Song Exploder
Brian Reitzell - Watch Dogs
Episode 15

Hrishikesh: You're listening to Song Exploder, where musicians take apart their songs and piece by piece tell the story of how they were made. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway.

("Watch Dogs" by BRIAN REITZELL)

Hrishikesh: In May 2014, the video game company Ubisoft released *Watch Dogs*, about a vigilante hacker. Here's how the game's described on their website: "You play as Aiden Pearce, a brilliant hacker and former thug, whose criminal past led to a violent family tragedy. While seeking justice for those events, you'll monitor and hack those around you." It sold over 4 million copies in its first week of release. The music for the game was made by Brian Reitzell, who played drums in the band's Air and Red Kross before becoming a composer and music supervisor for films like *Lost in Translation* and *Beginners.* He also creates the music for the NBC TV show *Hannibal*. Coming up, Brian talks about the unique challenges posed by scoring video games, where players control what happens on screen and as a result, what happens in the music. He'll break down a piece called "Donovan," which he wrote for a chase sequence within the game. He'll also describe the instrument that he created from a hundred-year-old piano. This episode is presented in conjunction with Polygon.

("Watch Dogs" by BRIAN REITZELL)

(Music fades)

Brian: My name is Brian Reitzell, and I am a film and TV, and sometimes, video game composer. I was asked by Ubisoft. They had an idea to approach their video game like a film. They were looking for a film guy instead of a video game guy. I'm not really sure they knew what they were going to get from me, but I had done a video game previously called *Red Faction: Armageddon*. And that was quite a challenge for me. It was my first video game, I didn't understand what I was doing. But I had the confidence after I did that one. And I really liked doing video games because it's a completely different thing than doing a score for a film or a TV show, or any other thing that I've had to make music for. This piece of music that we have up, the Donovan chase loop, it was a car chase and, you know, Aiden gets into a car. They would give me a work order, and the work order would say, "Donovan chase loop. Two minutes." And then, you would take

those two minutes, and you would break that down as much as possible into as many different loops that you could. You try to do things so that it never sounds like it's looping. And that is the biggest challenge with working on a video game; is to make music that is A) modular, and B) is something that feels like it isn't modular. Like this living, breathing, moving piece of music that is also scoring what you're doing, even though that's really an impossible feat. So you have to keep a layer of ambiguity to it [laughter]. You know? You kind of hit the broad stroke tension, he's in a car, you know, so you make exciting things, and you try to be as compelling as you can, I guess. They were interested

(Synth pad)

Brian: in doing a very electronic score. The game also takes place in the near future, you know?

(Wind sound effect joins)

Brian: So to put a spin on it, I told them that I would do it,

(Synth joins)

Brian: but I was actually more interested in doing it like the, sort of, orchestrations that were in those early Tangerine Dream records like *Zeit* and *Phaedra*.

(Synth with synth pad)

Brian: Analog, arpeggiators, and sequencers. So I started like that, and then did a delivery or two, and then it completely changed

(Music ends)

Brian: because, you know, it just felt like it needed to be its own thing. And that meant it being a hybrid of the analog synths, but also with more orchestral percussion, you know, other things that might be unique to its sound. Oftentimes, for me, with video game music, it's propulsive, it’s very rhythmic because I'm a drummer. I programmed parts on the machine drum to Swedish drum machine. But instead of using the sounds of it, like kick, snare, hi-hat, I'm actually using it to play the keys on a keyboard, but I'm using drum patterns.

(Swedish drum machine)

Brian: Instead of the kick drum being a kick drum, in this case, it would be a C or D or whatever. And then, your snare drum is playing the fifth or vice versa or a fourth or whatever. You just, kind of, make all these really interesting intervals using the 16 rhythmic steps of the pattern. And then, I'll just change from different patterns, and you'll get something like this.

(Swedish drum machine)

(Swedish drum machine ends)

Brian: So that's just the one stem. And then, everything was built on top of that. So I played along to that with the bell rhythm.

(Bell sound)

Brian: There's a guy in Scandinavia, I think in Norway, that makes these really great wooden rods, and I collect them. And they're all different, they're different [laughter] kinds of wood, they're different, you know? And I used those on metal, which gives it kind of a nice, industrial feel that sits really well with synthesizers, but a human playing it. So I would play that, and mostly what you're getting from that is the human dynamics, the different accents played by a human.

(Bell sound)

Brian: So we can then use that track to have its dynamics sent to a modular synthesizer to trigger the synthesizer, essentially just adding another percussion instrument to it. Because it's being triggered by my performance, it's automatically in time.

(Synth joins)

(Music fades)

Brian: I played real kick and snare and hi-hat to this, and then cut them apart. I've essentially sampled myself.

(Drums)

(Drums end)

Brian: I don’t think you should ever really do that if you're making a Neil Young song or, you know, a song [laughter], but in this case it's more percussive than it is like rock drums. The hi-hat for me is one of the most boring things.

(Beat)

Brian: Often drummers play it only because they can't play the drums without it. And I find that to be really boring. So I need to change it up, or I need to take it out, or whatever. So I will often have lots of things to do in that motion. There's a shaker as well.

(Shaker)

Brian: It adds a nice color.

(Beat joins)

(Shaker)

Brian: The shaker is a really good glue. I would usually play them close to last, and just with everything else. And it makes the whole thing just feel good. I do love electronic drum machine shakers and stuff like that, but for this case, trying to make people not feel like something [laughter] is looped, all that kind of stuff you can play on top of it helps it feel alive.

(Shaker ends)

Brian: I give them the ammunition so they can program it however they want. If they wanted to, they can, the minute a door's shut, for example, you could cut out everything except

(Synth)

Brian: this stem or these four stems, or however they want to program, and as deep as they want to program it. I give it to them so they can really be sophisticated with that. But this is modular music, man. This is, you know, this is a very different kind of music. It's more like being a line cook in a restaurant where you have prepped up all of your things, you've done your research, you know what instruments you’re going to use, you know what the sound of this thing is.

(Synth)

(Cymbals)

Brian: This was meant to add an element of fear, of danger, of tension. And I'm getting it by bowing some bronze cymbals.

(Cymbals)

Brian: It makes that kind of elephant sound because I'm bending it as I'm going. And I found using bronze instruments, and bowing it to pull the harmonics out of it, and pull these weird overtones out of it, it sounds like just a really scary brass section.

(Cymbals end)

Brian: I took the part that I had recorded with the machine drum,

(Synth)

Brian: and then distorted the crap out of it. But we also did something I rarely ever do, that's pretty trendy these days, which was to sidechain.

(Sidechain)

Brian: I don't normally do things like that. But it seemed to really fit, and it gives it a nice kind of sucking feeling. So it sounds a lot [mimics the sidechain].

(Music ends)

Brian: Then there's the bowed piano.

(Bowed piano)

Brian: This is an instrument that I created several years back, where I took my hundred-year-old piano and bowed the strings. And I made my own orchestra, because I was working on an Indian movie that didn't have the budget for a proper orchestra, yet it needed to have a orchestra [laughter], it needed strings. I just recorded a piano with two microphones. I used horsehair to bow the strings. I did each note on my piano, every one I could reach. It's an upright piano, so I

couldn't reach to the high strings. It was a very long process that I did [laughter]. What happens with the piano because, you know, with the piano you've got the three strings that you're bowing, as the sound decays, you hear all the lovely harmonics really unfold, and it's really interesting. Once you start stacking those on top of each other, you get this really rich, beautiful, sustained note. I'm not sitting down, and doing this with pen and paper,

(Bass joins)

Brian: more like sonically sculpting. Well, in the case of this music, a lot of the melody is meant to be found by the person that's listening to it. I'm not trying to cram a melody down anyone's throat. I'm trying to give them, actually, a whole lot of options [laughter]. And that's one of the things that I like about the bowed piano and about writing music in this way for this kind of medium, is that it allows it to be so melodic without it being really crammed down your throat. And then, you get this really rich, harmonically dense music. And once you stack up those chords and those different timbres together, the melodies kind of come out. Time-wise, it's quite interesting because if you're going to keep hearing the melody the same way. Even if I subdivided eight or ten different ways, you know, I modulate it, it's still going to be that same thing, but by creating a lot of ghost melodies and things in the music, I mean, you don't ever really hear it the same way twice.

(Music fades)

Brian: In terms of letting go of music, video game is the hardest, because you don't know if it works because you can't see it. You're not in that moment. And there's no way for you to know. It can be really difficult. I'm a guy that came from the world of being in bands, and making music to listen to. And this is a completely different job. Though, it's really important to me that if you extract the music from the game, and just listen to it, that it's really, really cool. And to do both is tricky, but that's the only way to do it. That's the only way to keep yourself happy, because it really is challenging to work in this way. And it's fun.

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: All the sections and various permutations that were created for the Donovan chase loop were edited and arranged, to create one linear piece of music for the soundtrack album. And so, now, here's that version of "Donovan" by Brian Reitzell from Watch Dogs.

(“Watch Dogs” by BRIAN REITZELL)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net or polygon.com for more information about “Watch Dogs” and Brian Reitzell, including a link to buy the soundtrack.
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