Ubisoft Game Makers Podcast
The Music of Myths
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CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

You're listening to the Game Makers Podcast. I'm Charles-Adam Foster-Simard from Ubisoft.

In this episode, we're taking a closer look at the music of Immortals Fenyx Rising. An open world action adventure game released by Ubisoft at the end of 2020. In Immortals Fenyx Rising, you play as Fenyx, a winged demigod on a quest to save the Greek gods and their home from the dark curse of Typhon, the deadliest titan in Greek mythology.

CHARLES:

To talk about the game's music, I was joined by music supervisor Jérôme Angelot who's based with the game's core team at Ubisoft Quebec and previously worked on Assassin's Creed Odyssey, as well as by the game's composer, Gareth Coker. Gareth's recent projects include composing for the Ori games, Ori and the Blind Forest and its sequel Ori and the Will of the Wisps, ARK: Survival Evolved as well as the upcoming Halo Infinite.

CHARLES:

Hello to both of you. I'm here with Jérôme Angelot and Gareth Coker. Nice to be with you.

JÉRÔME ANGELOT:

Hello, hello.

GARETH COKER:

Hello.

JÉRÔME ANGELOT:

Nice to be there.

GARETH COKER:

I'm disappointed I don't get a French accent of my name.

CHARLES:

Do you speak French, Gareth? Maybe we could do the whole thing in French if you like.

GARETH COKER:

No, my French days are long gone. I could actually understand a fair bit, but my speaking practice, I haven't spoken it for ages. But I did study it in school for quite a long time.

CHARLES:

And before jumping in and telling me a little bit more about how you got involved in the project and for you Jérôme, what you were looking for in the project, I'm just curious to know from your perspectives, what defines the music of Immortals Fenyx Rising? What makes it special, or just in a few words, what is the music of this game for you?

GARETH COKER:

Man, that's a question I've never been asked before. What is the music for the game? Even on any project. I think at least my approach and Jérôme might have a different answer, but I think it'll be the same because we were pretty in sync for the whole project. I think when you look at the game, just the visual style, the style of the dialogue, which is not like a lot of other games out there currently.

GARETH COKER:

I think the way I would describe the music is it never takes itself too seriously and is a form of escapism. Allowing the player to escape into Greek mythology rather than be hit over the head by it, if that makes sense. Because the Greek gods, if you look at their backstories, they were doing some weird and messed up stuff. But in this telling of Greek mythology, there is a sense of fun that, really, I think the music captures, at least that's what I think.

JÉRÔME ANGELOT:

And for me it was to have something quite different from the previous game. I wanted something lush, full in the music. I really loved that, to have this big palette of instruments that have very nice melodies and the point was we need to have something that cut from the AC franchise that is more electronic, that is more serious in the music itself.

CHARLES:

So of course the previous project was Assassin's Creed Odyssey and you worked on that game, Jérôme, and so a lot of the team actually transferred over to work on Immortals Fenyx Rising and so for you, it was breaking a little bit from that franchise and also creating a new IP, right? This is a whole new brand.

JÉRÔME ANGELOT:

Exactly. The difficulty was to find something that will define that brand. So it was really important to have the right fit as a composer. And I definitely think that we handled that well with Gareth.

CHARLES:

So you found the right composer for the job. Gareth, how did you first get involved on this project? What does that look like when you first hop onto a new game to write the music for it?

GARETH COKER:

It's different every time to be honest, but in this case it was through my agent and she said to me at the time that, "Yeah, this is something that will probably be a good fit for you." And I can't remember what the first piece of music I wrote. Did I have to pitch for this? I can't remember. Did I have to write something?

JÉRÔME ANGELOT:

Yes.

GARETH COKER:

Yes, I did, I remember now. The pitch was obviously successful and then I think the first piece of music I wrote for the project was the E3 trailer.

JÉRÔME ANGELOT:

Yeah.

GARETH COKER:

Yeah. Which ended up becoming the main theme of the game. At least part of the E3 trailer ended up turning into the main theme of the game. That happens so rarely. The only other time it's happened for me was on Ark: Survival Evolved, the first trailer for that game ended up becoming the main theme. But I think the good thing about that is, I remember Jérôme saying at the beginning, like there was an emphasis on needing a melody and that's kind of my thing. And I think it's definitely one of the reasons I'm talking to you today. I can never remember how I come up with the melodies for these things.

GARETH COKER:

They just happen in the moment and I'm like, "Oh, that's good. OK. Well let's flesh it out." But what does help and what has helped throughout the entire project, I don't think with the exception of Ori, I don't think I've ever had as much information from a developer that I could need to do my job, which is really important. I wasn't sure... because this was my first time really working with a AAA developer. And I've got friends who are composers too and sometimes like, yeah, we just get a little bit of concept art and that's about it.

GARETH COKER:

And maybe a little bit of the story, but no, Jérôme gave me everything. Like everything I could possibly want and then more. And that for me helps me ultimately get inside Fenyx's head, because that's how I can write a theme that I think is appropriate for her. And yeah, that main theme ended up being the catalyst for what the rest of the game became in terms of the music. So I think that was a helpful starting point, but it happens so, so rarely. But now we have a theme that we reuse in multiple places across the game and that's always cool to be able to have.

CHARLES:

So there's so much to unpack there. So, obviously, Jérôme is giving you a lot of material to work with from the beginning. I assume that it's looking like concept art and some gameplay segments or stuff like that. Maybe Jérôme, you can see a bit more about that. But Gareth, from your perspective, is there something that hooked you in from the beginning? When you first started seeing some material from the game, was there something that really made you say like, "Oh, yeah, I totally want to work on this project"?

GARETH COKER:

I think the look of the game, you can't deny that the look of the game is very... looking at Immortals, I don't think there's anything really out there that looks quite like it, it has a very unique style to it. But also I remember coming up to Ubisoft Quebec, pre-pandemic. I miss those days, we all do. I was able to see the game in action and I was also able to play it for a little bit. And it's hard to explain, but if you play games for a long time, sometimes games just feel good in your hands. And now after release, it feels the same. I can play this game for... I can dip into it for 10 minutes if I want to and it's fun. Or I can go and have a three to four hour session and it's still fun. And fun is really hard to capture in a game.

GARETH COKER:

It's such a... how do you define fun? It's very nebulous. But all I can say is that's what I felt when I had the controller in my hand and I'm like, "OK, this is very attractive." And I saw that from the

visuals when I saw like the initial video or the concepts and stuff and the story. But then to finish all that off, to be able to have it in my hand and be able to like feel the fun, that sounds like a bad catch phrase. But that is what I felt when I played it. And I think when you... because I've been playing games for a long time, I think when you can feel that, it made it a lot easier to think about the music for the rest of the game.

CHARLES:

And Jérôme, from your perspective when you start working on a new project in this case, so you had Gareth on board. He obviously got... he did a good enough job in the pitch to get the job. What are you then giving to the composer to make sure that you're getting the kind of music that you need or that you want for the project?

JÉRÔME ANGELOT:

The first thing I do and I want most of the time is for the composer to meet the team. I think it's very important. It was very important for Gareth and I did the same thing for the previous project I was working on, to meet the creative director for example. Because he's the one that have the idea of the game that has the recipe of what he wants to give to the player and also to meet the audio director, to be sure that we are in line with our creative process.

GARETH COKER:

I just want to touch on one story that I don't mind telling now because we've shipped the game. Jérôme said it was really important for the composer to meet the team. I think Jérôme knows where I'm going with this. So I'm flying out, there's two flights. There's no direct flight from L.A. to Quebec. And I arrive in New York. And it's like, "Yeah, all flights to Quebec are cancelled for the next 24 to 36 hours." So I'm like, "Man, that sucks. I don't want to miss this meeting. I've already flown across the country. So I drove from New York to Quebec overnight.

CHARLES:

Wow.

GARETH COKER:

And I made that damn meeting. So that's something I'm still quite proud of. I was really tired. Jérôme released me in the afternoon of that day, because he knew I'd only had like 90 minutes of sleep for which I'm very appreciative. But I was determined to make it. I was like, "I'm going to make this first meeting at Ubisoft." I did get a pretty decent car to drive in to make sure that the journey wasn't terrible, but I have to admit like driving through Maine at three o'clock in the morning is not the greatest.

CHARLES:

That's like a 10 hour drive or something like that.

GARETH COKER:

Yes. It's a 10 hour drive.

JÉRÔME ANGELOT:

Yeah.

GARETH COKER:

I guess Jérôme inspired me to drive all that distance to meet the team. It's that important.

CHARLES:

If Jérôme wasn't convinced yet that he had the right composer, I'm sure that did the job.

JÉRÔME ANGELOT:

For sure.

JÉRÔME ANGELOT:

And also that it's a long brief describing everything that we need. It's visual concept up to a lot of video capture because I think it's important to be able to just write with a picture in front of you. We tried in the past just to ask composer to write music, giving specific about how the music works in the games. And what I discover is that sometime it's a break for the creativity. So I don't want the composer to think about how the music will be implemented on the game. So I give video and they just compose like the linear project.

CHARLES:

And Gareth where you're actually composing music to the gameplay? You would be watching gameplay and composing at the same time or just kind of imbibing it and then getting inspired from it?

GARETH COKER:

That is literally my process for writing on all my projects. If I can't play the game, I record the gameplay myself. Getting gameplay footage from the developer preferably with no temp music, that means I can bring it into my sequencer and I write the music in the music software with the video playing in the background. So I don't try to match all of the footage. I feel every single game has a basic tempo, a basic speed of gameplay. I'll explain that using two very different examples.

GARETH COKER:

The speed of playing a first person shooter like Doom is completely different to playing a first person shooter like Halo. We can go through tons and tons and tons of examples, but Immortals has its own speed. And by just by having the gameplay in front of you, it informs so many decisions in the writing process, at least for me. And it gives me a chance to hear how busy the sound effects are. And also chance to like hear the dialogue.

CHARLES:

So Gareth, the first thing you composed is the melody, I guess.

GARETH COKER:

Yeah.

CHARLES:

The original melody that was in the trailer and the announcements. So that was Easter 2019. The game came out at the end of 2020. So a year and a half or so later. So once you had that kind of basic and the trailer music, which at that point I guess you didn't know would even ended up being in the final game.

GARETH COKER:

Yeah.

CHARLES:

Then what do you do to develop the rest of the soundtrack? Do you go get inspiration somewhere else. Do you do a lot of research?

GARETH COKER:

I think for this, one thing that was very helpful early on in discussing with Jérôme about this is we didn't want to make it a 100% authentic ancient Greek soundtrack using exactly the instruments of the time and only the scales of the time. And frankly, if Ubisoft had wanted to do that, I don't think they'd have hired me. Because if you wanted to do authentic Greek music there's other places you can go where it would probably be more accurate.

JÉRÔME ANGELOT:

Exactly. And it was already the mandate that we had on Odyssey. So we didn't want to repeat that.

GARETH COKER:

Yeah.

CHARLES:

And it makes sense with the game. Because the game is playful, there's references to modern stuff. There was sides and breaking the fourth wall.

GARETH COKER:

So what I thought I was like, "Well, OK, I still want something." So I commissioned a couple of Greek lyres for the game, from Eleutherna in Greece. So that was the real deal. But the way they are played in the music in the game is not as traditional or as authentic as they would be played in ancient Greece. I was just like, "Let's have some flavours from ancient Greece, but dress it up in modern production." And it comes back to the look of the game. Because the look of the game and all the exaggerated animations, the exaggerated dialogue, the colours that truly pop, it allows you to explore with music on a much, much greater variety.

GARETH COKER:

I think the best example of this is in all the Tartaros Vault music, which is a blend of some quite synthesised stuff. But then you have this awful sounding instrument called the aulos, which is awful by itself. It's an ancient Greek woodwind instrument. But I was like, "OK, my goal for the Tartaros Vault, I'm going to try my hardest to make this instrument sound good, no matter how long it takes." Because it really is by itself. You wouldn't want to listen to it for more than two minutes, even in the hands of a good musician, it's a sucky instrument.

GARETH COKER:

But it has a unique flavour and it's kind of haunting. I was like, "OK, I can make this work." So really all I ended up doing was throwing a bunch of reverb on it to make it sound like some giant space and a huge amount of delays. So it's kind of echoing all around you. And I was like, "Oh..."

GARETH COKER:

"..I think that's the sound." Then I took all of the edge off the instrument. Because it has kind of like a high, raspy, reedy sound because it uses two reeds. And took like the edge of the instrument and then it started sounding kind of floaty and ethereal. And it started to sound timeless. I can't really explain what that means.

GARETH COKER:

It's just what I felt. And I was like, "OK. Well, I can now build a bunch of tracks around this." And the best example in the soundtrack is Aulos of Tartaros.

GARETH COKER:

And yeah, it ended up being the sound of the underworld. And so that's just an example of where we combined something from the old world. And then just with a bunch of new ideas in terms of how to produce it.

CHARLES:

Can you say a little bit more about the lyres that you commissioned and what they look like and how they sound?

GARETH COKER:

So the lyres, it's interesting. Because I thought about using them as a melody instrument, but they're actually much better at supporting. One of the things about plucked instruments - I have one of them right here, I know we're doing a podcast but it's easier for me to explain. This is going to be terribly out of tune, but... yeah, it's really out of tune. But the thing about like plucked instruments is if you listen to them for a long time, they end up becoming really distracting.

GARETH COKER:

And one of the things about a lot of the exploration music I think, it does have melody, but the melody isn't hitting you in the face. It's there, but if it was hitting you in the face too much, it kind of sucks for the player. And this is something that I've learned from doing Ori as well, which is also a heavily melodic game. You can have melody, but if it's too upfront and in the face, the human brain just starts to switch off and starts to either get annoyed by it or just not recognise it at all. One day I'm going to do a PhD into the effect of music on the human brain, but I'm not ready to do that yet.

GARETH COKER:

Anyway, the lyres end up being a prominent but supportive role and I would say almost all of the exploration music has some lyre in it at some point. Jérôme's seen all the stems. I think there's usually plucked something or other in almost every single track. So it's just kind of there, because when you gently pluck these instruments in the background, what happens is that it gives the music movement and movement in the music always keeps the player... it's subconsciously telling the player, "Keep going, keep going, keep going." It's very, very gentle, but you can hear a gentle momentum throughout. And that's what I felt the lyres provided.

CHARLES:

So it's almost like these traditional instruments are giving you almost a foundation kind of for the rest of the music?

GARETH COKER:

Yes.

CHARLES:

Especially for the exploration or of course, as you're saying you need something that's a little bit more atmospheric maybe?

GARETH COKER:

Yeah.

CHARLES:

That's accompanying what the player is doing without being too present.

GARETH COKER:

For the exploration music, what we ended up doing and this was a whole thing that I was like, "Oh my goodness, I don't know how we're going to pull this off." So Jérôme told me at the beginning it's like, "We're going to have these explorations suites and they're going to need to be able to change seamlessly from exploring on foot, to flying, to exploring by horseback. And you've got to think about combat too."

GARETH COKER:

And I'm like, "Wait, what? OK. I think I can do that." So the one, I don't think Jérôme even knows how I approached this. Because I don't think, he just knows the end result. He doesn't know like the brain process to actually get there. I don't think he wants to. Well, he's going to hear it now anyway.

GARETH COKER:

I was like, "OK, what do I think the easiest one is going to be?" And the easiest one was flying. I decided that for all the flying suites, we should have a woodwind instrument because woodwinds are... you have to use wind and you need wind to fly.

CHARLES:

It makes sense.

GARETH COKER:

I've followed that philosophy before and it always works. And two instruments that... especially one in particular, the English horn and the oboe they're two related instruments. But they do have a slightly Mediterranean quality to them. I can't really explain what it is. It's probably because they use reeds to be played. And I was like, "OK, these instruments when played in a certain way can sound super floaty and ethereal. And so the flying part of the exploration suite ends up being the lightest. There's no plucked instruments. There's usually just a really soft ambient wash of sound. And then the oboe or the English horn.

GARETH COKER:

Then the horse music uses the same melody that is established in the flying music, but it's played maybe slightly quicker and there's like gentle percussion or all strumming or the lyre is playing and it's quite busy. Because it's horse riding and you can move more quickly.

GARETH COKER:

I Immediately differentiated it from the flying music and the explore music, which had neither the fast-paced music or the wind instrument.

GARETH COKER:

Once I had those three layers I'm like, "Well, I haven't even done anything loud yet." So doing the combat was actually fairly straightforward. But all the exploration music suites share the same fundamental melody, it's sometimes played in a slightly different way, whether you're flying or horse riding. But you can still hear them play it in a slightly different way. And once we'd done the first one I was like, "OK, thank goodness."

GARETH COKER:

Because the methodology was set in place and then doing all of the exploration suites for Ares, Athena, Aphrodite, all of the different regions in the game. We kind of had a methodology to do it and it definitely works. I remember seeing the implementation for the first time I was like, "Oh my goodness, is this going to work? Or is it not?" And it totally does.

CHARLES:

Oh. Because it's almost like creating a template that you can then apply because of course there's different regions in the game.

GARETH COKER:

Yeah.

CHARLES:

Each one is a ruled by different gods. So you need a little bit of a different texture, I guess for each region. And so once you had that template, you could apply it to different regions for the exploration music and it would fit everywhere.

GARETH COKER:

The instruments obviously change per region, Aphrodite features more vocals. So each region still has to have its own unique sound. But the fundamental approach, like busier for the horses, fairly ambient for the exploration, using a woodwind instrument for the flying, that fundamental approach remained the same. It's funny that Jérôme mentioned, he doesn't like the composers to worry about implementation and he's right.

GARETH COKER:

That is actually a good approach. But I like to know just enough, because I've been gaming for a long time. I think I'm like probably between a composer who doesn't want to know anything at all about implementation. And then there are composers who wants to know absolutely every single thing in the world. I'm probably right in the middle. And I think that's where Jérôme likes it.

CHARLES:

Jérôme would you agree with that? Can you say a little bit more about this implementation?

GARETH COKER:

Yes. Tell us your genius implementation system, Jérôme.

CHARLES:

Yeah, why you don't want the composer to worry about that.

JÉRÔME ANGELOT:

In my opinion, I'm here to help you make your music shine. I'm not here to tell you what you have to do. So the musicality, the instrumentation, the melodies are yours. I'm just there to guide you to be sure that the music will work the best that we can in the game.

CHARLES:

I'd like to talk a little bit about the combat, Gareth, because we talked more about exploration. But how did you approach the combat music? Because, it's quite exaggerated in a way the combat in this game, the moves are super big and there's a lot of special effects. And one of the things I love about this game is every time you manage to defeat an enemy, they kind of fly away.

GARETH COKER:

Yeah, they go flying. I love it, it never gets old.

CHARLES:

They just go flying off. Yeah. It's amazing.

GARETH COKER:

So yeah, you've used the one word that I would focus on. And you mentioned exaggerated. And I think, I remember handing in one piece of boss music. I can't remember which one it was, but Jérôme was like, "Yeah, you can go bigger." And I'm like, "Oh, OK. Cool."

JÉRÔME ANGELOT:

I was pushing to a bigger.

GARETH COKER:

I have no problem doing loud, combat music. If you've heard any of my work from ARK, it's all loud. Because it's all giant creatures. But this was kind of a case of like taking maybe... one of my favourite films of all time is Disney Fantasia and that like they make imagery with that music feel so powerful. And so over the top.

GARETH COKER:

And so that was kind of the approach. Like let's make this over the top and orchestral, but let's make sure that it's not just orchestral blah, blah, for like three minutes. It needs to have a tune. It needs to have an identity. It just can't be... I like to call it epic nothing. Because, we've all heard music from various films or projects or whatever where it's really loud for a long time and you can't remember any of it.

GARETH COKER:

And that's a problem to me. I was like, "I need these tracks, especially the boss fights. They need to be able to stand out and they need to be enjoyable to listen to by themselves." Because in a game like this which has such a high emphasis on fun, I think the music needs to be fun too. And for that reason it needs to be fun to listen to.

GARETH COKER:

Even though the player might be struggling to beat one of the bosses for the fifth or sixth time, if they have a banging music track that they enjoy listening to, it might spur them on to keep going. And so yeah, the approach for the boss music, actually almost all the combat music, we didn't really use as much of the traditional Greek elements.

GARETH COKER:

It's more of, I did use the Greek scales. Greek music has a particular scale that is quite identifiable. And it's kind of commonly used across this entire soundtrack. But I was like, "Let's just throw the whole orchestra at it. And use the orchestra in an intelligent way." It's not just every player playing all the time. So sometimes the strings will have the melody, sometimes the brass will have the melody. Just pass the things around. That makes it more interesting to listen to.

GARETH COKER:

And then yeah, once you pass the melody around, then have everyone play with all the power. And then you've kind of automatically got three parts of the music. This is a crude breakdown just for the sake of this podcast. But if you have a section which has full orchestra to begin with, then you switch it to the strings focus.

GARETH COKER:

Then you switch it to the brass focus. You've already got ABC. And then you've probably covered like 60 seconds of music already. And then it starts to sound like a long piece of music which has interest. Whereas if it was full orchestra the whole way through, it's not as interesting to listen to. Because as we were discussing earlier, the brain starts to switch off when you listen to the same thing for too long or if it's too in your face.

GARETH COKER:

And boss music is in your face all the time. So you have to find interesting ways to change it up. So it was about making it epic, of course. But also making sure the music had a nice dynamic flow to it so that it would be fun and enjoyable to listen to. That was a good answer.

JÉRÔME ANGELOT:

You make it sound so easy.

GARETH COKER:

Well, you know what? It's funny because like the boss music... I'm seeing all these wacky creatures and they've got amazing titles. And I'm just like, "How could you not be inspired to write music for the Medusa or any other bosses in the game?" And they've got such wacky designs, Jérôme would upload a new video of like, "Oh, here's another boss fight." I'm like, "Oh boy, what's this one going to look like?"

GARETH COKER:

And just to take Typhon as an example, Typhon looks how he looks and then you hear him speak and he's doing the classic over the top villain monologue all the time. I'm like, "Oh, OK. I know what to do for Typhon." The thing is having a character like that be sort of over the top, allows the music to be over the top because it actually makes it believable.

JÉRÔME ANGELOT:

And what else also in the open world, the combat music in the open world is that the music shines dynamically, depending of the enemy you have around you. We are basically calculating a trend depending of the lives of your character, the weapon that you have, the ammo and each enemy has some point. And we calculate the point that they are generating. And with that, we are driving the music.

JÉRÔME ANGELOT:

So we have multiple scale and the music can go very epic and go down and go up. So that way, when the combat is a little bit longer, you don't have that fatigue of the music repeating a lot of time, because it's changing. And from one combat to another, you will never have the same transition.

GARETH COKER:

Yeah. I was going to say so. From one combat to the next or one player to the next, even, depending on the weapons you're using, your strategy, how much health you have, how much skill you have, it's never going to sound quite the same, right?

JÉRÔME ANGELOT:

Exactly. The music will behave differently. It's still the same music, but the behaviour will change.

GARETH COKER:

Sure. This is the kind of thing that I was talking about earlier where that level of involvement in the implementation is beyond me. It's up to me to deliver them the raw materials to work with and then finesse the stuff like how often does the music change and how the number of enemies that you're fighting.

GARETH COKER:

That stuff I can only tell you if it's good or not, but there's so many people whose hands are on it that they kind of know before I even get to see it. So this was my first time that I had like a team worrying about that kind of stuff. Which was very nice. It meant I could just focus on writing music and delivering the next thing for them to implement, which is nice.

GARETH COKER:

And one of the things I remember Jérôme sent in his first PDF at the very end it says, "Writing for games is a marathon, not a sprint." And I think he said that he sent this to everyone ever who he's ever worked with. I hope you don't mind me sharing this Jérôme?

JÉRÔME ANGELOT:

Oh, no. That's OK.

GARETH COKER:

And because it's very true. And every composer should probably pay attention. But what it means is instead of delivering everything at the last minute, the fact that we were able to deliver some of these ideas so early meant that Jérôme's team had time to finesse the music playback system and get it working in the game to being what it is today.

JÉRÔME ANGELOT:

And even if the game changed that it happens on our game. There was some change that we decided to do in the project, I never put away a music, I always try to reuse it somewhere else. Because the music by itself is good, the melody are good, it's well orchestrated. So the reason why it's a way to reuse the music, even just cutting some element with the stems or just revamping it. So I always try to never lose a thing in the music.

CHARLES:

I'd like to talk a little bit about your collaboration and the feedback. Because earlier, Gareth, you mentioned you were writing combat music and for instance Jérôme had said, "Well, make it bigger," right? What other things changed? Or what kind of feedback did you get with the first versions of the music? What's the kind of feedback that you got from the team?

GARETH COKER:

Feedback can be something as simple as, "This is the right piece of music, but it's the wrong tempo." It just doesn't quite match the game-play. I remember one Jérôme was just like, "Can you just change the tempo? Just to make it a little bit quicker?" And that's literally two keyboard process for me and then export audio.

GARETH COKER:

And I was like, "OK, it's done." And then sometimes when I'm perhaps maybe struggling with the cue. I have to remind myself, it's like, "Hey, wait, hold on a second. We've actually got a really good main theme. Let's use it." And I remember, I think it's for the archery that the boat challenge, I think we just used a version of the main theme.

JÉRÔME ANGELOT:

No.

GARETH COKER:

Is it that one or is it navigation challenge?

JÉRÔME ANGELOT:

Navigation challenge.

GARETH COKER:

Thank you. Yes, yes. Sorry. Yeah, I'm getting them mixed up. But I think that's why we ended up going that direction. It's like, "Well, let's just use the theme." Or at least I was like, "There's a good chance that this might get approved because the theme is good." But the thing is because the theme is good, it automatically, whatever you do with the theme, it's going to fit the game in a basic way.

GARETH COKER:

Because it's the theme that I think we've done the navigation... I can't remember when we did the navigation challenge, but the team had been living with the theme for at least like four to five months at that point. So everyone knows it's the theme. So if you use the theme in a different way it's like, "OK, well then, OK, we've got the melody. Now we just have to make sure the feel is appropriate for the navigation challenge."

GARETH COKER:

I think that's kind of how we ended up there. One of my favourite quotes from one of my composer heroes Jerry Goldsmith said, "If in doubt, play the tune." He always said that if you are struggling to do a scene in a film, obviously Jerry didn't do any games. But he said, whenever he was struggling to do a scene in a film, he would just be like, "Well, I'm just going to go back to the main theme." And it usually like nine times out of 10, solved the problem for him. Or at least it started the process of solving the problem. Now of course, the catch with that is you have to have a good theme in the first place.

CHARLES:

Well, I was going to say, yeah, it's a motif, right? So it works well to repeat that motif. But also I was going to say the same thing. It works because the melody you wrote for the theme is catchy and works well and can be, I guess declined into different versions easily.

JÉRÔME ANGELOT:

Exactly.

GARETH COKER:

The word I like to use is malleable. It can be bent into many different shapes and sizes. There's so many things you can do to a melody. I mean, one of my favourite things is just to speed it up or halftime it, play it like double the speed of the original. This is stuff that we learn in Composition 101, that it's so easy to forget. Because as composers just like, "Oh, I'm going to try and impress everyone with my incredible compositional ability." When actually the things you need to do are, nine times out of 10, the things you learned in Composition 101. Just like simple ways of changing a melody.

GARETH COKER:

I mean, one of the things I did when we'd kind of established Fenyx's theme and I kind of do this with every project, is I will just go to pencil and paper and I'll write down the theme as it is. And then I'll notate like 20 different versions of the theme. And I don't use all of them, but it's a mini well of different versions of the theme that I can use if I need them. And usually they're all pretty solid because they're based on that one original melody. Theme and variations is one of the very first things like most composers are learning. And it's also therefore, one of the very first things you forget.

CHARLES:

Can you reveal some other areas in the game where you slipped in the main theme?

GARETH COKER:

Oh man. I think one of my favourite places is in the final dungeon and the final boss fight. It's always kind of an obvious thing to do, but sometimes it can also be lost. We have the boss fight music with Typhon and I was like, "OK, we could just play epic Typhon music." But actually I was like, "No, this is Fenyx coming to..." obviously I'm spoiling things a little bit here, but it's Fenyx coming to her full realisation of her destiny. And so I think the temptation with a lot of games when they go to the end boss is to make it super dramatic and super epic.

GARETH COKER:

But when you do that, you actually take away from the journey of the main character. And thus, if you've been playing with a character for, I don't know, 30 hours, 40 hours, 50 hours,

however long it takes you to get to the end, I think it's way more powerful to reinforce. That's the time to play the character's theme in a super powerful way.

GARETH COKER:

And then if you can, combine it with elements of Typhon because the two are going at it. So why not? So that's like the obvious place.

GARETH COKER:

The main theme, the first part of the motif is used in a ton of stingers. I can't remember exactly which ones, but we do drop it in a fair amount of places. Maybe Jérôme can - do you remember...

JÉRÔME ANGELOT:

I re-edited a lot in the game. For example when you die, I isolate the voice, I slow the music. So you have something more dramatic.

JÉRÔME ANGELOT:

Because, we do a lot of edit when we receive the stems. And for example, I really love the theme and I really love the Ori soundtrack. And listening to all the stems that we add our song, I would love to have a wing to Ori.

JÉRÔME ANGELOT:

So I took all the stems and basically redid a version of the theme based on how all this soundtrack sounds.

JÉRÔME ANGELOT:

And everyone loves it and I send it to Gareth. And it was fun because he sent it to me back that track. But with the full Gareth power in.

GARETH COKER:

That's right. Yes. You sent me your edit and then I dressed up Jérôme's edit. But yeah, it was a good edit and I was like, "Great." Is that what we did for the end credits?

JÉRÔME ANGELOT:
Yeah.

GARETH COKER:
Yeah, exactly.

JÉRÔME ANGELOT:
That's the music that we have in the end credits.

GARETH COKER:
Yeah.

JÉRÔME ANGELOT:

And it worked so well and it proves how much that is malleable, that you can work within and that you can change it. And yeah, it's really fun to play with these kind of tools, I would say.

GARETH COKER:

Again, I can't remember how I came up with the motif. But the (HUMS TUNE). That's the thing that plays the most in the game and it is incredibly flexible and it's something. There's the whole melody, which is like 45 seconds to a minute. But it's that first phrase, that is always the first thing that I spend the most time on writing to a tune.

GARETH COKER:

If the first phrase is good, it informs everything else after it. And actually all of the phrases after are kind of similar to that very opening, (HUMS TUNE). Like, you'll hear that part repeat over and over again. One of the key things about a good melody is you've got to not be afraid to use repetition, but you've got to change it up just enough so that it's not exactly the same.

CHARLES:

Right.

GARETH COKER:

If you think...

CHARLES:

You alter it slightly, you unpack it a little bit.

GARETH COKER:

Yeah. If you look at all the famous melodies throughout history and I have studied all of them, well, not all of them. But as many as I could possibly can, they all have an element of repetition to them. And that's actually one of the things that makes them successful and ultimately the easiest test is, is can I remember the melody after I've been away from it for a day? And if I can't, then I'm like, "Well, it sucks." That's usually where I end up. And if I can, then it's successful.

JÉRÔME ANGELOT:

You know what? It's a very fun way also for us to know if the main theme is working. Because, for example, and it happens on Odyssey and this game, the main theme were very easy to find. As soon as you share it with the team, when you are in the corridor of Ubisoft and you can hear people humming the theme you know that you have it.

GARETH COKER:

Yes.

JÉRÔME ANGELOT:

And it's exactly what happened with that game. You had people that were whistling or humming the theme and you know it works.

CHARLES:

You know you had it. And as a player after of course, for me, it's the same once I've played a little bit of the game, I find myself humming the theme when I'm doing the dishes afterwards. So as we were talking, the new DLC is coming out, Myths of the Eastern Realm. So I wanted to give you a chance to say a few words about the process for that.

CHARLES:

Of course, this DLC is an expansion that takes, it's like a whole other story basically set in ancient China and based on Chinese mythology. So how did you go about doing the music for that? Did you kind of use the same melody and try to use different instrumentation or did you go a completely different direction or go at it from scratch?

JÉRÔME ANGELOT:

What we did for that, we had a long conversation and meeting with the Chengdu team. Because, I think it was important to avoid the music cliche that you have most of the time for games taking place in China, done by Western development teams. So we had a long-

CHARLES:

And Ubisoft Chengdu of course, is the team that's leading the development for the DLC.

JÉRÔME ANGELOT:

Exactly. Exactly. So where we are... they were super helpful to giving us pointer, instrument not to use, cliche to avoid. And after that, it was a matter to find again, the right melody and theme. Then once again, the music it sound really, really, really good.

GARETH COKER:

It's funny you mentioned the melody. This really was a completely standalone thing. So it was almost like starting from scratch again. But that initial meeting was incredibly helpful because Jérôme just mentioned like avoiding the cliches. And one of the things that you'll hear every Western composer do with Chinese sounding music is that they'll instantly go to the Chinese violin, which is the erhu.

GARETH COKER:

And that is an incredibly recognisable sound. And any Hollywood movie set in China, you'll see the opening shot and you'll hear an erhu within three seconds. Literally it happens so often. Well, one of the great things is like they were like, "Yeah. This game is set in a particular dynasty." Because basically the point was, is that the erhu didn't exist yet. So they're like, "You can't use it." Or if it did exist, it wasn't being used regularly. So it would not have...

CHARLES:

Stay away from the cliche violin sound.

GARETH COKER:

Right. Exactly. Because if it's for historical reasons, they actually wanted to make sure that it was accurate. I'm like, "Oh my goodness, that actually makes things so helpful." So Chengdu provided me with a list of instruments I could and couldn't use. And I was like, "Ah, this is so glorious." Limitations. Limitations are amazing, especially when you're starting out on a project. And I was like, "OK, that means I can now like focus on the instruments that are there and then make those ones shine." In coming up with the theme, the biggest difference this time is that we wanted to have a song with lyrics in the game and I was like, "Well, that's cool." I have not done that ever. And finally I got the opportunity, even though it's going to be in Chinese, to do it.

GARETH COKER:

So that was the whole process, figuring out the Chinese pronunciation and learning how that would all work. But then ultimately I'm like, "Well, it's still fundamentally the same thing. Try and find a good melody." But this time I had the words to work with. And not only did I have the words to work with, but they also had them pronounced. So I could understand how the words flowed so that they would fit well, musically. And yeah, I think the tune I came up with for this one is also pretty strong and we use it quite a lot, especially in the opening. And it's nice to hear it with words and without words.

CHARLES:
(THEME SONG WITH CHINESE LYRICS PLAYS)

JÉRÔME ANGELOT:

It's always difficult when you are writing songs, especially when we were using a poem, an ancient poem from China, that is called Song of the Crane. And the first version that we did by the way, was sung by the English actress Elana that was doing the voice for the English version. And later it was re-recorded by the Chinese actress.

CHARLES:
So the final version is the actress who does the Chinese voiceover.

JÉRÔME ANGELOT:
Exactly.

CHARLES:
The Chinese voice of the character.

JÉRÔME ANGELOT:
Yes. Yes. It's because we wanted to be sure that we have the correct pronunciation.

CHARLES:
How is it used in the DLC? Is it just used at the beginning or how are you using - or just for the credits?

JÉRÔME ANGELOT:
The song is in the credits, but the melody is also used in the game itself. For example, the character, Nuwa, that is the goddess Nuwa. Gareth chose that melody for her and it works really well.

GARETH COKER:
It's also used in the opening gods scene.

JÉRÔME ANGELOT:
Exactly.

GARETH COKER:
In a moment which definitely justifies it. So yeah, it's another melody that we... again, if it's memorable and if it feels good, it's the same philosophy. Once it's good enough, you can drop

it in, in multiple places. Not quite as extensively as in the base game. But obviously this is a DLC rather than like a full 30 hour thing.

CHARLES:

Well, players can check out the soundtrack for the game itself and for the DLC. They are all available, so they can go listen to that. It's beautiful music. Thank you very much, Gareth and Jérôme for this great conversation.

JÉRÔME ANGELOT:

Thank you.

GARETH COKER:

No problem. I just want to... because I have a forum to do it, I just want to thank everyone who played on the soundtrack or who worked on it in some way. Because, even though I did do a bunch of work, there are a lot of other people who helped bring it to life as well. Right from the original luthiers who made my lyres in Greece to Kristin Naigus who performed all of the woodwind on both the Greek part of the game and the Chinese version as well.

GARETH COKER:

She's a ridiculously talented woodwind player. And then the orchestra that played the main theme and credits for the game as well. Yeah, people always see the composer, but actually there's usually a ton of people who have to get involved to actually make the music, enter your ears rather than just the composer.

CHARLES:

The soundtrack to Immortals Fenyx Rising is available to buy or stream wherever you get your music. And you can also find the soundtracks to Immortals Fenyx Rising Myths of the Eastern Realm and to the latest DLC Immortals Fenyx Rising The Lost Gods, which just came out. We've put all the links in the episode description. I'm Charles-Adam Foster-Simard from Ubisoft. This episode was edited by Manu Bachet. If you enjoyed this podcast, remember to subscribe to Game Makers and review us on your favourite platform.