uses landscapes with mountains and sunsets as metaphors. See Mark Tanzer, *On Existentialism* (Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2008), pp. 23–5. Such landscape imagery can also be found in works such as Delius’s *Song of the High Hills*. See Daniel Grimley, ‘Music, Landscape, and the Sound of Place: Hearing Delius’s *Song of the High Hills,*’ at *Hearing Landscape Critically* (Conference Paper, University of Oxford, 2012).

17 One such example requires the player to choose between continuing the questline that leads to them joining the assassins of the ‘Dark Brotherhood’, or abandoning it altogether. In order to join and not fail the quest, the player is asked to interrogate three people tied up, on the knees with execution hoods over their heads. The player is told that only one of the three is a real target for the Dark Brotherhood, the other two are ‘innocent’. Although the player would never know it without replaying the sequence multiple times, killing any of the three will allow them to continue and join, although the exact combination of kills will result in a different response from Astrid, the Dark Brotherhood representative. Although it seems the player can simply walk away, the only other option to avoid the risk of killing an innocent victim is actually to kill Astrid herself. This results in the termination of the ‘Join the Dark Brotherhood’ questline and the start of ‘Destroy the Dark Brotherhood’ instead. (The player could not have reached this point without killing other characters and making similar decisions.) See information on the quest ‘With Friends Like These...’ at <http://elderscrolls.wikia.com/wiki/With_Friends_Like_These...>, accessed 22/03/2013.

18 It is also not too much of a stretch to consider certain elements from the history of Tamriel such as the original defeat of Alduin, and even the player’s final victory as a form of Eternal Recurrence, though linking this directly with the repetitive nature of the music may be less helpful.
through once, if they complete them at all, and therefore aim to explore the most interesting content, regardless of whether joining a guild of assassins, for example, is incongruous with the character’s honourable warrior background.

These images then represent the creative or artistic impulse of a significant proportion of the gaming population. However, the framework provided by the game still holds true—the creative palette is very much limited. The panoramas below (Figures 4.8–1019) are presented here to give an impression of the variety of the region’s landscapes, landscapes that are very much part of the player’s sense of their character’s saga.

Figure 4.6: Skyrim Panoramas
The Player’s Saga

In the immediate history before the game, the Jarl of Windhelm, Ulfric Stormcloak rebels against the Empire in order to liberate Skyrim from a ban of Talos worship. Ulfric kills Skyrim’s puppet High King in a duel, provoking the Empire into deploying an Imperial Legion to the province. The player is thrown into the middle of a Civil War (generally referred to as the ‘Stormcloak Rebellion’ by the Empire and the ‘Great Uprising’ by the Stormcloaks). The protagonist’s personal background is completely blank, and the player’s experience of the game consists of an individual’s saga in the tradition of the great Norse narratives. The player’s character is ‘Dragonborn’—that is, born with the soul of a dragon and the ability to converse with them in their powerful language. By absorbing defeated dragon souls in the game, the player can learn ‘words of power’ that make up Thu’um, or ‘Shouts’. The main quest is to defeat a powerful dragon known as Alduin the World Eater, the Nordic God of Destruction. Alduin serves as the negation of the Nine, a corrupted servant who loosely parallels the fall of Lucifer. The structure of the main questline is split into three acts:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Act I</th>
<th>Act II</th>
<th>Act III</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Unbound</td>
<td>A Blade In The Dark</td>
<td>The Fallen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before the Storm</td>
<td>Diplomatic Immunity</td>
<td>Paarthurnax*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bleak Falls Barrow</td>
<td>A Cornered Rat</td>
<td>Season Unending*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dragon Rising</td>
<td>Alduin's Wall</td>
<td>The World-Eater's Eyrie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Way of the Voice</td>
<td>The Throat of the World</td>
<td>Sovngarde</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Horn of Jurgen Windcaller</td>
<td>Elder Knowledge</td>
<td>Dragonslayer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Alduin's Bane</td>
<td>Epilogue</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.3: Skyrim’s Main Questline

20 Most of Skyrim’s citizens clearly side with one faction or the other, but many distrust Ulfric’s motives even while supporting aspects of his cause. The difference in name styles is indicative of certain characters affiliations and origins. Ulfric’s commander, Galmar Stone-Fist plans operations from the Stormcloak stronghold, Windhelm’s Palace of Kings. General Tullius is the Imperial Military Governer of Skyrim, based at Castle Dour in Solitude. His commander is Legate Rikke, although he has a more obviously Nordic ally in Jarl Elisif the Fair of Haafingar—Ulfric’s rival for the position of High King. It was initially the Imperials who belittled Ulfric’s followers by calling them ‘Stormcloaks’ but the name was since adopted as a badge of honour.

21 The name is reminiscent of Tolkien’s ‘Anduin’ River in Middle Earth. Figure 4.11 was taken from <http://www.pcgamewallpapers.net/1920x1200/tes-v-skyrim-by-dead-end-thrills-01.jpg>, accessed 14/03/2013.

22 The asterisk marks quests that are conditional or optional. See <http://elderscrolls.wikia.com/wiki/Main_Quest_(Skyrim)>, accessed 20/03/13.
The player is, for the most part, free to travel about wherever they choose across Skyrim, acting on, postponing or rejecting outright numerous quests besides those of the main story. These sub-quests and side-stories provide the player with the necessary ‘experience’ to level up and become more powerful, in turn allowing them to make progress on the epic narrative. As such, developers take a great deal of care over the pacing and balance. In RPGs such as this, the player is expected to complete the grind by defeating enemies of a certain difficulty, exploring, and completing sub-quests. The payoff for this is granted in the form of experience, powers, and items such as weapons and armour. We will return to this precarious balancing act later in this chapter, and in the Epilogue.23

Critically, the player is afforded a choice of race before starting the game, affecting their likely alignments to various factions, although not dictating their choices in the branching narrative.

23 Some players have expressed disappointment at the dramatic climax of Skyrim. See, for example, Alessandro, ‘Hater’s Corner—Skyrim’s Climax Is A Joke,’ on egamer.co.za (27/01/2012), retrieved from <http://egamer.co.za/2012/01/haters-corner-skyrims-climax-is-a-joke>, accessed 21/09/2012.
Early on, they are given the chance to leave Helgen either with the Imperials or with the Stormcloaks, setting the tone for the rest of the game. The game is designed so that the player can affect events, or let things run their course. As a result, they are offered the chance to influence others and make both moral and political decisions, some straightforward, others considerably more complex and unclear.

The Nords have developed their own distinctive culture. Known for their love of music and mead, they are tolerant if not welcoming of outsiders. In fact, they hold a strong prejudice against Elves of all kinds, blaming them for any misfortunes suffered. The ‘Old Ways’ and superstitions are still followed in the ‘Old Holds’ of the northeast (Winterhold, Eastmarch, The Rift, and The Pale), such as the tradition of young warriors (wearing animal skins) spending weeks in the mountains during winter in order to hunt their first ‘ice wraith’ and gain full citizenship status. Their names are often based on omens.

The Nords value reputation and honour above all else in order to secure a place in the Hall of Valor in Sovngarde, the Nordic afterlife. However, both of these are reliant on deeds achieved in life, and most often, physical prowess and bravery and skill in combat. Indeed, it is said that ‘a Nord is judged not by the manner in which he lived, but the manner in which he died.’ The Nords are also revered seamen, crewing merchant fleets from the Northern coast to the whole of Tamriel. Indeed, they originally migrated to Skyrim from Atmora, a separate continent north of Tamriel, after ‘the freezing’ caused Atmora to become increasingly inhospitable.

Many traditions held in the ‘Old Ways’ no longer reflected the present reality of the world at the start of the game, include, for

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24 For an overview, see <http://www.uesp.net/wiki/Lore:Nord>, accessed 13/03/2013.
25 Though there is no (Gallicised) ‘-garde’ suffice in any Nordic language, in various Scandinavian languages, ‘Sovnegard’ can be translated to ‘a place for sleep’, and is loosely based on Asgard, the home of the gods in Norse mythology. See <http://elderscrolls.wikia.com/wiki/Sovngarde_(Location)>, accessed 27/02/2013.
instance, a Dragon cult which led to the first Dragon War, history that had almost become myth. This cult originated in the Atmoran tradition of worshiping animal gods, and it is still believed that those celebrated in the modern Pantheon are just new names for older personifications of various forces.

The Nords also have their own distinctive architecture. In an environment like Skyrim, it is no surprise that the ship-builders are experts of timber construction. To conserve warmth in extreme weather, Nord buildings usually include rooms underground. Buildings tend to be tall, however, and dragon motifs are a common ornamental feature. Many of their constructions have lasted for thousands of years due to their technique of using wooden supports for a principally stone-based structure.

Figure 4.7: Nordic Architecture at Dragon’s Reach, Whiterun

So far, I have highlighted the static construction of the game’s geopolitical landscape, as set at the start of the game. I will now consider how musical play can reconstruct this landscape.

28 Figure 4.11 was taken from <http://images.bit-tech.net/content_images/2011/10/elder-scrolls-v-skyrim-preview/whiterun_wlegal.jpg>, accessed 14/03/2013.
Musical Analysis

My analysis starts with an overview of the technical features of the Creation Engine. I then consider the theme music to the game and its relationship with the themes of earlier instalments. This will be followed by an analysis of the diegetic music included in the game—the folk music performed by bards in taverns across the landscape. Finally, I will consider other scholarship on music and landscape pertinent to the music of Skyrim and draw further comparisons with Scandinavian programme music.

The Creation Engine: Implementation and Distribution of Musical Materials

In order to understand how the music of Skyrim functions it is important to investigate how the musical material (by which I mean the cues, or ‘tracks’, in this context) is distributed and implemented by the Creation engine. The music engine itself does not appear to be as complex as CryEngine. Opening up the main game file (Skyrim.esm) in the Creation Kit software allows the user to browse the game’s resources through the ‘object window’. Expanding the ‘Audio’ category in the filters column reveals the following types of audio objects:

- Acoustic Space
- Music Track
- Music Type
- Reverb Parameters
- Sound Category
- Sound Descriptor
- Sound Marker
- Sound Output Model

Selecting ‘Music Track’ reveals a list of all the Music Track in-engine objects (see Figure 4.13 below). These are essentially containers or markers that point to actual music files in the data structure. The music section of the main game’s data structure (excluding any add-ons or new downloadable content) has been replicated as Appendix D and lists every music track in the standard version of the
game in the original file structure.\textsuperscript{29} In addition to the evidence in Creation Kit, this is revealing as it shows how the cues are categorized. It also tells us that while the official soundtrack consists of a generous 53 tracks (3.6 hours) spread across four CDs\textsuperscript{30}, the actual in-game music amounts to 235 tracks with a total duration of approximately 4.3 hours. The data structure, without all the audio files listed is as follows:

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|ll|}
\hline
\texttt{	extbackslash music} & \texttt{	extbackslash music\textbackslash explore\textbackslash reach\textbackslash palette\textbackslash night\textbackslash a} \\
\texttt{	extbackslash music\textbackslash combat} & \texttt{	extbackslash music\textbackslash explore\textbackslash reach\textbackslash palette\textbackslash night\textbackslash b} \\
\texttt{	extbackslash music\textbackslash dread} & \texttt{	extbackslash music\textbackslash explore\textbackslash reach\textbackslash palette\textbackslash night\textbackslash c} \\
\texttt{	extbackslash music\textbackslash dungeon} & \texttt{	extbackslash music\textbackslash explore\textbackslash snow\textbackslash palette\textbackslash day\textbackslash a} \\
\texttt{	extbackslash music\textbackslash dungeon\textbackslash cave} & \texttt{	extbackslash music\textbackslash explore\textbackslash snow\textbackslash palette\textbackslash day\textbackslash b} \\
\texttt{	extbackslash music\textbackslash dungeon\textbackslash fort} & \texttt{	extbackslash music\textbackslash explore\textbackslash snow\textbackslash palette\textbackslash day\textbackslash c} \\
\texttt{	extbackslash music\textbackslash dungeon\textbackslash ice} & \texttt{	extbackslash music\textbackslash explore\textbackslash snow\textbackslash palette\textbackslash night\textbackslash a} \\
\texttt{	extbackslash music\textbackslash explore\textbackslash reach\textbackslash palette\textbackslash day\textbackslash a} & \texttt{	extbackslash music\textbackslash explore\textbackslash snow\textbackslash palette\textbackslash night\textbackslash b} \\
\texttt{	extbackslash music\textbackslash explore\textbackslash reach\textbackslash palette\textbackslash day\textbackslash b} & \texttt{	extbackslash music\textbackslash explore\textbackslash sovangarde\textbackslash palette\textbackslash day\textbackslash a} \\
\texttt{	extbackslash music\textbackslash explore\textbackslash reach\textbackslash palette\textbackslash day\textbackslash c} & \texttt{	extbackslash music\textbackslash explore\textbackslash sovangarde\textbackslash palette\textbackslash day\textbackslash b} \\
\texttt{	extbackslash music\textbackslash explore\textbackslash reach\textbackslash palette\textbackslash night\textbackslash a} & \texttt{	extbackslash music\textbackslash explore\textbackslash sovangarde\textbackslash palette\textbackslash night\textbackslash b} \\
\texttt{	extbackslash music\textbackslash explore\textbackslash reach\textbackslash palette\textbackslash night\textbackslash c} & \texttt{	extbackslash music\textbackslash reveal} \\
\texttt{	extbackslash music\textbackslash explore\textbackslash mountain\textbackslash palette\textbackslash day\textbackslash a} & \texttt{	extbackslash music\textbackslash reward} \\
\texttt{	extbackslash music\textbackslash explore\textbackslash mountain\textbackslash palette\textbackslash day\textbackslash b} & \texttt{	extbackslash music\textbackslash special} \\
\texttt{	extbackslash music\textbackslash explore\textbackslash mountain\textbackslash palette\textbackslash night\textbackslash a} & \texttt{	extbackslash music\textbackslash special\textbackslash failure} \\
\texttt{	extbackslash music\textbackslash explore\textbackslash mountain\textbackslash palette\textbackslash night\textbackslash b} & \texttt{	extbackslash music\textbackslash stinger} \\
\texttt{	extbackslash music\textbackslash explore\textbackslash mountain\textbackslash palette\textbackslash night\textbackslash c} & \texttt{	extbackslash music\textbackslash stinger} \\
\texttt{	extbackslash music\textbackslash explore\textbackslash reach\textbackslash palette\textbackslash day\textbackslash a} & \texttt{	extbackslash music\textbackslash tavern} \\
\texttt{	extbackslash music\textbackslash explore\textbackslash reach\textbackslash palette\textbackslash day\textbackslash b} & \texttt{	extbackslash music\textbackslash town} \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Skyrim’s In-Game Music Data Structure}
\end{table}

Table 4.4 shows us that there is a default or generic set of audio tracks for when the player is in a dungeon, but that specific types of dungeons such as caves, or forts have their own specific set of tracks. These categories should equate roughly with the Music Types in the Creation Kit, although they need not tally up exactly. While some of these folders only contain two or three files, most contain more. Indeed, the ‘music’ folder contains several audio files that assumedly did not ‘fit’

\textsuperscript{29} All the audio tracks in the data structure prefixed by ‘music’ were extracted from the compressed game files, and then converted to wave format.

\textsuperscript{30} It should be noted that the fourth disc is of a different nature, containing just one 42-minute track of atmospheric ambient music.
anywhere else or warrant their own unique folder to contain them. The list, therefore, also gives an immediate indication of the categories of music that are most common or voluminous in the game. It is interesting to note, for instance, that there is a single ‘combat’ folder, whilst music of exploration is more carefully organized into many specific categories, two of which relate to specific regions (‘reach’ and ‘sovgarde’), the others pertaining to the sort of environment or terrain the player is exploring.
Opening up the properties of ‘MUSCombat01’ displays a simple dialogue box that includes the track type (Palette, Silent or Single), whether or not it has any ‘Conditions’, the actual audio file name and location within the games data structure, a ‘Finale’ file name, a list of ‘Cue Points’, and looping information (see Figure 4.14).³¹

³¹ Palette: multi-layer track with a combination of layers played at random. Silent: to create periods of silence between other track types. Finale and Cue Points: particular with combat music, when combat finishes, the nearest cue point is selected and the music quickly crossfades to the short ‘finale’ track. For more information on track types, see <http://www.creationkit.com/Music_Track>, accessed 04/04/2013.
This condition simply ensures that ‘MUSCombat01’ is not used if the player’s combat target is a dragon. (The ‘MUSCombatBoss’ tracks have conditions that allow them to play when the player encounters this scenario.) Much of this is familiar from the exploration of ‘CryEngine’ in Chapter 1, although the degree of sophistication available (or at least, ‘on display’) in the ‘Creation Kit’ is arguably more limited.

Right-clicking on ‘MUSCombat01’ in the Object Window also grants access to a ‘Use Report’ which provides a list of references to contexts in which this music track object is employed (see background of Figure 4.16). These references are to the ‘Music Types’ found in the filter list of the Object Window. The ‘MUSCombat’ type listed here has the following properties:
From this, we can deduce that a ‘Music Type’ is a form of container that groups together a set of ‘Music Tracks’, in this case, including ‘MUSCombat01’, and several others. The Music Type has a priority property that informs the music engine’s mixer whether or not it should be heard instead of something else that may be playing. Since this music is clearly combat related, it has a high priority, so it will usually be audible if it is triggered. There are a number of other properties that affect how the engine handles a transition to this Music Type, such as the so-called ‘ducking’, which in this case reduces the volume of the previous (‘current’) track by 100dB.

This, alongside the data structure already explained above, is a sufficient understanding of how the musical cues are categorized and employed in the game. It is a traditional system that organizes the audio files into categories based on where and when they will be heard in game and then links them to a cue system. For the most part these cues permit the engine to select a music
track at random from a particular music type, although certain music tracks are conditioned to play only in certain situations, and some for unique events.\textsuperscript{32}

\textit{The Elder Scrolls Theme Music}

The extensive official game soundtrack (available for purchase separately) provides a reasonably accurate representation of the music in the game, although cues are often re-recorded. The relative simplicity of the music engine only requires fully composed cues and it is both possible and quite likely that the whole cue (or music track) is heard in game, especially in scenarios when the player is travelling across the landscape on their way to their next objective.\textsuperscript{33} The back cover of the soundtrack reads ‘from the icy sounds inspired by the game’s highest mountain peaks to the powerful themes capturing the magnificence of the dragons.’

The first item on the soundtrack is entitled ‘Dragonborn’, a reduction of which is transcribed in its entirety as Figure 4.18 (below).\textsuperscript{34} It features the title music for the game, and it is heard in the game’s first official trailer.\textsuperscript{35} (In the data structure, the track is called ‘mus\_maintheme’ but it must be treated uniquely by the Creation Engine, as it is not on the list of music tracks.) This makes it an obvious starting point for any musical analysis, as the player is likely to have already heard it even before the game was published. Although this actual track is not played during normal gameplay, the theme and many other features are used. For instance, the track ‘One They Fear’ features a darker and more combative version of the main theme that is referenced in the Creation Engine as

\textsuperscript{32} It is most likely not a truly random selection, but rather one that ensures variety.

\textsuperscript{33} Indeed, the audio director has stated that they did not attempt to link the music too closely to the action. See Bethesda Softworks, ‘The Sound of Skyrim,’ on YouTube (03/11/2011), retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QLnPwnJicFQ>, accessed 06/03/13.

\textsuperscript{34} Some elements of this transcription have been modified for a more suitably pianistic impression of the overall sound, for example, the LH part of bars 71–8. However, other markings such as the choir’s ‘shouts’ have been made where relevant to the discussion, even though they are not intended for performance.

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‘mus_combat_boss_02’. The notes of this version are slightly adjusted to make them more suitable for their particular task, but the structure is similar. Figure 4.17 gives an indication of the rhythmic style:

![Figure 4.12: ‘One They Fear’ (Trumpet Excerpt in C)](image)

I have included some indications on the score regarding instrumentation, when relevant to my discussion. Some entries, transitions and rhythmic details are blurred to a certain extent by the orchestration, in particular the use of suspended cymbals and other percussion. This is also compounded by copious amounts of *reverb* and a normal degree of *rubato*. Indeed, Jeremy Soule’s music is recognizable primarily for the ambient character, created in no small part by the use of reverb.\(^{36}\)

The music is primarily in B minor, although the basic harmonic vocabulary is built around the common bass-line sequence B-G-A-E. The balanced two-bar pattern is a simple and effective one. The falling third brings about a mode switch that is then answered by the falling perfect fourth. Although the intervals are different, their effect is similar: the chord of E major acts as the dominant of A, an unfinished motion, just as the G major chord opens out from B minor. This makes the whole harmonic unit particularly suitable for extended repetition as a bass ostinato. The harmony also brings about a particularly jarring false relation between G major and the G-sharp mediant of E.

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major. The end of the piece moves to the final chord of E major as if it is opening up a new world of possibilities. Indeed, on the trailer, the camera pans upwards over the rocks behind the protagonist bringing into view a large valley with large mountains in the distance. More dragons await in the ruins on the hillside, as if everything seen in the trailer was just a teaser for the saga that awaits the player who explores this vast landscape. Even though the false relation is pervasive, the G-sharp introduced by the horn in bar 105 feels like opening a door, making for the sort of ending that can only work for an introductory piece.
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Chorus:
Dovahkiin, Dovahkiin, naal ok zin los vahriin,
Wah dein vokul mahfaeraak ahst vaal!
Ahrk fin norok paal graan fon nust hon zindro zaan,
Dovahkiin, fah hin kogaan mu draal!

Verse 1:
Huzrah nu, kul do od, wah aan bok lingrah vod,
Ahrk fin tey, boziik fun, do fin gein!
Wo lost fron wah ney dov, ahrk fin reyliik do jul,
Voth aan suleyk wah ronit faal krein

Verse 2:
Ahrk fin zul, rok drey kod, nau tol morokei frod,
Rul lot Taazokaan motaad voth kein!
Sahrot Thu'um, med aan tuz, vey zeim h okoron pah,
Ol fin Dovahkiin komeyt ok rein!

Chorus:
Dragonborn, Dragonborn, by his honour is sworn,
To keep evil forever at bay!
And the fiercest foes rout when they hear triumph’s shout,
Dragonborn, for your blessing we pray!

Verse 1:
Hearken now, sons of snow, to an age, long ago,
And the tale, boldly told, of the one!
Who was kin to both wyrm, and the races of man,
With a power to rival the sun!

Verse 2:
And the voice, he did wield, on that glorious field,
When great Tamriel shuddered with war!
Mighty Thu'um, like a blade, cut through enemies all,
As the Dragonborn issued his roar!

Chorus

Verse 3:
And the Scrolls have foretold, of black wings in the cold,
That when brothers wage war come unfurled!
Alduin, Bane of Kings, ancient shadow unbound,
With a hunger to swallow the world!

Verse 4:
But a day, shall arise, when the dark dragon’s lies,
Will be silenced forever and then!
Fair Skyrim will be free from foul Alduin’s maw!
Dragonborn be the saviour of men!

Chorus

Table 4.5: Dragonborn Lyrics and Translation

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Interviews make clear that the initial inspiration for the stylistic shift between the ‘original’ Elder Scrolls theme (the main theme of *Morrowind*) came from Mark Lampert and the developer’s audio team.\(^\text{38}\) As we have seen in other games, it is common for the composer to be approached with several ideas already prepared, and in this case, the key idea was for a ‘Viking choir’ version of the more lyrical *Morrowind* theme. As a result, unlike previous title themes of the series, this theme is in fact a song. The lyrics are composed in the dragon language, invented specifically for this purpose as only a few words were required for the rest of the game (see Table 4.5). Care was taken to ensure that both the original lyrics and the English translation would rhyme and read well. (Indeed, the poetry undeniably has its own musical quality.) While the song is not strictly speaking an ‘anthem’ sung in game, in can be thought of as such. Musical anthems and folk songs help create as well as solidify and represent identity within a particular social/ethnic group. As this music accompanies the official game trailer, it is the first soundworld that the player is likely to be exposed to, perhaps even long before the game was published. This makes it all the more important to begin the work of defining exactly how the Nords are represented.

In order to produce a suitably Nordic sound, a male choir of thirty singers was recorded three times and then remixed to give the effect of a larger body of Viking warriors. At bars 45–48 and 91–94, the horns play a dotted downward leaping octave motif, combining with a rhythmic shout from the choir that slides back up the octave. While the horn motif is an obviously war-like trope, this shout is a musical realization of the shout sound effects employed in the game—as already mentioned, an integral part of the player’s personal saga as well as the Nord’s cultural heritage (in particular, the Old Ways of the Ancient Dragon Cult). At bar 49, the choir begin to chant their verse by speaking rhythmically instead of singing. Such chanting is not uncommon in videogames and films as a generic device to evoke ancient or sacred power, but here it serves as

something more specifically tailored to the Elder Scrolls lore and the Nordic people in particular. The rhythmic chanting of the male voices at bar 55 is all the more potent due to the hemiola effect (already begun at bar 49) produced by overlaying the incantation with a truncated but double-time (half note values) version of the main theme in the horn part. This version of the theme sounds more like *Morrowind’s* (see below) due to its slower pace, and is used as a theme in its own right in other tracks such as ‘Unbroken Road’ (see below). (It is interesting to note that the female vocal parts simultaneously provide a retrograde version of this melody.)

The anacrusis to bar 21 is self-evidently the start of *Skyrim’s* main theme. However, there are actually two renditions of the Elder Scrolls theme within the *Skyrim* version, one as written at bar 1 of Figure 4.18 below (the upbeats to bars 30 and 71 in Figure 4.18), the other, the anacrusis to bar 15 (the upbeats to bars 21 and 83 in Figure 4.18). The second is essentially the same as the first but at twice the speed, although this becomes more apparent when comparing the heterophonic texture of the third phrase (bar 18 below, bar 25 in Figure 4.18). While the choir sing the modified version, the trumpet plays a line much closer melodically and rhythmically to the original.

Figure 4.19 below places the themes of all the Elder Scrolls games side-by-side for comparison. It is immediately clear that the theme first began to take shape with *Daggerfall*, although the technical limitations on audio production for the first two games set them somewhat apart from the rest sonically. The fifth bar of the *Oblivion* excerpt is its theme proper, and its reflective character could be related to the fact that it is an inversion of the rising melodic contour of the peaceful but hopeful *Morrowind* theme. Although the meter is now simple-quadruple, the accompaniment’s emphasis on the first two beats give a lazy waltz-like feel, as if the third beat enjoyed a fermata on every bar. In any case, the rhythmic profile of the theme itself combined with the same harmonic content ensure a sense of familiarity. The simple-triple time of *Morrowind’s*

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39 The themes in Figure 4.19 were originally transcribed by Daniel Ran in ‘The Elder Scrolls: Retrospective,’ on danielran.com (no date), retrieved from <http://www.danielran.com/blog/the-elder-scrolls-retrospective>, accessed 12/03/2013. Jeremy Soule became the series composer for *Morrowind* and subsequent games.
peaceful descending scale is overlaid on Skyrim’s compound-duple time (bar 10 of both themes, bar 79 in Figure 4.18 above) producing a climactic hemiola. Such rhythmic effects are also traceable back to Daggerfall, memorable for the rhythmic juxtaposition of its counter-melody as much as for its actual melody. The dotted rhythm of the drum’s introduction signals a return to Tamriel and The Elder Scrolls series, as it too features at the start of the Morrowind theme.
Figure 4.14: *The Elder Scrolls* Main Themes Compared
Like the *Morrowind* theme, the theme for *Skyrim* consists of three four-bar phrases, the second an altered repetition of the first, both rising in thirds by step, and the third descends by step. All three contain the same motifs, the rising scale consisting of two quaver upbeats leading upwards by step to the downbeat, or a variation on this in which the upbeats leap a third before reaching the note in between on the downbeat (Figure 4.19: bars 2–3, 8–9 and 12–13). The cadential pattern that brings the first and, in the case of *Morrowind*, final phrase to conclusion is an exact inversion of the opening scale. However, due to the length of the third phrase, this final cadence feels as though it should be the start of the next one and as if it has been tagged on the end. In the case of *Skyrim*, the theme never ends in this way, but instead continues with the new variation, starting at the same point (bar 13–14).

The reason why these comparisons are pertinent to this discussion is that they not only trace the heritage of the musical material, but in doing so, they also help to form a better understanding of how the music to *Skyrim* is designed to evoke a particular landscape. If the same musical theme can be used to unite several disparate locations, races and cultures under one banner, then the differences in how it is presented become all the more important. Principally, ‘Dragonborn’ is obviously a rousing and dramatic ‘teaser’ designed to sell the narrative and ultimately, the game itself. However, it also marks a return for those already familiar with the *Elder Scrolls* theme (and other features such as the drum introduction). For a new audience, it relies upon established tropes from the classical repertoire and film music to begin the work of immersing the audience in a mythical time and place. Although the game is set in a specific historical and geographic context, the music’s principal contribution is in creating a familiarly mythological yet distinctive atmosphere. The analysis above demonstrates that several specific musical features help to create a more focused and determined version of the otherwise fairly languid theme. The rhythmic elements that in *Daggerfall* contributed to a lazy and dreamlike wandering are now reconfigured to create a sense of drama and heroic optimism. These features are critical in helping to create the world of *Skyrim*, both reinforcing and defining its landscape and culture.
**Songs of Skyrim (Diegetic Music)**

The player can obtain a book (of which there are many in game) entitled ‘Songs of Skyrim, Compiled by Giraud Gemaine, Historian of the Bards’ College, Solitude.’ The book contains the lyrics to several popular songs, but there is no indication of the melody. However, by travelling around Skyrim, the player can pay bards in various local taverns to perform. Three songs from the book will be discussed here in further detail: ‘Ragnar The Red’, ‘The Dragonborn Comes’, and ‘The Age of Oppression/Aggression’.

These songs form the majority of the diegetic music in the game (there are other short passages and instrumental excerpts that the bards play from time to time, and sometimes various NPCs can be heard whistling or humming various folk tunes) and as such can offer a very particular perspective on Nordic culture within the game—this is the music that the Nords themselves perform. The Creation Engine also reveals five music tracks that are heard in taverns, the first two of which are in the Music Type ‘MUSTavern’ (used in various specific locations), the remainder in the separate group, ‘MUSTavernB’ (used in all the main settlement taverns). The tracks sound ‘diegetic’, like ambient background tavern music performed by the bards, but they are not requested by the player or actively performed in the same way as the songs discussed below. The track ‘mus_tavern_01’ contains a drone that frequently clashes on the downbeat with the melody’s accented passing notes. The second track (rerecorded on the soundtrack as ‘The Bannered Mare’) is a clearer texture, starting with a simple melody and clear chordal accompaniment that gradually becomes increasingly embellished and contrapuntal, before returning to the simplicity of the opening. The third track (also included on the soundtrack as ‘A Winter’s Tale’) has a quiet repetitive beating of a drum, and an additional countermelody performed as if the fingers are barely touching

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40 For details, see <http://elderscrolls.wikia.com/wiki/Songs_of_Skyrim>, accessed 12/03/13. The lyrics here were taken from this source, although they are also available in game.
41 A taste of these songs performed by a variety of bards can be found in Stormie McTrooper, ‘TES V: Skyrim Bard’s Songs,’ on YouTube (December 2011), retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLE03E7B122AB46BCE>, accessed 12/03/13.
the strings. The melody of the fourth track is performed on a flute or panpipe of some kind, again over a pedal or drone-like bass. The fifth track has a more mobile harmonic drone and a more complex ensemble, with all of the instruments above, and violins. There is also a much deeper bass instrument. All the tavern music tracks are peaceful and relaxed, and follow simple strophic structures as if they are ordinarily sung.

Ideally, it would be beneficial to be able to compare this music with diegetic music from other parts of Tamriel, or from early games such as Oblivion or Morrowind. Unfortunately, no such music exists, excluding fan-made music mods (of which there are several, as already indicated). As a result, in order to isolate and identify the specifically Nordic features of this folk music, an impression of the music of other cultures must be gained from the non-diegetic music available. Although this flawed comparison is likely to be misleading to a degree, how the other races and cultural groups are characterized in the non-diegetic music should still prove to be a workable point of reference. One obvious example is the track ‘Imperial Throne’ (mus_castle_imperial_01) from the soundtrack. The three-part texture consists of long quiet pedal notes in the bass supporting an exotic intertwining duet. The soundworld is unmistakably reminiscent of Tchaikovsky’s ‘Danse Arabe’ from The Nutcracker (although darker and even more mysterious). This may at first seem a surprising characterization of Imperial culture, but as the Empire compares favourably with that of the real-world Romans, it is worth remembering that both tolerated and absorbed many different aspects of the cultures they conquered. Of course, this makes a direct comparison with Nord folk music particularly problematic, especially given the shared Nordic and Imperial history outlined above. Nevertheless, the fact that this ‘middle-eastern’ exotic soundworld was selected to represent Imperial flavour within the province of Skyrim, and the fact that it is decidedly different from the music discussed below, makes for a valid contextualization. A second (and admittedly less ‘musical’)

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42 The music to Morrowind and, to a lesser extent, Oblivion, was criticized for not being sufficiently immersive due to a reliance on repeating small sets of generic music tracks for a very limited number of situations (exploration, battle, etc.). This spurred on modifications to the game. See Tim Summers, Video Game Music – History, Form and Genre (PhD Thesis, University of Bristol, August 2012), pp. 308–9.
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Comparison can be drawn from the two quite different military horn calls. These can be heard at times of conflict in the game, as one side prepares to go into battle, and also directly in the Creation Engine. Whilst the Imperial horn call (NPCHumanHornImperial) does sound quite rustic, compared to the more lyrical Stormcloak horn call (NPCHumanHornStormcloak) it has a clearer, raspier tone and timbre, probably due to the use of metal. The Stormcloak horn, about a tone lower in pitch, sounds less refined and sophisticated—a simple ‘blowing horn’ probably made from cow horn.

![Image](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

**Figure 4.15: Drømde mig en drøm i nat**

Another useful comparison to make would be real-world Nordic folk music. The earliest surviving notated music of possible Viking origin is *Drømde mig en drøm i nat*, ‘I Dreamed a Dream...’, the first two lines of a folksong notated at the end of the *Codex Runicus*, an important fourteenth-century vellum manuscript containing early Danish laws. The words are written in runes and apparently describe the narrator’s dream of becoming a rich woman. The melody, assumedly older than the notation, is now famous to Danes as an interval signal used on Danish Radio since 1931.

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43 There has been some debate about the meaning of the runes, which appear to be written in the same hand as the rest of the legal document. See Ake Persson and John Holmquist, *Runenom* (2003–4), p. 6. Figure 4.20 was taken from Wikimedia Commons where it was sourced from the University of Copenhagen/The Royal Library of Copenhagen Digitization Library. The complete manuscript can be found here: [http://haandskrift.ku.dk/en/about_the_manuscripts/digitised_manuscripts/].
The song is in either the modern Aeolian mode, or perhaps the related Dorian mode (T-s-T-T-s-T), though the tuning of instruments of the day make exact comparisons difficult. According to Hucbald, a ninth-century Benedictine monk greatly influenced by Boethius, a six-string lyre would be tuned T-T-s-T-T-T. This would make it easy to perform various major scales, as well as the Dorian (playing the open strings gives the leading note followed by the first five notes). The rhythm in Figure 4.21 is ultimately based on conjecture, though the trochaic character is a notable feature of folk and dance music. Richard Taruskin points to another manuscript—Nobilis, Humilis, a hymn to the twelfth-century St. Magnus—that may provide clues to an ancient Nordic style of singing, apparently corroborated by Giraldus Cambrensis, also known as Gerald of Wales, a twelfth-century chronicler.

The hymn is composed for two voices and is often referred to as a gymel, although the term more usually denotes a temporary split of one voice into two parts. The most significant element of this style was the use of parallel thirds around a fulcrum pitch. Although all the songs in Skyrim are written for just one voice, they do move about a central pitch (modal centre). The intervals used extend further than thirds too, so it is clear that this more refined source was not a significant influence.

Other Nordic music traditions are even more difficult to trace in the folk music of the game. Circle dancing to vocal ballads make up a significant component of these folk traditions, for instance. Yet in the game, the folk songs are presented in a stifled, rigid manner, as if the bards are trying to reinvent a tradition that the local people have forgotten, and their attempts are lacklustre. Andrew

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Cronshaw explains that more recent Finnish and Estonian “runo-song” has a four-footed trochaic rhythm, invariably in 4/4 or 5/4 time. Cronshaw says that often ‘the line has eight beats, the melody rarely spans more than the first five notes of a diatonic scale and its short phrases tend to use descending patterns.’46 The songs in Skyrim are predominantly in 6/8, but are often organized in 8-beat phrases, and have a similarly limited vocal range. However, Jan Ling has noted that traditional Finnish runic songs, like Saami “jojk”, entail more recitative and calling than melodic singing.47 This suggests that the folk music in Skyrim was composed in a similar way to Philip Glass’s Brazil in Chime (see Chapter 2)—as a topic for an old traditional folk music that would be broadly acceptable in a mass-market Hollywood-like videogame.

Like many of the songs discussed here, ‘The Bannered Mare’ instrumental (Figure 21, a song named after Whiterun’s tavern) is predominantly composed in the modern Aeolian mode (also known as the natural minor mode, T-s-T-s-T-s-T-s-T), with occasional harmonic inflections (bar 4). The dotted but freely flowing rhythm with its steady two-beat oscillation is also reflective of the dance-like folk music.

“Songs of Skyrim” tells us that ‘Ragnar the Red is a traditional song of Whiterun. Despite the grim final image, the song is generally regarded as light and rollicking and a favorite in inns across Skyrim.’ It can be performed on request by bards such as Karita in Dawnstar’s Windpeak Inn, Sven in Riverwood, and Mikael at The Bannered Mare in Whiterun, amongst others, although other NPCs can sometimes be heard singing lines or humming the tune.

The humorous and boisterous nature of the lyrics make it particularly suitable as a popular tavern song although it is interesting to note that it is a heroine who puts the boastful liar Ragnar into his place. The Nordic warrior ethos does not exclude women, and indeed, besides the player’s own potential choice of sex, there are plenty of other female NPCs who engage in both politics and combat. (That said, the majority of NPC positions of power are perhaps unsurprisingly male.) Indeed,
the real-world runo-song texts that have been collected cover all aspects of life from a female perspective. The abrupt key changes and short pauses at the end of each short two-line (one sentence) verse are common devices employed in such folk songs, designed to heighten both the humour and suspense for the audience. (In the actual game, these pauses occur in all the songs and are actually bizarrely long, lasting on average almost the same length as a verse. This is reflected in the Creation Engine, which reveals that each verse is a separate audio track. Figure 4.24 shows the two voice files for the first line of Ragnar the Red. Whether this was done for convenience, or whether it was an aesthetic decision, is unclear—both seem similarly implausible explanations.)

Figure 4.24 shows the two voice files for the first line of Ragnar the Red. Whether this was done for convenience, or whether it was an aesthetic decision, is unclear—both seem similarly implausible explanations.) Otherwise, the harmonies and melody are relatively simple, though it is worth noting how the tonal centre shifts down a tone for the central passage, after the unrelated imperfect cadence in bar 9. The renditions of the song by the various bards are for the most part identical, with slight changes of emphasis and the odd difference of opinion regarding precise pitches or rhythms. The main purpose for the inclusion of this song is assumedly to add an additional layer to the Nord’s cultural heritage, as well as an additional source of immersion and entertainment. This is necessary in fantasy games to provide an illusion of depth to their fictional constructs.

‘The Dragonborn Comes’, however, is clearly a point of focus for the player in that it tells them that the saga of the Dragonborn is popular and pervasive across Skyrim. As explained in the

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Songs of Skyrim, it also presents the heroic Dragonborn as an aspirational epitome of Nordic characteristics:

The Dragonborn Comes has been handed down from generation to generation of bards. The Dragonborn in Nord culture is the archetype of what a Nord should be. The song itself has been used to rally soldiers and to bring hope.

The Dragonborn Comes

Our hero, our hero, claims a warrior's heart.
I tell you, I tell you, the Dragonborn comes.
With a Voice wielding power of the ancient Nord art.
Believe, believe, the Dragonborn comes.
It's an end to the evil, of all Skyrim's foes.
Beware, beware, the Dragonborn comes.
For the darkness has passed, and the legend yet grows.
You'll know, you'll know the Dragonborn's come.

The musical lines are repetitive, in the form AABABABA, where A is closed harmonic pattern (ending with ‘the Dragonborn comes’, aside from the first line), and B is open-ended. The lyrics emphasize the power of the Dragonborn’s Shout on the first change of melodic pattern (B).

The overtly political ‘Age of Oppression/Aggression’ are two versions of the same Civil War song. All music can help to form the relationships between people and the places in which they live, and therefore, it is highly political both as an activity, and a received object. Songs of this nature gain an additional political dimension, primarily through lyrics which associate the performer and (willing) audience—often performers as well through their participation—with a particular place or socio-cultural group. The lyrics for the pro-Stormcloak Age of Oppression read:

We drink to our youth, and to days come and gone.
For the age of oppression is now nearly done.
We'll drive out the Empire from this land that we own.
With our blood and our steel we will take back our home.
All hail to Ulfric! You are the High King!
In your great honor we drink and we sing.
We're the children of Skyrim, and we fight all our lives.
And when Sovngarde beckons, every one of us dies!
But this land is ours and we'll see it wiped clean.
Of the scourge that has sullied our hopes and our dreams.

Another real-world scenario that sheds light on this mechanism is explored by Matthew Machin, in ‘Controlling and Contesting a Musical Landscape: Flamenco, Regional Identity and Political Autonomy in Andalusia, Spain,’ at Hearing Landscape Critically (Conference Paper, University of Oxford, 2012).
They are sung to the same melody (and similar rhythm) as the anti-Imperial Age of Aggression (see Figure 4.25 below). The structure of the lyrics and much of the wording is also identical, aside from the obviously central lines that state affiliation:

![Figure 4.20: 'The Age of Aggression'](image)

![Figure 4.21: 'The Age of Oppression/Aggression' in Creation Engine](image)
The *Songs of Skyrim* tells us that ‘It isn't known which of the two was written first but the tune, with loyalty appropriate lyrics, is quite popular on both sides of the war.’ In fact, in the Creation Engine, both versions are stored as the same song (see Figure 4.26). One version or another is known by all the bards of Skyrim, depending largely on who controls the territory in which the song is requested. The bards themselves show little evidence of any hidden loyalties of their own—if the Stormcloaks succeed in taking a city, the resident bard will most likely switch sides and sing The Age of Oppression when once he offered the Imperial version only.\(^50\) The game provides a neutral palette in the form of the protagonist’s avatar that can be personalized by the player’s choices to side with one particular faction, or none. As the player can walk into any tavern in Skyrim at any point in the game, depending on the region’s current affiliation (the player’s involvement in the Civil War can affect this), a degree of flexibility in the system is required. While the bards only offer one version of the song in their selection, they do make political comments to commend your choice.

The folk melody itself is assumedly older than both sets of lyrics in the game’s chronology, perhaps even older than the Civil War itself. It is rousing for both sides because it is assumedly a popular part of the heritage each claims as their own, but its provenance also ensures that, at least on the surface, it is politically neutral. However, the similarity of this melody to the other songs performed in the province may well indicate that it is in fact reflective of Nordic culture. If this is the case, then this tune is perhaps unlikely to be as popular in Morrowind or Cyrodiil, if it is known at all. The music is primarily composed in either the Aeolian (the natural minor scale) or Dorian mode—although the sixth degree of the scale, B, is not included in the melody, both a G major chord and a G minor chord are used on the second beats of bars one and two respectively. Like the other songs, it seems Nordic music is based on much real-world folk music in that it predominantly (although not exclusively) relies upon modal rather than classical functional harmony.

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\(^50\) Ulfric himself can occasionally be heard reciting lines from the *Age of Aggression* in his sleep, assumedly a joke from the developers, or otherwise an indication of the character’s pride of his own infamy.
It is also possible to find a revised edition of the book that includes the lyrics to ‘The Following’—‘an ancient song we’ve only recently been able to translate. Without a tune or a sure pronunciation the song is lost to time. It’s included here to show the deep history of song here in Skyrim.’ These lyrics are those of the main Elder scrolls theme discussed above. The fact that bards do not seem to know this song, and that the tune is forgotten is interesting in that it allows the song to function as the non-diegetic main theme rather than a diegetic anthem. This edition also contains an additional song that can be sung by the bards once the player has completed the main story questline:

Tale of the tongues is a newer song. One that has come in to favor [sic] since the Dragonborn put down Alduin. It actually describes the events of the first battle against the dragons.

**Tale of the Tongues**

*Alduin’s wings, they did darken the sky.*
*His roar fury’s fire, and his scales sharpened scythes.*
*Men ran and they cowered, and they fought and they died.*
*They burned and they bled as they issued their cries.*

*We need saviors to free us from Alduin’s rage.*
*Heroes on the field of this new war to wage.*
*And if Alduin wins, man is gone from this world.*
*Lost in the shadow of the black wings unfurled.*

*But then came the Tongues on that terrible day.*
*Steadfast as winter, they entered the fray.*
*And all heard the music of Alduin’s doom.*
*The sweet song of Skyrim, sky-shattering Thu’um.*

*And so the Tongues freed us from Alduin’s rage.*
*Gave the gift of the Voice, ushered in a new Age.*
*If Alduin is eternal, then eternity’s done.*
*For his story is over and the dragons are gone.*

This song reinforces the impact the player has on the game world—now their great deeds are recorded by the bards to be passed on through the generations. Collectively, these diegetic songs enable the player to reconstruct Skyrim’s geopolitical landscape.

The scale of the diegetic music of Skyrim is naturally small, as anything longer than a short song is unlikely to hold the attention of the intended audience, especially as an optional ‘aside’ to
the core gameplay. However, this is indicative of a widespread perception of videogame music amounting to nothing more than a collection of ‘miniatures’, or specific character pieces. It is plain to see why this view is prevalent—the vast majority of the music discussed in this thesis so far is composed for a specific dramatic purpose (danger, combat, heroic) with average durations never more than four or five minutes. Indeed, even the more ambient ‘exploration’ music investigated below tends to last no more than six or seven minutes. To a certain degree, this limits what can be done with regard to musical processes and more complex formal structures. However, like the component parts of an opera, or the cues of a film score, these individual examples are in fact excerpts from a much more substantial whole. As already mentioned, the overall scale of the music to a game like *Skyrim* is much larger than any film, at least in terms of duration. That should be no surprise, as the average playtime for the game is 75 hours, with many players spending several hundred hours in the game world.\footnote{See Brendan Sinclair, ‘Skyrim PC players average 75 hours of playtime,’ on gamespot.com (08/02/2012), retrieved from <http://uk.gamespot.com/news/skyrim-pc-players-average-75-hours-of-playtime-6350045>, accessed 18/03/2013.} As such, the paltry four-and-a-half or so hours of music does not seem that much, considering the amount of repetition that necessarily takes place. For games like this, the balancing act between familiarity and boredom becomes the crucial psychological element that governs large-scale musical structure.

*Klangfläche* Landscapes

Daniel Grimley’s reappraisal of Grieg aims to ‘move beyond the cosy, small-scale image’\footnote{Daniel Grimley, *Grieg: Music, Landscape and Norwegian Identity* (Boydell Press, 2006), p. 223.} of the composer through a consideration of music and landscape. For this reason, alongside the Scandinavian backdrop, Grimley’s study is a particularly pertinent point of reference for an analysis
of the music to *Skyrim*. For Grimley, landscape is not merely an imitative representation, but an ideological construct that expresses a particular time and place. Grimley also notes that landscape presupposes both a process of composition (the creation of frames of reference or forms of spatial organisation) and the presence and active participation of a viewer (their sense of perspective). Furthermore... landscape is not merely concerned with spatial perception, but also possesses a temporal dimension.\(^{53}\)

For these reasons, music is well suited to depict landscape sonically. Grieg described the mountain landscape of western Norway as an ‘ecstatic or epiphanal experience’ that, with the sense of home and nation evident in his compositions, Grimley shows resonates with high romanticism. In Grieg’s compositional response to this experience of landscape, an effect of enchantment, distance, and nostalgia is generated by a ‘suspended temporality’ or radical ‘spatial’ quality, and a ‘heightened sense of aural awareness or sensitivity to sound.’\(^{54}\)

Like many so-called nationalist composers, the reception of Grieg has for many years limited the status of his achievements to the local or small-scale. (The size and relative stability of the many component parts of the Holy Roman Empire ensured a sense of unity, longevity, and universality, despite the fact that the composers it prized became just as involved in creating a sense of Germanic nationalism as outsiders.) There are several associated myths that have contributed to this perception—Grieg’s ill health and small stature perhaps the most pervasive. But, alongside the imbalance between large-scale (symphonic) and small (songs) that makes up his oeuvre, it was Grieg’s own admission that he had difficulty with large traditional forms that has perpetuated the image of a ‘miniaturist’.\(^{55}\) Nevertheless, Grimley argues that Grieg’s approach to form was part of a productive creative engagement between two linguistic camps: the creation of Norwegian cultural identities and his training in the Austro-German heritage at the Leipzig conservatoire:

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linguistic conflict between the deliberately primitivist treatment of musical material and an increasingly abstract sense of syntax and structure.⁵⁶

This is evident, Grimley suggests, in the dualism between diatonic and modal systems that govern works such as Slåtter. Such tensions reflect an ideological construction of musical landscape in which the music problematizes the relationships between the socio-cultural and political trends of nationalism, cosmopolitanism and protectionism in Norway.

Grimley draws on Dahlhaus’s conceptions of Naturklang and Klangfläche—two closely related concepts that are both antithetical to ‘teleological process’, what Dahlhaus characterized as the hallmark of nineteenth-century symphonic music. Naturklang is a sense of stasis paradoxically reliant on an inner drive generated by ostinatos and a proto-minimalist rhythmic repetition of ‘cells’. Dahlhaus defines Klangfläche as ‘the sound-sheet... outwardly static but inwardly in constant motion.’⁵⁷ He argues that in order for music to depict nature, the teleological impulse of the ‘imperative of organic development’—practically a musical ‘doctrine’ founded on Beethoven—must be subverted. In other words, through avoiding the usual (at least, the Germanic orientated norms presented as universal by Dahlhaus and others) ‘character of musical form as process’⁵⁹, a particular kind of stasis is permitted, regardless of any amount of internal rhythmic interest.

Examples Dahlhaus cites include, most obviously, the development section of the first movement of Beethoven’s Pastoral Symphony, which Dahlhaus characterizes as an ‘idyll’ or ‘refuge’ from Beethoven’s own formal principals, the Forest Murmurs from Wagner’s Siegfried, which Dahlhaus uses as an example of harmonic ‘open-endedness’, and even the tumultuous thunderstorm of the Prelude to Act 1 of Die Walküre. In each case, ‘the music remains riveted to the spot motivically and harmonically, no matter how gentle or violent its rhythmic motion.’⁶⁰ To ensure that the music is not so static that it becomes ‘dull and lifeless’, Dahlhaus pinpoints both a particular use of rhythmic

⁵⁷ Carl Dahlhaus, Nineteenth Century Music, p. 307.
⁵⁸ Ibid.
⁵⁹ Ibid.
⁶⁰ Ibid.
patternning and the use of unresolved non-harmonic notes. By thwarting the usual logic of harmonic
dissonance and resolution, and layering this with a set of rhythmic patterns that operate on a more
minimalist or cellular basis, rather than a classically informed balanced aesthetic, the necessary
sense of stasis can be achieved that is the prerequisite to any landscape imagery. However, as R.
Andrew Lee has pointed out, the experience of a temporal stasis in music need not be defined
merely through alterity to conventional musical processes.61

In Grieg’s music, Grimley creatively but precisely finds these concepts of landscape in the
tensions caused by the juxtaposition of Norwegian folk music with European diatonic harmony.62
Many of these elements are also present in the music for Skyrim, although there are some significant
differences in terms of scale and form. The track ‘Unbroken Road’ will form the centrepiece of my
analysis for this section, but beforehand, it will be useful to investigate a number of specific features
that are common to much of the music in the ‘explore’ types. That this music is particularly pertinent
to the sorts of concepts discussed above is largely self-evident, especially when compared to other
categories of music in the game such as the music for combat. However, I will argue that it is the
combination of these specific features that can bring about a sense of Klangflächen.

The first and perhaps most obvious element that makes up the soundworld is the particular
timbre of the instrumentation. ‘From Past to Present’ is a heavily string-based composition, a facet
of the orchestration that we can call idiomatic for Skyrim’s landscape music. In the game, the track is
used as both ‘mus_town_day_02’ and ‘mus_explore_day_02’.

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61 See R. Andrew Lee, ‘Temporality as an analytical approach to minimalist music: Tom Johnson’s An hour for
piano,’ Divergence Press Journal 1 (March 2013), retrieved from
<http://divergencepress.com/Journal/JournalIssue/tabid/85/ID/9/categoryId/1/Temporality-as-an-analytical-
62 For an overview, see Stephen Downes, ‘Review: Grieg: Music, Landscape and Norwegian Identity by Daniel
The music continually hangs on open-ended (imperfect) cadence points. The opening passage transcribed as Figure 4.27 is a case in point. The music appears to start in D minor, although the first two phrases ambiguously resolve on to the subdominant major (G major). The third phrase appears to confirm that the home key is based upon D by introducing the C-sharp, but the F-sharp that precedes it confuses the mode and results in a particularly expectant feeling. In fact, some cues come to an end on comparatively open-ended harmonies, and even those that feel tonally closed or complete often employ fade outs, whether composed or electronically imposed. Following the cadence point in bar 7, the music returns to the minor mode with supplementary melodies in the woodwind, and then continues in much the same vein with frequent mode switches.

The main theme (Figure 4.28) consists of two balanced phrases, the second identical to the first with the exception of the last note, which remains on the ‘A’. The theme itself is doubled in the
violins and cellos—that often cliché Romantic texture pervasive across music of the nineteenth century and in film scores to this day. The harmony oscillates around the G major chord and the harmonic vocabulary remains a combination of traditional diatonic functionality with modal harmonic procedures adopted from folk music. The harmonic progression is constructed around two cadences, the first a perfect cadence indicated by the move from D to G in the basses, and the second, F to G. However, strictly speaking, the first is not a perfect cadence as it moves from the dominant minor to the tonic. As if to reiterate or compliment this fact, the subsequent cadence returns wholeheartedly to the F-natural and combined with the melody itself, moves in parallel motion back to the tonic. This heightens the hopeful and uplifting oscillating pendulum effect which is only brought to a close on the second phrase which returns to an open chord of D (D minor is implied although no F is sounded). The openness of the final chord creates a melancholic emptiness demonstrating that the harmony is not as ambiguous as it had first appeared.

Aside from the added reverb, there are other important ‘effects’ that help to create the sensation of space. The principal lines for the track ‘Journey’s End’ have been transcribed below as a clear three-part contrapuntal texture. However, the sound is thickened through the use of enharmonic cluster chords. For example, the first comes in the second bar with the entry of the second voice and consists of the notes E-flat, F and G, as well as the A-flat in the part below. The slow pacing, meandering rhythm and gentle enharmonic suspensions create an ethereal feel with the gentle dissonances of the chord clusters moving in parallel motion. Even in the jaunty ‘The City Gates’ (‘mus_town_day_01’ in the data structure), these cluster harmonies are pervasive.
The familiar combination of horn melody and string accompaniment is also found in ‘Awake’ (‘mus_special_cartintro_01’), although this track is much shorter as it is used at the very start of the game while the player is in the cart with Ulfric on their way to be executed. As a result, for once the form is not ABA, but AB. The violins hold long, high tessitura lines like those that embellish the theme of ‘From Past to Present’, which create a sense of vertical space. Once the theme has been fully realized by the horn, the strings quietly reveal a version of the Elder Scrolls theme, but fade out prematurely.

Horn calls such as this are pervasive across the soundtrack because they fulfil two functions: the horn is a heroic and warrior-like cultural trope, and the many leaping fourths and fifths traditional to horn calls are effective in helping to create a certain sense of time and space.
‘The Streets of Whiterun’ (‘mus_town_day_03’) draws from the heritage of “city” music using a falling fifth as a piano motif that repeats every bar.63 This motif remains at the same pitch while the harmony shifts around, turning initially enharmonic notes into more interesting ‘flavours’ such as sharpened sevenths. The strings grow from another wash of harmonic accompaniment to an increasingly impassioned theme in the cello. Again, this theme is created through the repetition of short phrases. The use of repetition, especially in the case of the falling piano motif, gives a timeless quality to the music, although a better characterization might be a melancholic mixture of nostalgia for something past, or sadness at the realization that it will not last.

‘Far Horizons’, ‘mus_explore_day08’ starts with another horn solo (with string countermelody):

63 See, for instance, Ivan Hewett, ‘Different Strains. Music in 12 Parts by Philip Glass; Michael Riesman; Proverb; Nagoya Marimbas; City Life by Steve Reich; Bob Becker; James Preiss; Paul Hillier; Bradley Lubman; El Dorado by John Adams; Kent Nagano; Berceuse élégiaque by Adams; Busoni; John Adams; The Black Gondola by Adams; Liszt; John Adams,’ The Musical Times 138/1848 (February 1997): 20–23.
The open intervals (a rising fifth and a falling fourth) are idiomatic of the space-creating quality to the horn themes in the game. A version of the Elder Scrolls theme (Figure 4.31) also makes an appearance in the middle of the ABA form. Although it is clearly a variation on the Elder Scrolls theme, it is different enough to ensure that the audience is not over-exposed.

In summary, the musical elements of the non-diegetic music for *Skyrim* that make up this *Klangflächen* music are:

- String based instrumentation
- (Harmonically) Open-ended phrases and cues
- Themes presented in octaves (cellos and violins)
- Mixture of traditional diatonic harmony and ‘folk’/modal procedures (parallel motion, mode switches indicative, provide extended harmonic vocabulary)
- Open-ended harmonies but not ‘ambiguous’—sense of home key and solid foundation
- Horn calls/melodies (open intervals creating space)
- Wash of harmonic ‘accompaniment’ (time) and string tessitura creating vast space
- Themes created through repetition, accompaniment’s also based on ostinati. Repetition creates timeless quality
- Few ‘main themes’ and subtle variations ensure balance is struck between repetitiveness and familiarity
- Reverb and chord clusters.

**Unbroken Road**

The track ‘Unbroken Road’ (Figure 4.34 below) is in a simple ternary ABA form, with each ‘A’ section culminating in a sweeping rendition of the slow version of the Elder Scrolls theme heard in the horn part of Figure 4.18 above. The track has a duration of about six-and-a-half minutes. In the data structure it is entitled ‘mus_explore_day_06’ and in the Creation Engine we see that unlike most of the other ‘explore’ tracks, it is only used for one unique Music Type: MUSSpecialElderScrollSequence. (By way of contrast, the Music Track MUSExploreDay01 is used in Music Types MUSExploreMarsh, MUSExploreCoast, MUSExploreMountaing, MUSExploreTundra, MUSExploreReach, MUSExploreSnow, MUSExploreForestPine, MUSExploreFall, and two other test types.) This special music type is uniquely attached to a particular moment in the game, although like the other ‘explore’ tracks,
MUSEExploreDay06 includes conditions that ensure it is only heard between the hours of 8am and 6pm (see Figure 4.33). It seems the track is only supposed to play at the moment the player obtains or reads the Elder Scroll in the quest, 'Elder Knowledge', but as the music track MUSEExploreDay04 has no usage information whatsoever, it may be that the tracks are also referenced in other ways.  

The horn melody that commences the track is actually the tail end of the main theme that appears in the strings at bar 25 (cf. bars 1–8 with 32–37). The rising third by step is the principal motivic component, originating from the start of the main Skyrim/Elder Scrolls theme. The music builds gradually in both volume and texture, culminating in the presentation of the main theme that is doubled in the violins and cellos encompassing three octaves. The sweeping character of the melody is greatly enhanced by its contrasting but supportive accompaniment in the rest of the strings—a pulsating but static wash of a single harmony. The music dies down in a similar fashion, repeating the final phrase of the melody.

The ‘B’ section is marked by the solo flute entrance. Although the horn continues to echo the closing phrase from the previous section, and the wash of harmony remains largely unchanged, the character is decidedly different. The instrumental solos benefit from added clarity since the texture of the accompaniment is less rich. Eventually the passage dies away and the music returns to

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64 The comments on a YouTube video of the track indicate that the music does not always play at the moment it should. There is also a degree of debate about whether the language sung by the choir is that of the Dragons, or Latin. See allaboutSkyrimmusic, 'Unbroken Road - The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim Original Game Soundtrack,' on YouTube (12/12/2011), retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N7twwNhRq30>, accessed 19/03/13.
the start. In the build-up section before the main theme returns for the second time, a choir joins the violin part at the moment parallel to bar 9 below, though there is no record of what the lyrics are. This additional punctuation adds to the building dramatic tension and supplements the sweeping aesthetic with a sense of player’s role in an epic saga. The overall feeling is not unlike that expressed in Strauss’s aforementioned *Alpine Symphony*, although the sections are greatly condensed. In this sense, the music in section A describes (at least figuratively) the protagonist’s ascent into the mountains, their arrival at the summit, and a subsequent descent. The B section introduces an obviously related (nearby) but different sort of terrain—pine trees on more level ground perhaps—the repeating flute motif reminiscent of birdcalls.

The music of Sibelius also makes for a useful point of comparison. The reception of Sibelius, perhaps even more so than Grieg, was inextricably tied up with the growing nationalist sentiment in Finland prior to the disintegration of the Russian Empire in 1917. Richard Taruskin points out that in later years, the composer himself ‘loomed not merely as a Finnish national monument but as the very embodiment of the North—harsh, frosty, inscrutable, chastening.’ Finlandia makes for an interesting parallel with *Skyrim’s* main theme, in that it was banned in Russia as although it is not an anthem with words, the theme was remarkably reminiscent of the pre-existing folk song ‘Finland, Awake!’

More pertinently though, the ostinato string writing that opens the Finale of Sibelius’s Symphony No. 5 (also noticeable in the fourth symphony finale) has the effect of a tremolo that also bears direct comparison with ‘Unbroken Road’. The famous horn melody of that movement, and the horn call that opens the work are remarkably similar in style to Soule’s. However, perhaps more significant is Sibelius’s treatment of form. The ternary form of ‘Unbroken Road’ is common to the

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66 See Taruskin, *Music in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 822. The theme itself is in fact not a folk song, but a hymn by Emil Genetz.
vast majority of longer tracks. Perhaps in a similar way to James Hepokoski’s take on the ‘rotational’ form of the first movement of Sibelius’s fifth symphony, the music of the second ‘A’ section is somehow transformed through repetition. The addition of the choir is not a big difference sonically, or structurally, but it is a significant one nonetheless. The ‘Klang’ meditation Hepokoski refers to is also of relevance to Soule’s music for *Skyrim*—the form of individual tracks is governed as much by the musical material and attention to the soundworld as any pre-conceived abstract structure. Of course, the musical processes Sibelius employed in his symphonies also included an important teleological strand, often leading to a ‘breakthrough’ moment. Without this, the concept of ‘cycles’, or rotational repetitions more obviously indicates a sense of stasis.

That is not to say that there is a complete lack of musical processes in the music for *Skyrim*. Often, what musical processes can be traced are operating on a different temporal plane, or in a different way. Chris Garrard suggests that until we move beyond viewing what he identifies as ‘glacial music’ from the outside as static drift, it is difficult to properly identify and evaluate the slow-moving processes that create it. It is important to remember that even though the two Sibelius finales mentioned above only last around nine-and-a-half minutes, in general, it is nevertheless problematic to draw direct comparisons between the large-scale formal structures of this music with that of the game. As we have discussed in previous chapters, the larger form of the music in video games of this genre is governed by the dramatic pacing of the gameplay, and beyond that, ultimately the narrative. ‘Unbroken Road’ is an example of a piece of music that does in fact give musical form to this larger structure, as it is only heard at a specific and dramatic moment in the narrative. While the exact timing is contingent on many factors, the player’s own decisions and play-style not least, the moment comes approximately two-thirds of the way through the main questline—hardly a surprising proportion (see Table 4.3 above).

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4. Landscapes in *Skyrim*

The Aesthetics of Videogame Music

Mark Sweeney

Figure 4.29: ‘Unbroken Road’—Excerpt
The stylistic features identified in the musical excerpts above are combined here to create an archetypal example of Naturklang or Klangfläche. The use of reverb (throughout the soundtrack) enhances the generally slow pacing of the explore music and gives the impression that the music is being heard in a vast landscape. The tumultuous string ostinati provide rhythmic interest but remain static. Great washes of slow harmonic rhythm support long sweeping themes for strings and frequently, the horn. This sense of movement within stasis sets up a particular subject position from which the landscape is surveyed. In addition to this, a particular time is created. The principal musical process is that of repetition, which by its very nature does not progress, develop or change. Even the larger scale structure is a form of repetition, the B section providing some contrast but with a strong sense of continuation. Dahlhaus’s concepts provide a useful way of describing the particular aesthetic sense of time and space created by the music, and this aesthetic is well suited to the phenomenological experience of exploring the virtual world.

Moments like this in the game—the music powerfully coinciding with a particularly picturesque vista—are often arresting in the sense that they demands the player’s time and indulgence. Structurally, these experiences are usually not predetermined to coincide with the exploration of particular locations. Rather, they occur randomly across many hours of gameplay. Michiel Kamp has argued that the serendipitous nature of ‘stumbling upon’ these musical encounters has more in common with Ronald Hepburn’s aesthetics of nature than the authored, controlled semiotics usually associated with artworks. While the identity-forming diegetic songs serve more obvious semiotic functions, the exploration music is integral to the game’s aesthetic identity, and, in turn, its commercial success. The aesthetic experience of Naturklang is ultimately

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more important than the specific narrative and lore in creating the game’s unique identity and sense of appeal. These late-romantic cues are, of course, close to the music found in mass-entertainment cinema, but this should not imply that the music is deficient, uninteresting, or an ‘easy option’. In fact, the particular mythology of order/chaos in *The Elder Scrolls* games, with its concept of time as a synthesis of continuity and change, is very much in keeping with serendipitous moments of musical stasis. Such issues are the focus of the next chapter.

In describing the ‘Unbroken Road’ cue, and others, as examples of *Naturklang* and *Klangfläche*, and in recognizing certain musical similarities with Norwegian and Finnish nationalist composers Grieg and Sibelius, an ideological conception of landscapes in *Skyrim* emerges. Although there are no clear musical tensions that highlight ideological positions (between “universal” and “modern” tonality and localized folk modes, for instance), the idealized landscapes, the simplistic and universalized version of folk music traditions, and the referencing of Scandinavian nationalist music provides a Hollywood-like impression of a fictional Viking world. Indeed, the game as a whole can be viewed as a simplified microcosm for the multiplicity of historical ideological and geopolitical issues from the Scandinavian region.

Massey’s conception of space as a product of ‘interrelations’ is realized in the geopolitical landscapes of *Skyrim*. The Nordic diegetic music can be identified through its alterity to non-diegetic non-Nordic (Imperial) music. The landscape is plural and heterogeneous, with numerous characters and factions presenting a variety of perspectives on the political landscape, as is evidenced in the diegetic songs. The player’s actions through the game ensure that the geopolitical landscape is not static, but constantly under construction. Exploration through the virtual world does not entail the same tangible connection to aesthetic play with musical form that we have seen in other games. However, the player’s negotiation between the various political forces in the game creates a unique landscape, and the game’s music is embedded in this reconstruction. The prevailing aesthetic experience engendered by the non-diegetic music is closely connected to the game’s fiction.
Although the shortcomings inherent in constructing a newly invented large and vivid virtual world sometimes prevail on the player’s suspension of disbelief, the music crucially provides a complementary aesthetic experience in support of the fiction. The success of this game has often been said to be its immersive world, but it is actually the aesthetic experiences it offers.