

HARD BOILED MUSIC

The case of *L.A. Noire*

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Abstract

A lot can change in six decades. *L.A. Noire* (Rockstar Games, 2011), a video game developed primarily by Sydney development studio Team Bondi, is set in Los Angeles in 1947. The game is ostensibly an interactive *film noir*, or at least a tribute to the *noir* aesthetic. But the style signified by the term *film noir* has developed over time, perhaps as much as the city of Los Angeles itself, and *L.A. Noire*'s "noire" is noticeably different to the style at its 1940s inception. To a player familiar with classic *noir* the promise of becoming a modern-day Marlowe is on shaky ground. Comparing *L.A. Noire* to notable examples from film, television and literature, this article discusses the game's explicit attempt to be an authentic *jeu noir* and its musical accompaniment to crime and justice in 1940s Los Angeles. By exploring the origins of the game's musical aesthetic, this article determines *L.A. Noire*'s relationship with the *noir* tradition. Although the game's strong links to period *noir* film are unsurprising, *L.A. Noire*'s nexus of period style and open-form gameplay connects the player to *film noir*'s earliest influences, allowing exploration of both a constructed history and the notion of 'noir' itself. Accordingly, *L.A. Noire* should be considered as a progression, rather than a derivation, of the *noir* tradition.

Keywords

Video game, film noir, period, hard-boiled detective fiction, jazz

Introduction: A (nominal) claim to authenticity

Film noir is among the most iconic of film styles. Its shadowed scenes, hardened detectives and *femmes fatales* have had a widely recognised influence on myriad cinematic and cultural productions through the latter half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st. Its influence spans both genres and media, with *noir* traits evident in films, books and art of many kinds. And unsurprisingly, the *noir* influence is now observable in new media such as video games.

L.A. Noire is a video game developed by Sydney development studio Team Bondi and published by Rockstar Games in 2011. It's not hard to see that *L.A. Noire* is trying to be *noir*—the most obvious clue is, of course, its name. The grammatically incorrect extra "e" in "Noire" is a bit of a mystery—it is reportedly the fault of a programmer's typo (Plunkett, 2010: online)—but the inclusion of the word in the game's title tells us a lot about the developer's intent. We can infer that the *noir* style was an important objective in the development of this game, possibly even one of the most important. But an academic approach to *L.A. Noire* is not necessarily so straightforward. Naming a game "Noire" implies an attempt at *noir* authenticity, but *noir* authenticity requires more than simply stylistic appropriations. Determining

whether *L.A. Noire* is *noir* requires an analysis of the game's ancestry, a reckoning of where the game sits on the twisted and complex *noir* family tree.

The task is made easier by the relationship between jazz and *noir*. This relationship is also not straightforward, but it is more extensively documented, and (as shall be shown below) each phase of (classic) *noir* is marked by a particular relationship to jazz. Accordingly, this article will determine *L.A. Noire*'s place in the *noir* tradition by comparing elements of its score to the music of the main periods of film and television *noir*, thus developing a musical ancestry for the game. A brief history of the relationship between *noir* and jazz will explore classic *noir*, television *noir* (*Peter Gunn* [Blake Edwards, 1958–61]), and period *noir* (*L.A. Confidential* [Curtis Hanson, 1997]), against which two examples of music from *L.A. Noire* will be analysed. The article will then conclude by considering *L.A. Noire*'s links to hard-boiled detective fiction, a precursor to *film noir*.

The origins of *noir*

The classic phase of *film noir* is agreed by consensus to span a period of cinema from *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), directed by John Huston and based on the novel of the same name by Dashiell Hammett, and *Touch of Evil* (1958) directed by Orson Welles (Silver, 1996: 11). The term *film noir* literally means 'black cinema' or 'dark cinema', a reference to the dark styles and themes employed therein, and was coined by Nino Frank soon after the reintroduction of American film into French cinemas following the second World War (Borde and Chaumeton, 1955: 17). Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton—authors of *Panorama du Film Noir Americaine* (1955), the first book to be written about *film noir*—defined *film noir* loosely, concluding:

The moral ambivalence, the criminality, the complex contradictions in motives and events, all conspire to make the viewer co-experience the anguish and insecurity which are the true emotions of contemporary film noir. All the films of this cycle create a similar emotional effect: that state of tension instilled in the spectator when the psychological reference points are removed. The aim of film noir was to create a specific alienation. (ibid: 25)

Note two things: firstly, Borde and Chaumeton here refer to *film noir* as a cycle rather than a genre (at other points they describe it as a series to the same effect). From the beginning of the phenomenon it was clear that *noir* films could be found in almost any genre; Raymond Durnat adds that *film noir* classification is a function of "motif and tone" before briefly listing *noir* films from a broad range of genres (Durnat, 1970: 38). Secondly, Borde and Chaumeton's definition of *noir* discusses emotion rather than style. To a 21st century viewer the term *film noir* bears mostly stylistic connotations—stark black and white images, silhouettes of venetian blinds in private detectives' offices, figures in trench coats committing crimes in dark alleys, and sultry saxophone melodies accompanying a gritty narration or a *femme fatale* in a (presumably) red dress. Indeed, it may be surprising to today's viewers that a classic *film noir* might exhibit few, if any, of these tropes. The history of how a pan-generic and emotionally defined cycle became a stylistic genre in the public consciousness, though interesting, will not be addressed fully here; however, the history of *noir*'s metamorphoses will inform this article's discussion of *noir* music at various points. More directly useful to a study of the thematic and stylistic origins of the game in question is the history of the relationship between *noir* and jazz.

Jazz and classic *film noir*

Richard Ness argues that the musical scores of classic *films noir* worked alongside the other filmic elements to create a “sense of displacement” mirroring American post-Depression, post-War realism (Ness, 2008: 52). He states that “the feeling of uncertainty created by the Depression in the 1930s was contradicted by Hollywood’s reinforcement of images (and sounds) of stability and prosperity,” before explaining that the dissonant elements of *noir* scores, together with the darkening of style and tone, enable Hollywood to begin reflecting contemporary collective thought (ibid: 55-6). Ness discusses a dissonance in *noir* scores that might be considered twofold—a musical dissonance according to the generally understood definition, together with increased use of atonality; and a conceptual dissonance, the result of innovative (often sparse) instrumentation and a dramatic reduction in the lengths of scores (and, consequently, an increase in the amount of musical silence). In the terms of Borde and Chaumeton above, the optimism of the late 19th and early 20th century had been replaced in *film noir* by “alienation”, achieved in part by scores that removed film viewer’s musical “reference points”.

Jazz, meanwhile, was far less commonly used in the non-diegetic music of classic *films noir* than a modern viewer might expect. Jazz was rarely heard in *noir* film scores in the 1940s, and though it became more common in the 1950s it was predominantly cast in a negative light. David Butler argues that, “although jazz and the ‘jazz life’ made for a potentially strong noir theme, the conventions of 1940s film noir still prevented jazz from being portrayed positively” (2002: 61). In the 1950s “the respectability being accorded to jazz that encouraged its use in film music was seldom reflected by the films themselves,” wherein jazz “was predominantly used to underscore the film noir or films that involved crime and immorality” (ibid: 95). Butler, Ness (2008), Wierzbicki (2009) and Coady (2012), among others, explore in detail the factors that contributed to the increased use of jazz in the 1950s, and that therefore set the stage for its dramatically increased use in the 1960s. Consequently, the common conception of *film noir* as a jazz-saturated film style often far surpasses the fact of the matter; indeed, an incredulous Butler points out that even film critics are liable to fall into this error (2002: 154-5).

The jazz association

However, *noir* and jazz do have an extant association; it is simply that the association was constructed somewhat later than the classic period of *film noir*. Butler credits Henry Mancini’s scoring of the television series *Peter Gunn* (Blake Edwards, 1958-61) with both making jazz acceptable to Hollywood and associating jazz with, “the noir world of private detectives, criminals and femmes fatale” (Butler, 2002: 152). Mancini’s use of a light and accessible style of jazz, together with the ensuing popularity of this style and its use in other police/detective shows of that time, led to this style of jazz being retrospectively termed ‘crime jazz’. Butler suggests this association between crime and jazz (in *Peter Gunn*, and also in other crime and/or action themed films and shows of the 1960s) was an early ingredient in the conceptual link between jazz and the crime-soaked *film noir* (ibid: 149-51).

The first episode of *Peter Gunn* provides an illustration of how the jazz/*noir* association would play out. The opening scene shows the assassination of a crime

boss accompanied by a typical example of crime jazz⁷: a walking bass line and a snare and cymbal dominated percussion rhythm provide a sense of movement, while horn, saxophone and piano melodies provide dramatic emphasis. The title theme has, through its popularity and its subsequent use in other films and television shows (perhaps most notably *The Blues Brothers* [John Landis, 1980]), outgrown the show itself; it features a similar walking bass, percussion and melody construction to the opening scene. In the funeral scene following, a sensuous melody on saxophones, echoed by a twangy electric guitar, accompanies the protagonist/narrator's eulogy of the dead crime lord. The music depicts the intertwined romance and alienation of the crime-centred diegetic world, over which the narrator sits all seeing (the viewer learns that the narrator is Peter Gunn himself, played by Craig Stevens). The following scene in Mother's nightclub shows diegetic uses of jazz, but casts these in a positive light through the positive relationship between the setting and the protagonist. Initially, the band plays a groovy tune accompanying Peter Gunn's conversation with Mother, with whom he appears friendly. Then, accompanied by a jazz number featuring a 'jungle' rhythm, the singer (Edie Hart, played by Lola Albright) sings her sensual song to the room (though her gaze suggests she is singing primarily to Peter Gunn).

The music of *Peter Gunn* was modern and innovative at the time of first screening. Butler discusses Mancini's innovations in scoring the show, including instrumentation employing a relatively small (in relation to a film orchestra) jazz band, but most significantly that the show featured an original score at all (Butler, 2002: 148-9). Having been hired to compose original music for the show, it is unsurprising that Mancini should create music in an archly contemporary style. Not only did Mancini believe contemporary music the most apt for the task (ibid: 143), but the Hollywood film scoring tradition was familiar with the incorporation of the modern into the 'classical'. As Wierzbicki summarises:

Since the start of the nickelodeon period film music had "played" not just to the narrative needs of the on-screen picture but also to the aesthetic needs, and expectations, of its audiences.... Exceptions notwithstanding, thanks to Hollywood's overwhelming screen dominance even the least educated persons in the smallest cities throughout the world came to regard "Hollywood music" as the norm. This norm readily incorporated modernist devices, especially in films whose plots involved science-fiction and psychological deviance, yet its expressive essence remained firmly rooted in the symphonic and operatic literature of the late nineteenth century. Instead of seeming old-fashioned, however, "Hollywood music" for most moviegoers in the 1940s and '50s was very much music of the times. (Wierzbicki, 2009: 195-6)

The new medium of television provided a chance for a film music composer like Mancini, who was already favourably disposed towards the contemporary, to put aside the 'classical' and concern himself only with the modern.

By the 1970s, however, the world of classic *noir* had been relegated to the past. Notably, the *noir* tradition itself began to diverge at this time. It is possible to distinguish between a collection of neo-*noir* films and television shows that invoked the *noir* sensibility outside the classic setting (in diverse ranges of genres, time periods and themes), and a concurrently produced collection of period *noir* films

⁷ See liner notes of Rhino Records compilation *Crime Jazz: Music in the First Degree* (J. Botticelli, 1997), quoted in Butler (2002: 149).

and television shows that sought to recreate classic *noir* in sensibility, setting and often story. The former may include such films as *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976), *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) and *Reservoir Dogs* (Quentin Tarantino, 1993), together with television shows like *Miami Vice* (Anthony Yerkovich, 1984-89); the latter includes both period remakes of classic *noir* stories like *Farewell, My Lovely* (Dick Richards, 1975) and *Detour* (Wade Williams, 1992), and original period pieces like *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1975) and *L.A. Confidential* (Curtis Hanson, 1997). While these categories are necessarily broad, and examples exist that span both categories (for instance, *The Big Sleep* [Michael Winner, 1978]), they illustrate the existence of two distinct sub-traditions of *noir*. Todd Erickson refers to a “transitional/nostalgic period” of “period *noir*” remakes in the late 1960s and 1970s, concurrently with which modern *noir* films were starting to emerge (1996: 311-12). However, as Erickson’s own further analysis alludes to—listing *noir* remakes through the 1980s and 1990s, and foreseeing future *noir* remakes (ibid: 324)—and as examples from both sub-traditions have been made in recent times (for example, *Sin City* [Frank Miller et al., 2005] and *No Country for Old Men* [Ethan Coen and Joel Coen, 2007]; *L.A. Confidential* and *Gangster Squad* [Ruben Fleischer, 2013]); “period *noir*” resists classification as a “transitional” phase in the evolution of *noir*. A comprehensive treatment of the evolution of *noir* should treat period *noir* and neo-*noir* as separate (though of course related), both derived from classic *noir* but in different ways and with different ends. A full treatment of this divergence is beyond the scope of this article, but it should be noted that the translation of both period *noir* and neo-*noir* into the video game medium indicates that creators of non-filmic media regard period *noir* and neo-*noir* as distinct sources of filmic inspiration.⁸

In period *noir*, both *noir* and its crime jazz accompaniment are nostalgic recreations of the 1940s and 1950s. At first, as in *Chinatown*, the time of the *noir* cycle was a recent memory recalled with a slight tinge of nostalgia. By the 1980s and 1990s, however, memory and the nostalgia were thoroughly mixed. Butler states that “jazz may have become associated with film noir simply by being contemporaneous” (2002: 155); he then uses Michel Chion’s term “retrospective illusion” to explain the mechanism of the association’s construction (ibid: 156 ff). Over time, memories of *noir* and of contemporaneous jazz have become blended in the public consciousness, so much so that even “contemporary filmmakers and critics of film noir have often assumed that jazz was indeed the actual soundtrack to classic noir” (ibid: 155). Butler further explains that the association is bilateral, and that “the retrospective use of jazz has become one of the main purposes for the music being employed in contemporary films... to create the feeling of the past” (ibid: 166). The retrospective illusion of *film noir* imbues the style with ever-present jazz soundtracks. Thus, just as jazz is expected in classic *noir*, jazz is employed in period *noir*.

Period *noir* and the memory of crime jazz

L.A. Confidential (1997) is a period *noir* film directed by Curtis Hanson, adapted from the novel of the same name by James Ellroy (1990). It is set in 1953 in Los Angeles, and follows the activities and investigations of three police detectives investigating a string of murders. The film exhibits noiric influences in its period setting, style and narrative, and its three main characters exhibit tropes derived

⁸ Examples of video game period *noir* include *L.A. Noire* and *Face Noir* (Mad Orange, 2013); examples of video game neo-*noir* include *Grim Fandango* (LucasArts, 1998), the *Max Payne* series (Remedy Entertainment, 2001-03; Rockstar Studios, 2012) and *The Wolf Among Us* (Telltale Games, 2013). Neither list is exhaustive.

from the (anti)heroes of *noir*. In her comparative study of *L.A. Confidential* and Carl Franklin's *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1995), Elana Shefrin notes that both Hanson and Franklin "dedicated prodigious amounts of time and energy toward visually, aurally, and kinesthetically reconstructing their personal versions of an authentic production locale [and] focused more on recapturing rather than on re-imagining the sights and sounds of that era," although she believes neither would claim to have made an entirely authentic recreation (Shefrin, 2005: 173). Shefrin is informed by an interview between Hanson and Amy Taubin, in which Hanson describes at some length his efforts to construct a film that used period elements but told its story in a modern way. Hanson states:

my number one directive... was 'Let's create this world of LA. Confidential, and let's give great attention to the detail of the period, but then let's put it all in the background and let's shoot it as if it were a contemporary movie. So that the audience forgets that they're watching a period movie and what they're aware of are the characters and the emotions.' The one thing that I wanted to avoid was telling the story through the lens of nostalgia. Because one of the reasons for making a picture set in Los Angeles in 1953 is that so many of the things that were starting in that era of economic boom and postwar optimism are still very much with us today, for better or worse. (Taubin, 1997: online)

Of the film's relationship to the *noir* tradition, Hanson says in the same interview:

*it's multi-character, the characters are ambiguous at best, it's period and it's related to film noir, the very reasons why I wanted to make it. I didn't look on it as a homage to the world of Raymond Chandler, or to *The Big Sleep*, *Chinatown* - movies I love, but didn't want to do. I wanted this to be a movie set in the forwardlooking, splashy 50s. That's why it's *LA. Confidential* - *Confidential Magazine*, lurid and fun. Funny even, yet dark. It's noir in the broadest sense, meaning the darkness under the bright. (ibid: online)*

Ostensibly, Hanson was attempting to create a period film that was "related to film noir," rather than a period noir *per se*.

And yet, *L.A. Confidential* is regarded as a *noir* film (Ebert, 2008: online) and presented as a historically sensitive film alongside other neo-*noir* films (Arthur, 1998: 41-42), indicating that the film may have ended up more *noir* than Hanson intended. Its modern storytelling nevertheless tells a period story, with noiric themes and the incorporation of numerous historical details and characters (attributable, in large part, to Ellroy's novel from which the story is derived). Paul Arthur suggests that the film draws from the *noir* tradition with more integrity than other films of its time, pointing out that the film "is dead serious about its historical backdrop, its relation to the generic lineage of *noir* storytelling but also to the social-political climate in which the [*noir*] series flourished and expired" (Arthur, 1998: 41). Additionally, the hybrid myths in the film both conform to, and contribute to, the retrospective illusion of *film noir*. Shefrin uses the term "hybrid myth" to describe a perspective-biased use of history or tradition in order to tell a fictional story, particularly referring to an element or a group of elements within the story (Shefrin, 2005: 172). Her study of *L.A. Confidential* demonstrates the hybrid myths in the characters and the setting of the film and suggests that its selective use of *noir* contributes to these. A relationship may be traced between the 'hybrid myth' and the 'retrospective illusion': the former is similar in effect to the latter but is

created intentionally, while the latter undoubtedly shapes both the creation and reception of the former. *L.A. Confidential* has been received as a *film noir* both modern and period and shows modern/period hybridisations in myriad elements, from its visual style to its story to its soundtrack.

L.A. Confidential features both contemporary 1950s popular music and a jazz-infused original score by Jerry Goldsmith. Reviewers Todd McCarthy (1997: online), John Wrathall (1997: 45-6) and Peter Travers (1997: 59) likened Goldsmith's score for *L.A. Confidential* to his score for *Chinatown*. As a veteran Hollywood composer and Los Angeles native, Goldsmith would have been familiar with both modern *noir* and the historic L.A. to which Hanson aspired. The score makes frequent use of solitary trumpet melodies that hint at a *noiric* alienation (which, although diluted relative to classic *noir* alienation, has myriad loci in the film). These trumpet parts are set over dark orchestral and piano accompaniments, which are responsible for inducing dramatic tension. The piano, in particular, frequently plays loud single-note staccato melodies synchronised with timpani and snare drums, imbuing both tension and an air of military precision reminiscent of the post-war Los Angeles police force ethos. The score employs both jazz elements and orchestral elements, constructing a hybrid myth of the scoring of *noir* by invoking both retrospective illusions of jazz and the conventional sound of what Wierzbicki above termed "Hollywood music." Used in a period setting, and in conjunction with contemporary 1950s popular music, the score actively draws upon retrospective illusions of both the 1950s and the *film noir* style, while its modern and conventional aspects allow it to appeal to its 1990s audience without interpretation. As such, it reinforces the retrospective illusion that *film noir* was a jazz-infused filmic style. It serves to a viewer what they would expect from a period *film noir*, yet remains a familiar viewing experience.

On the case of *L.A. Noire*

The quest for the 'familiar' is presumably one of the primary motivations for implementing filmic qualities in a video game. Computer programs (of which video games are a subset) have no intrinsically filmic qualities—they are, at the base level, binary-encoded sets of mathematical instructions that allow electronic machines to be used as human-operated tools. Thus, any filmic elements in a video game (and, for that matter, any aesthetic elements in any computer program) are ultimately deliberate, creative inclusions. That is not to say that the implementation is made without utilitarian considerations; the use of filmic elements in a video game may create a familiar atmosphere for viewers of films, thereby helping to breaking down technological or psychological barriers that would otherwise prevent their use of computer programs.

With this in mind, the developers of *L.A. Noire* could be considered to have hit 'a hole in one', as the game is liable to give an *L.A. Confidential* viewer a heady sense of *déjà vu*. The two texts are remarkably similar throughout—in style, in setting, in music, and to some extent in narrative and character development. The (uncommonly linear) narrative follows the career trajectory of a straight-laced policeman named Cole Phelps as he progresses from beat cop to detective and through various detective bureaus. The protagonist gradually becomes more jaded over the game's progression, though he could never be described as hard-boiled. The game's arching narrative centres on an army-surplus morphine racket run by some of Phelps' former Marine comrades. Phelps falls for a dame, is betrayed by his partner and demoted, but he maintains a private investigation of the racket, only to

be forced underground. The player's own investigation of the racket continues through another of Phelps' Marine comrades—an investigator named Jack Kelso, who sets aside his differences with Phelps and turns private in order to help investigate the case, and who exhibits a more hard-boiled personality than Phelps. The personality types and the themes of redemption explored in the duo of Phelps and Kelso appear similar to the depiction of the trio of Exley, White and Vincennes in *L.A. Confidential*. Phelps, in particular, appears to be a hybrid myth of the *film noir* protagonist, undergoing an incomplete progression from socially conservative to hard-boiled and morally fluid, before being finally and irrevocably redeemed (with his redemption serving as a vindication of his initial social conservatism).

Similar hybrid myths may be found in the game's portrayal of Los Angeles itself. The visual elements of video games are often a significant hurdle to game developers aiming for filmic realism, as the realism of computer-generated imagery is limited technologically. While technological progression is allowing increasingly realistic video game graphics (indeed, the quest for visual realism in video games is a significant driving force behind computer graphics innovation), there is more to realism than visual authenticity. For instance, the developers of *L.A. Noire* have made up for the technological limitations on the visual realism of their depiction of Los Angeles by making their depiction exceptionally comprehensive. A comment from an official Rockstar Games account named "R* Y" on a Rockstar Games online press release indicates that the game world spans eight square miles⁹. Brendan McNamara, founder of Team Bondi, indicated that "the first year and a half... was just research" into 1940s Los Angeles, involving "newspaper research, guys going over to LA and doing research on the buildings, taking photos, getting all the resources together" to ensure that the depiction was as comprehensive a period replication of Los Angeles as possible (Hurley, 2012: online). Although the game's linear gameplay prevents it from being classed as a 'sandbox' game (Kauz, 2011: online), the player is afforded a large degree of freedom of navigation (that may be surrendered to the character's partner, if impatient); the player experiences, by consequence, realism in the form of architectural, geographical, automotive and fashion authenticity, and the period representation as a hybrid myth of authenticities and verisimilitudes. Additionally, if the player chooses to engage the game's optional black-and-white graphics mode, chromatic authenticity can be traded for an additional *noiric* verisimilitude that the player may believe gives a 'more authentic' *noir* experience.

L.A. Noire's music both accompanies and fortifies the hybrid myths presented in the game's visual and narrative elements. It is both the product of the retrospective illusion of traditional *noir* scores and uncannily familiar to an *L.A. Confidential* viewer. The game's score was composed by Andrew Hale, keyboardist of the band Sade, together with his brother Simon Hale, and was recorded at Abbey Road Studios (Smyth, 2011: online). After an introductory melodic section on piano, vibraphone and strings, the title theme features a solitary trumpet melody underset by piano, strings, pizzicato double bass and brushed percussion, with a saxophone providing occasional harmonies. It then develops through four improvisational solos—one each on vibraphone, saxophone, trumpet and piano—before recapitulating the initial solitary trumpet section. The title theme accompanies a looped black-and-white animation¹⁰ of Cole Phelps searching for clues in a dark,

⁹ See comments section below article: R*S (2011, <http://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/14121/the-gaming-press-goes-handson-with-la-noire.html>), accessed 10 Nov 2013)

¹⁰ This animation is displayed in black-and-white regardless of whether the player has engaged the game's optional black-and-white graphics mode, though engaging this mode does alter the contrast of the graphics.

rain-drenched alley. Phelps himself is situated at a distance from the player's point of view and just in front of his car, while the car's headlights cast Cole's long silhouette down the alley and against the wall (his larger-than-life shadow at times overlapping the game's main menu, which itself is designed to appear as shadows on the wall). Notably, the 9 minutes 30 seconds duration of the theme eclipses the length of the looped animation (several iterations of which may be viewed while listening to the complete theme) – which is the length of time an average player may arguably be expected to interact with a video game's main menu – and the length of the version of the theme found on the Official Soundtrack record (of 3 minutes 5 seconds duration)¹¹. This suggests the importance of this theme in cementing the *noiric* aspirations of the game in the player's consciousness. Although the title animation in itself provides evidence that the game derives inspiration from *noir*, some game elements may cast doubts upon the game's apparent (and nominal) claim to *noir* authenticity (such as the exceedingly straight-laced Cole Phelps character the player must initially control). The more the player encounters the jazz title theme in association with its archly *noir* visual setting, the more the player's retrospective illusions of jazz-soaked *noir* reinforce *L.A. Noire's* claim to authenticity. The lengthy and increasingly elaborate title theme may serve as an enticement for the player to linger, increasing the effectiveness of the reinforcement.

It is perhaps apt that a *noir*-aspiring game should have a notable title theme, but the music accompanying gameplay demonstrates yet more of the game's filmic influences. The gameplay score employs jazz elements similar to those in the title theme combined with orchestration and arrangement that invoke a 'Hollywood music' aesthetic, similar to the score of *L.A. Confidential* as discussed above. A number of melodic figures are prominently developed throughout the score, two of which shall be examined in detail here. The first, a melody derived from the principal trumpet melody of the title theme, shall be referred to as 'melody A' henceforth; the second melody shall be referred to as 'melody B'. Melody A steps from the tonic to a minor third, before a minor sixth appoggiatura is resolved to the fifth. A repeat of the figure then resolves the minor sixth appoggiatura up to a minor seventh. Melody B steps from the fifth up to the second, followed by a run from a major seventh through the tonic to the same second; this figure is then modulated up a fourth. Melody A voices a *noiric* alienation through the echoed memory of the solitary trumpet melody of the main theme, an ambiguous tonality, and the downward resolution of the minor sixth (with this effect still achieved on the second resolution by memory of the first). Melody B increases dramatic tension through an upward melodic shape, the upward modulation and a major seventh set in a minor tonality. Tracks based on melody A are used in the beginning stages of investigations, while tracks based on melody B are used during stages of heightening dramatic intensity. These melodies are developed throughout the score, and as such they help bind together the musical experience of the game. But two particular settings of these melodies bind the musical experience of the game to the musical experience of earlier *noir* films.

The first is a setting of melody A in a track named 'New Beginning, Pt. 1' on the Official Soundtrack.¹² In game, this track may accompany the player's driving navigation early in an investigation. Preceding the implementation of melody A,

¹¹ *L.A. Noire (Official Soundtrack)* released by Rockstar Games on 17 May 2011 on the iTunes Store

¹² Since the names of score tracks cannot be found in-game, names of matching tracks from the Official Soundtrack are used where possible. However, it must be noted that the Official Soundtrack versions may differ slightly from the in-game versions, i.e. when incorporating endings and other elements not included in-game due to the requirement to loop tracks during gameplay.

'New Beginning, Pt. 1' begins with a chord played on horns that repeats at a gradually increasing pace and volume. At the climax of the rhythmic acceleration the horns are joined by a rolling snare drum before resolving to a higher chord, followed by a deep bowed-bass ostinato. This figure is repeated beneath melody A when it begins to be played on high strings, and is sometimes interjected by militaristic hits on snare drums between repeats. This track, and particularly its accelerating-climaxing rhythm, is reminiscent of the introductory scenes of *Taxi Driver*, wherein Travis Bickle's isolation is made explicit (Butler, 2002: 157-9). The militaristic use of snare drums also echoes similar snare drum use in *L.A. Confidential*, where it was used to invoke the post-war police ethos (a theme which also runs through *L.A. Noire*).

During a case within the game called "The Naked City"—a downloadable content (DLC) case which is based on its namesake film (Jules Dassin, 1948) (R*Q, 2011: online) - I observed 'New Beginning, Pt. 1' played during the initial drive of the investigation. The player character (Cole Phelps) had just been briefed on the case, the murder of a young fashion model. The drive takes place directly following the briefing, its destination being the crime scene. During the drive, Phelps and his partner (a crooked cop named Roy Earle) discuss the case; Earle is annoyed to be assigned to the murder of "some hump", while Phelps considers the case worthwhile because the victim is "someone's little girl," her humanity all the motivation he needs.¹³ This investigation, like all in *L.A. Noire*, begins in daylight at a police station. In this context, 'New Beginning, Pt. 1' signifies the police ethos forming the subtext to Phelps' recent briefing, and may reinforce a *noir* sensibility weakened by driving through the city during a sunny Californian day (which, whether in full colour or black-and-white, can hardly be described as 'dark'). The lonely melody may also signify the character's alienation as a morally upright crime fighter in a crime-darkened world, playing on the tensions between the moralistic Phelps, his crooked partner, and the crime he is travelling to investigate. The use of strings for this melody, however, creates an aesthetic that is more filmic than specifically noiric; the music evokes, rather than invokes, *noir*.

The second is a setting of melody B in a track named 'Redemption, Pt. 2' on the Official Soundtrack. In game, this track may accompany the player's driving navigation during a plot-thickening point in the narrative. Preceding the implementation of melody B, 'Redemption, Pt. 2' begins with a series of jarring, syncopated staccato chords played on strings. The main chords are open augmented seventh chords; these are played sparsely, or clustered with an open octave and an open ninth to give the impression of a melodic three-note run in the top note between the seventh and the second or back again. The chords are accompanied by occasional raps on a hand-played drum. After eight bars the chords are repeated with the addition of the twelfth, which takes a prominent role above the original chord. After a further eight bars, melody B begins to be played on horns, below which the staccato chords continue. In a second and louder iteration, melody B is also played one octave higher on bright trumpets. Low horns forcefully ground this iteration on the tonic (and the fourth during the modulations). More aggressive strings initially continue the staccato figures (albeit with rhythm-evening additional notes in the low strings) but then fall in step with the trumpet and horn melody. The strings then develop into a rising, legato series of long notes before the track concludes with a dramatic avoidance of the tonic. 'Redemption, Pt. 2' develops considerably in volume, complexity and instrumentation over its duration, each section larger and louder than the last, but finishes unresolved. In contrast to 'New

¹³ Quotes taken from in-game dialogue.

Beginning, Pt. 1', this track is more overtly filmic and less jazz-infused, though it does feature some rhythmic syncopation, a hand-played drum and perhaps a jazz-inspired trumpet timbre. It is invocative of "Hollywood music" with a slight twist of jazz, in which it may be positively compared to Goldsmith's score for *L.A. Confidential* as discussed above.

At a later point in the investigation mentioned above, I observed 'Redemption, Pt. 2' played during a sunset drive between an interrogation of a suspect's fiancée and the suspect's apartment. Phelps had just learned that the suspect's fiancée was in possession of stolen jewellery, a gift from the suspect, and that the fiancée's mother had herself been the victim of theft. The purpose of driving to the suspect's apartment was to interrogate him about the thefts and about the murder at the centre of the case before he skips town. It is natural that the music played should then avoid resolution: the driving does not in itself provide the information needed to move the narrative forward substantially. However, the music plays to the drama of the situation, and in doing so may modify the player's reading of the currently setting sun from 'pretty' to 'ominous'. It may also help draw the player's attention away from the visual world and towards the narrative. A more conventional use of the "Hollywood music" sound, a sound familiar to the film viewing public, renders the music more easily interpreted and thus, arguably, more quickly effective in this action scene.

These examples illustrate certain aesthetic and functional similarities between the music of *L.A. Noire* and the period *noir* film *L.A. Confidential*, in the context of the more general observation that *L.A. Noire*'s music tends to invoke certain "Hollywood music" tropes in order to evoke *noir*. It would be straightforward, at this point, to categorise *L.A. Noire* as a text influenced by the period *noir* tradition; one could even go a little further and say that *L.A. Noire* exhibits certain traits of a period *noir* text itself. Its links to the broader *noir* tradition appear, at this point, to be mostly second-hand, derived from period *noir* and its evolution. However, a deeper relationship with *noir* does exist, and is discoverable by comparing *L.A. Noire* with one of *film noir*'s literary progenitors: hard-boiled detective fiction.

More than one road to authenticity

There are a vast number of *films noir* that are adaptations of hard-boiled detective fiction stories, and undoubtedly more that draw on the genre for inspiration. Two of the five films listed by Borde and Chaumeton as inspiring the first investigations of *film noir* were based on works of hard-boiled detective fiction, and of a third, the screenplay was co-written by hard-boiled novelist Raymond Chandler (Borde and Chaumeton, 1955: 17). Borde and Chaumeton go on to describe as "not haphazardly" the *noir* screenwriter's predilection for the private detective, a character already "midway between lawful society and the underworld" (ibid: 21). A worthwhile question to ask is whether, as a *noir*-inspired text, *L.A. Noire* also exhibits the traits of a hard-boiled detective fiction ancestry. Furthermore, if so, whether these traits arrive in *L.A. Noire* through the conduit of the game's period *noir* influences, or whether more direct comparisons may be drawn.

A comparison between video games and literature is not necessarily a straightforward endeavour. Short of the full treatment perhaps required of this subject, it is possible to draw enough evidence to proceed with this comparison from a recent pedagogical research study. Richard Burger and Julian McDougall (2013) studied groups of students together with their teachers as they taught and

analysed *L.A. Noire* in the context of literature classes at senior high school and undergraduate levels. The study aimed to investigate the concept of ‘literacy’ in video games and what it means to ‘read’ these texts (Berger and McDougall, 2013: 142); it observed “the limitations of subject English in the ‘semi-permeable’ spaces between its teachers and students,” noting that the expertise of both the teachers (in analysing literary texts) and the students (in playing and understanding video games) was required in order to critically analyse the gameplay text (ibid: 148-9). Of particular note for the purposes of this article, the study found that “some students do not see marked boundaries between novels and games (with cinema often acting as a mediator between the two)” (ibid: 145) and that “for the students at least... *L.A. Noire* does function as a (digitally transformed) novel, in relation to other texts, across a flattened hierarchy” (ibid: 148). That is, although the teachers studied appeared to establish a clear separation between textual media before conducting critical comparisons, the students required no such division:

It is clear that student responses to questions about the ‘status’ of L. A. Noire as a novel were more consensual than their teachers — moving away from the simple affirmative to a shared dismantling of the premise of the question.... The students who took part in our study seemed to be comfortable with this ‘flattened’ hierarchy between the novel, cinema and games. However, some of their teachers were more reluctant, retreating to and rehearsing value-laden discourses of fidelity and verisimilitude. (ibid: 148)

Berger and McDougall chose *L.A. Noire* for their study on account of its appropriations of *noir*, which in turn was influenced by hard-boiled detective fiction (ibid: 142). Among video games, this is perhaps one of the more ostensible links between a game and a body of literature. However, Berger and McDougall do state that their study is predicated on:

*the premise that cinema contains the utterance of literature, in much the same way as the modern novel now clearly contains the utterance of cinema. Therefore, *L.A. Noire* must frame both these utterances, and in time, both literature and cinema will frame the utterance of the videogame. (ibid: 145)*

To find a link between a video game and a body of literature, therefore, does not explicitly require the mediation of cinema (although this may frequently occur); that the two media exist in the same cultural milieu is justification enough to search for a link. Student responses in the Berger and McDougall study suggest that an expertise in video gameplay tends to inculcate such a “flattened hierarchy” approach; furthermore, some of the initial journalistic responses to *L.A. Noire* observed that the game exhibited certain novelic traits distinguishable from its obvious noiric ambitions (e.g. Kylo, 2011: online). Thus, although the relationship between video games and literature remains a potential avenue for future study, it is clear that there is a present, functional understanding that *L.A. Noire* may be read, in some manner at least, as literature.

What this means for the current study of *L.A. Noire*’s music may, at this point, be rather obfuscate. I would argue, however, that in light of the ability to read a video game as a literary text, the musicality of the act of gameplay—specifically, its rhythm—becomes comparable with that of hard-boiled detective fiction. Kirk Hamilton writes that “rhythm is an ephemeral yet vital quality in a game, and without it, even the most ambitious and beautifully drawn ideas fall flat” (Hamilton,

2011: online). Hamilton's theory is that the best video games exhibit a "rhythm of play" that synchronises the game's elements and the player's actions, what he calls "a kinesthetic dance of feedback and response." Elsewhere, Hamilton likens story and gameplay to music and lyrics, explaining that the most powerful gameplay experiences happen "when gameplay and story work in harmony" (Hamilton, 2012: online). In other words, a player will be most drawn into a video game when the rhythm of gameplay and the rhythm of narrative are synchronised—that is, when the actions performed by the player have appropriately proportioned aesthetic and narrative-progressing effects, and conversely, when aesthetic changes and narrative progressions have proportionate effects on the player's actions. Tia DeNora's (2000) discussion of "musical entrainment" frames this concept within a discussion about "human-music interaction"; more broadly, DeNora states that "Entrainment may involve regularizing and/or modifying physiological states, behaviour, the temporal parameters of mood and feeling, and social role and action style," and that music, along with "other temporally organized environmental media," may "afford or provide resources for particular kinds of bodies and bodily states, states that are regularized and reproduced over time" (DeNora, 2000: 79). Hamilton's "rhythm of play" may be considered an "entrainment" that affords the player certain bodily states (actions and reactions) that align productively with the visual, aural and narrative elements of the game. This entrainment is in two ways musical: firstly, the video game's score plays a part in the game's overall entrainment; secondly, the entrainment results in the player engaging in a rhythmic experience, taking part in the aforementioned "kinesthetic dance" upon which hinges the interactive, narrative and emotive efficacy of the text. This may be demonstrated through comparisons of the settings of melodies A and B above with text excerpts from the novels *The Thin Man* (1934) by Dashiell Hammett and *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940) by Raymond Chandler respectively.

Consider first this excerpt from *The Thin Man* by Dashiell Hammett:

'Her old man's crazy: she thinks she is.'
'How do you know?'
'You asked me. I'm telling you.'
'You mean you're guessing?'
'I mean that's what's wrong with her; I don't know whether Wynant's actually nuts and I don't know whether she inherited any of it if he is, but she thinks both answers are yes, and it's got her doing figure eights.'
When we stopped in front of the Courtland she said: 'That's horrible, Nick. Somebody ought to—'
I said I didn't know: maybe Dorothy was right. 'Likely as not she's making doll clothes for Asta right now.' (Hammett, [1934] 2013: 44-45)

In this text, former private detective Nick Charles and his wife Nora are riding in a taxi through New York. Very little information is given about the setting of the scene, other than the novel's New York setting, the fact that the conversation takes place in a taxi (explicitly mentioned at the start of the chapter), that the ride lasts at least a few blocks, and that they stop at a building called the Courtland. The focus of the text is the conversation between Nick and Nora. As Carl Malmgren illustrates, hard-boiled detective fiction presents a "decentered world" stripped of values (Malmgren, 1997: 123); in this world, the detective and his actions are of more interest than the world itself (ibid: 126). Raymond Chandler writes that the detective story should be about "an effect of movement, intrigue, cross-purposes and the gradual elucidation of character" (Chandler, [1950]: online). Now, recall the setting of melody A in the track 'New Beginning, Pt. 1' in *L.A. Noire*. During this

drive, the player's character (Phelps) discusses the case with his partner (Earle) immediately following their initial briefing. This discussion does not, in itself, move the narrative forward, but instead reveals what the two characters 'think' of aspects of the narrative. This may be situated within a longer term "gradual elucidation of character" in which the player observes the moralistic Phelps' fall from grace and eventual redemption, and Earle's complicity in corruption and role in Phelps' undoing. Thus, the player must listen to this dialogue in order to understand the nuances of the narrative, and so to play the game well. 'New Beginning, Pt. 1' is accordingly low-key and relatively subdued. It avoids taking focus from the dialogue, allowing the dialogue primacy in affecting the entrainment of the player. The music can, however, alter the player's reception of the dialogue; among other possible effects, the noiric alienation signified in melody A may lead the player to more deeply associate with Phelps, who in this discussion appears to be a lonely champion for the dead victim. The overall effect is that the player is entrained to investigate the case, to play the part of the detective and the truth-seeker, to focus (in this instance) not on the elaborate recreation of Los Angeles surrounding the characters but on the character's location in the narrative trajectory, and to perform the actions required for the narrative to progress.

To examine the rhythm of play in the above setting of melody B, consider the following excerpt from *Farewell, My Lovely* by Raymond Chandler:

We went west, dropped over to Sunset and slid fast and noiseless along that. The Indian sat motionless beside the chauffeur. An occasional whiff of his personality drifted back to me. The driver looked as if he was half asleep but he passed the fast boys in the convertible sedans as though they were being towed. They turned on all the green lights for him. Some drivers are like that. He never missed one.

We curved through the bright mile or two of the Strip, past the antique shops with famous screen names on them, past the windows full of point lace and ancient pewter, past the gleaming new night clubs with famous chefs and equally famous gambling rooms, run by polished graduates of the Purple Gang, past the Georgian-Colonial vogue, now old hat, past the handsome modernistic buildings in which the Hollywood flesh-peddlers never stop talking money, past a drive in lunch which somehow didn't belong, even though the girls wore white silk blouses and drum majorettes' shakos and nothing below the hips but glazed kid Hessian boots. Past all this and down a wide smooth curve to the bridle path of Beverly Hills and lights to the south, all colours of the spectrum and crystal clear in an evening without fog, past the shadowed mansions up on the hills to the north, past Beverly Hills altogether and up into the twisting foothill boulevard and the sudden cool dusk and the drift of wind from the sea. (Chandler, [1940] 2009: 149-50)

This text focuses more prominently on the detective Philip Marlowe's actions than on his character. In this instance, as he is being driven along in silence and without the power to act, Marlowe relates his observations of the world passing by. The descriptions come thick and fast, a series of brief snapshots of Los Angeles. Aside from a few musings, Marlowe's descriptions never move out of the immediate present, and the reader's attention is entrained to follow Marlowe's. Compare this with the setting of melody B described above in the track 'Redemption, Pt. 2' in *L.A. Noire*. Having left the house of the suspect's fiancée, the player is here intended by the narrative to get quickly to the suspect's apartment in order to interrogate him

before he skips town. The game here seeks to entrain the player into a sense of haste. The sunset evident during the drive is a visual signification that the case is in its latter stages, but for much of the drive this is the only signifier of the narrative. After a brief initial continuation of the dialogue that had taken place at the fiancée's house, the majority of the drive progresses without discussion. This allows the player to concentrate on driving, with focus brought into the immediate present. 'Redemption, Pt. 2' is thus able to take a primary role in affecting the player's entrainment. The track's jarring staccato elements may entrain the player into more 'staccato' modes of action, perhaps rendered as a more reckless or speed-focussed driving style. Meanwhile, the track's penchant for the unresolved and its rise in volume and substance over time may, as mentioned previously, be read as an 'ominous' sign, and thus increase narrative drama. The player is entrained to drive quickly, because the case depends on it. Although entrainment with the overall trajectory of the game's narrative is maintained, the entrainment of the player's actions in the immediate present is the primary concern in this scene for the game and its music.

These examples illustrate that it is possible to compare certain aspects of *L.A. Noire* directly with hard-boiled detective fiction, a precursor to *film noir*. More specifically, the entrainment of the player of *L.A. Noire* mirrors the entrainment of the reader of detective fiction. The rhythm of the player's engagement with the game—which music influences both generally and directly—enables a deeper involvement with the fictional characters and actions, in a manner aesthetically and functionally similar to the hard-boiled writer's prose.

Conclusion

L.A. Noire exhibits, in its music as in other elements, clear links to the period *noir* tradition. Its music is informed by the long relationship between *film noir* and jazz, and the more recently formed fusion of jazz and "Hollywood music" found in recent period *noirs*. But to classify *L.A. Noire* as a period *noir* game risks prioritising the aesthetic qualities of the game too heavily, which is unacceptable when analysing any interactive text. The analysis of the gameplay and accompanying music of *L.A. Noire* in this article shows that the game's links to the *noir* tradition are more than superficial. A period *noir* film uses hybrid myths to employ retrospective illusions of classic *noir*, and in doing so reflexively constructs these illusions. *L.A. Noire* does this too, but it entrains the player in the process such that the gameplay experience is more akin to the activities of the hard-boiled narrator than to the viewing of a film. The player does not simply watch cases be solved, but is caught up in the investigation. The player does not simply listen to *L.A. Noire*'s score, but is entrained by it and, to some degree, enacts it along with the role of the detective. On this basis, *L.A. Noire* can be considered a *noir* text in its own right, a progression of the *noir* tradition rather than a derivation or digital adaptation of period *noir*. It was mentioned above that both period *noir* and neo-*noir* have been translated into the video game medium. Together with this article's investigation of *L.A. Noire*, this suggests the existence of *jeu noir*, a video game-based tradition of *noir* that is related to, but not strictly derivative of, filmic traditions of *noir*. And as the narrative power and efficacy of video games increase, further study of nascent game-based narrative traditions like *jeu noir* will be required, undoubtedly covering a broad range of genres, styles and influences.

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Frank Miller, Robert Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino (2005) *Sin City*
Roman Polanski (1975) *Chinatown*
Dick Richards (1975 – US release) *Farewell My Lovely*
Martin Scorsese (1976) *Taxi Driver*
Ridley Scott (1982) *Blade Runner*
Quentin Tarantino (1993) *Reservoir Dogs*
Orson Welles (1958) *Touch of Evil*
Wade Williams (1992) *Detour*
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Anthony Yerkovich (1984-89) *Miami Vice*

Ludography

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Mad Orange (2013) *Face Noir*
Remedy Entertainment (2001) *Max Payne*
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