There are several elements that are required to make a convincing and popular video game; high quality graphics, cinematic scenes, environmental music, and a convincing and well-developed narrative are all necessary components of a successful game. Nobuo Uematsu, an active game sound composer and the composer for many of the games in the Final Fantasy series, has commented on the role of music in games saying, “What we are looking to create is not the perfect musical composition but a superb video game as a whole.”

Scholars are now beginning to explore the fundamental role that music plays in the gaming experience. In her essay *Left in the Dark: Playing Computer Games with the Sound Turned Off*, Kristine Jørgensen discusses the psychological effects that music creates in the gaming experience: “…game music works to support the sense of space and presence in the game environment, or […] it helps the player progress through the game.” Jørgensen’s case study further explores the impact on player experience that results when the sound is turned off. She describes the gamers’ loss of connection with the suspended reality of the game environment, concluding, “On the other hand, the mood, sense of presence and the feeling of a lifelike world disappeared, and the games revealed themselves as nothing but animated graphics on a screen.” The music, then, is an essential aspect of the video game experience, reinforcing the players’ suspension of reality and their mental presence in the game world.

Although the role music plays in gaming experience is relatively consistent across genres, the creation of a convincing game world is most essential in role-playing games (RPGs), which typically emphasize narrative over other aspects of game play, such as fighting. Because RPGs require players to immerse themselves in an imaginary new world for an extended period of time, it is imperative that

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3 Ibid., 175.
the game world be convincing. In order to create a believable suspension of reality, game graphics, narrative, and sound must be united in presenting a coherent artistic ideal.

The designers of *Final Fantasy IX* were fully aware of the importance of creating a believable game world, and they undertook this goal with a unified artistic vision: the presentation of a nostalgic return to the early games of the series. “*Final Fantasy IX* was supposed to be the bridge between the old and the new. It was advertised as a pre-FFVII style of *Final Fantasy* – something that would please old-school gamers while still maintaining Square’s reputation as one of the chief blockbuster-makers in the industry.” Designers carefully balanced progressive technology and a more complex narrative with nostalgic elements from earlier games. One example is the favorite character model known as the black mage, who is given a rebirth in *Final Fantasy IX*, not merely as a nostalgic token, but as a deeply philosophical and human character. Other similar elements of nostalgia can be found in the design style, character models, game play interaction, and environmental music. As one critic observes, “Nearly every element of Final Fantasy IX seems designed to trigger a nostalgic response in series fans.”

As the composer for *Final Fantasy IX*, Uematsu was well aware of the intended nostalgic return, and he took steps to ensure the music would support this artistic ideal. One game critic remarks, “With the music, Nobuo Uematsu seems to be entering a renaissance of sorts in which we can hear glimpses of the old pre-FFVII style.” Uematsu creates this “renaissance” not only by using nostalgic motives and styles, but also by deliberately composing in the Renaissance and Baroque styles of the western music tradition. In *The Place I’ll Return to Someday* Uematsu seeks to fulfill musically the artistic vision of *Final Fantasy IX* as a nostalgic return. He calls on several elements of Renaissance styles of the western musical tradition, including soprano-bass polarities common to

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6 Bell, “Final Fantasy IX.”
dance forms, essentially modal melodies, and strongly independent melodic lines that suggest the idea of successive composition. The combination of these elements helps to establish the ongoing atmosphere and support the artistic goals of the game.

The location of this music as the sound for the introductory video and start menu heightens the efficacy of Uematsu’s stylistic choices. As the first music heard when experiencing the game, *The Place I’ll Return to Someday* plays a pivotal role in creating the sense of nostalgic return. The previous two games, *Final Fantasy VII* and *Final Fantasy VIII*, had updated the series, taking full advantage of new technology and focusing on more modern character models, more complicated narratives, and more modern and futuristic soundtracks. This modernization placed a strain on the series: in the words of one reviewer, “the already tenuous links that held together the notion of *Final Fantasy* seemed ready to snap.”

Although *The Place I’ll Return to Someday* is not nostalgic in itself, it nonetheless functions in a nostalgic capacity. The style of this work immediately informs players that this game will not be like its futuristic predecessors, *Final Fantasy VII* and *Final Fantasy VIII*, but rather, will provide a new experience steeped in the nostalgia of previous games. The unique sound of the western Renaissance tradition, most notably characterized by its modal and contrapuntal features, bears with it associations with feudal hierarchies, knights in armor, princesses in distress, and epic narratives of chivalry and honor; in short, the stuff of legends. These narratives were essential to the earliest games in the *Final Fantasy* series, which sometimes had thin and minimal plots, usually defined by some type of epic quest.

Two of the most conspicuous elements that contribute to the renaissance sound of *The Place I’ll Return to Someday* are the instrumentation and texture that have been used. Rather than the thickly

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7 A large majority of people experiencing this game do not have an extensive musical background, and typically lack the technical knowledge to recognize stylistic elements more specifically than as characteristically “Renaissance” in nature. The specific elements of the music discussed in this essay combine to create a stereotypically “Renaissance” sound identifiable to a broad audience, without adhering strictly to one specific style from the Renaissance period.

8 Bell, “Final Fantasy IX.”
orchestrated, militant approach taken in the introductory video for Final Fantasy VIII, Uematsu creates a much more transparent texture, orchestrating The Place I’ll Return to Someday with a simple recorder trio. This instrumental choice immediately invokes associations with Renaissance music. Independent lines sounding simultaneously also contribute to the renaissance quality of the music, recalling the independent lines and contrapuntal textures of Renaissance polyphony. Jessie Ann Owens has discussed the process of composition during the Renaissance at length, and she succinctly describes the successive nature of the compositional process:

There is no single ‘compositional process’ in music of this period, but there are certain overriding principles and approaches that in turn reveal basic attitudes about the construction of music and the relationship among the voices. The most fundamental is the fact that the composers of vocal music did not use scores for composing, but instead worked in separate parts or quasi-score.⁹

Uematsu takes a similar approach in The Place I’ll Return to Someday, creating independent lines that give the impression of successive composition and contribute to the renaissance sound of the piece.

More fundamental to the achievement of a renaissance sound in The Place I’ll Return to Someday is Uematsu’s attention to the counterpoint. The structure of the work is characterized by a soprano-bass polarity in which the most active figuration occurs in the descant recorder in juxtaposition with a supportive bass line (Figure 1).¹⁰ In some instances, such as that found in m.2, the

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¹⁰ The Place I’ll Return to Someday was downloaded from David Lawrence, Video Game Music Archive, http://vgmusic.com, accessed September 22, 2010. It was then transcribed using the software Notation Musician distributed by Notation Software Incorporated. Instrumental designations (descant, alto, and bass recorder) are my own.
alto recorder responds to the descant melody by filling sustained tones with decorative counterpoint, but its primary function is to fill in the harmonies created by the descant-bass juxtaposition. The bass recorder serves a largely supportive role, frequently performing notes with longer durational values and a more limited range than those of the alto and descant. The polarity between a decorative soprano line and a supportive bass line, with a central line filling in harmonic gaps, is reminiscent of dance styles popular during the Renaissance.

The formal structure of The Place I’ll Return to Someday also shows some parallels with Renaissance dance styles, in particular the basse danse. The basse danse typically followed even four-measure phrases, and followed the form AABB, creating a large-scale binary form. The Place I’ll Return to Someday follows a similar format, substituting eight-measure phrases for the typical four-measure phrases in the basse danse (Figure 2). The A section contains two eight-measure phrases, a and a’; similarly, the B section consists of an eight-measure phrase, b, repeated twice. The slower moving bass and decorative effects of the descant voice mentioned previously are most evident in the A section, as is a tendency for one or more parts to cadence late. This occurs in the alto and bass parts in m.8, and in the alto part in m. 16 (Figure 3). The texture of the B section stands in contrast to

\[ \text{Figure 2: The Place I'll Return to Someday, Formal Structure} \]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>a'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td>b</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ \text{m. 1} \quad \text{m. 9} \quad \text{m. 17} \quad \text{m. 25} \]

\[ \text{Figure 3: Delayed Cadencing in The Place I'll Return to Someday} \]

Figure 3

\[ \text{a) mm. 6-8} \]

\[ \text{b) mm. 14-16} \]

\[ 11 \text{ Patrick Warfield and James Rodgers, “Renaissance Instrumental Music,” Indian University Jacobs School of Music, maintained by Peter J. Burkholder, http://www.music.indiana.edu/som/courses/m401/RenInstrum.html, accessed December 4, 2010.} \]
the active counterpoint of the A section, changing to a largely homophonic texture (Figure 4). Aside from brief elements of syncopation and decorative figuration in the descant, all three parts of the trio participate in an essentially homorhythmic phrase. It is also notable that in the B section all parts begin and cadence together, in contrast to the staggered entrances and reluctant cadences of the A section.

Figure 4: The Place I’ll Return to Someday, B section, mm. 17-24

The strong independence of the individual melodic lines contributes to the characteristic renaissance sound of the piece. In her study of compositional practice during the Renaissance, Owens further observes, “I believe that composing in separate parts reflects the basic character of the music: lines woven together to form harmonies, and not a series of sonorities. Composers heard harmonies, but did not see them arrayed in columns on the page.”12 This description applies particularly well to the compositional style presented in The Place I’ll Return to Someday. The lines of the descant, alto, and bass recorders are fundamentally independent, but they combine to create vertical harmonies that emphasize the modal nature of the piece and, as a result, contribute to the unique renaissance quality of the sound.

Most influential in creating the renaissance sound of The Place I’ll Return to Someday is the essentially modal nature of the melodic content of the piece. The melodic material of each part is best analyzed in terms of the modal D Dorian scale. As seen in the descant part (Figure 5), the melody of

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12 Jessie Ann Owens, Composers at Work, 7.
Uematsu’s stylistic choices concerning instrumentation, texture, counterpoint, and modality combine to create the renaissance sound of *The Place I’ll Return to Someday*, and this in turn sets the tone for the remainder of the music in the game. As is typical in the *Final Fantasy* games, musical elements from one part of the game will return in another capacity, usually modified in some form, much in the way thematic transformation can occur in a symphonic movement. The melody of *The Place I’ll Return to Someday* returns several times throughout the game’s soundtrack, usually with modified orchestration, but always supporting the renaissance sound initially presented at the start of the game. The most notable recurrences of *The Place I’ll Return to Someday* occur in *Transient Past* and *Ipsen’s Heritage*.
Transient Past, like The Place I’ll Return to Someday, uses the characteristic elements of the renaissance sound to create an association with an ancient society. At this point in the game, the characters are in an ancient edifice, filled with lost technology; Transient Past plays while the characters receive an account of the history of a lost civilization. To strengthen this association, Uematsu extends and re-orchestrates the melody from The Place I’ll Return to Someday. The elements of the recorder trio are now orchestrated for voices, and Uematsu adds an eight-measure chant-like phrase to the existing melody. This new chant element highlights the modality of the original tune and deepens the association with early church music of the western musical tradition.

The added chant element is inserted before each section of the original binary form of The Place I’ll Return to Someday, similar to the alternatim style used in the organum of the early Christian church (Figure 7). The chant is sung by all three voices: the soprano and tenor double the chant at the octave, while the bass provides a pedal tone throughout. The chant also gives the impression of being unmeasured due to changes of pitch on weak parts of the beat or in unexpected portions of the measure. The unmeasured, modal, and unison nature of this chant-like element draws close parallels with the plainchant portion of the alternatim style.

This chant phrase gives way to The Place I’ll Return to Someday melody A, presented as a metrically regular, polyphonic verse in contrast to the unison chant. The contrapuntal textures of the original recorder trio are simplified, with all voice parts presenting the melody in a homophonic texture. The soprano presents the melody in its original form from the recorder trio, while the tenor moves in strict parallel motion with the soprano melody, a feature that once again emphasizes the

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modal nature of the piece. The bass doubles the soprano melody at the octave in a simplified form, resting during all decorative scalar motion and performing only the sustained pitches.

In keeping with the alternatim style, the chant phrase returns in a form identical to its first appearance in *Transient Past* before the presentation of the second verse: the B section of *The Place I’ll Return to Someday*. Uematsu once again modifies the texture of the original recorder trio, this time shifting the homophonic texture to contrapuntal activity. The soprano continues to present the melody as it appears in *The Place I’ll Return to Someday*, this time doubled by the bass. The tenor sustains tones with longer durational values and a strongly independent line. This texture provides further references to the polyphony of the early Christian church and is reminiscent of the early use of the tenor cantus firmus.

*The Place I’ll Return to Someday* returns in *Ipsen’s Heritage*, once again creating associations between the renaissance sound and an archaic and long-lost past.¹⁴ *Ipsen’s Castle*, the location associated with the music *Ipsen’s Heritage*, is an ancient, abandoned castle containing mystical weapons and necessary quest medallions. *Ipsen’s Heritage* is one of the most complicated treatments of *The Place I’ll Return to Someday* melody. It contains not only the most varied orchestration, but also utilizes more advanced contrapuntal techniques. The orchestration consists of a recorder duet over bass voices and percussion. The recorder duet treats the A section melody in hocket, sounding their respective portions of the melody an octave apart. The B section is then treated as a canon at the octave, with the descant recorder leading. A supportive vocal part underlies the recorder duet, moving in sustained tones in a restricted range, similar to that found in the bass recorder of *The Place I’ll Return to Someday*. The voice is also doubled at the octave, creating a very low drone effect. The final element, percussion, is supplied by a tambourine repeating a two measure rhythmic pattern following a consistent rhythm of one half note, and two quarter notes per phrase.

¹⁴ Ibid.
The Place I’ll Return to Someday, Transient Past, and Ipsen’s Heritage all create an association between their characteristic renaissance sound and elements of epic narratives, including mystical weapons, abandoned castles, and ancient societies. This association is at the core of the nostalgic effect of the Final Fantasy IX soundtrack; many subsequent tracks continue to emphasize this association, featuring other characteristic instruments, such as the lute, recorder, harp, organ, or harpsichord, in solo capacities. The thematic music for individual characters and environmental music for game locations utilize the stylistic themes already considered in this study throughout the soundtrack.

Although it is not possible to enumerate the many instances of Baroque or Renaissance influence evident in the creation of the ongoing atmosphere of Final Fantasy IX within these pages, this study has established the intentional use of the Renaissance style of the western musical tradition to create an association with the ancient, thereby invoking the epic ideal of heroes on a quest. Uematsu’s approach to the music, though not inherently nostalgic, still contributes significantly to the designers’ goal. By creating a renaissance sound for the opening music, and reusing this melody in direct association with ancient edifices, lost civilizations, and mystical quest elements, Uematsu signals clearly that this game will not be like its immediate predecessors, but will offer an experience steeped in the traditional epic narrative and design of the early Final Fantasy games.
Works Cited


