

The Future Sounds Familiar: Retrofuturism, Nostalgia, and Capitalism in the Music of Fallout 4,
Cyberpunk 2077, and Final Fantasy VII

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A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts (Music History)

University of Washington

2025

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Music History

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Abstract

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The video games Fallout 4, Cyberpunk 2077, and Final Fantasy VII each feature a complex web of retrofuturist settings, nostalgia, and criticisms of unchecked capitalism. These games' soundtracks each serve to sound their retrofuturist settings as well as evoke and enhance the games' nostalgic qualities. This is done in a variety of ways, utilizing a variety of methods and musical styles. This paper analyzes the ways in which music is used to conjure nostalgia in each of these retrofuturist games, and draws connections between their settings, the way they employ and evoke nostalgia, and their shared themes, which include a general skepticism or criticism of capitalism. The works of Svetlana Boym and Mark Fisher, two authors who have written about nostalgia and its relationship to both capitalism and the future, are used to frame this analysis.

Introduction

Impossibly tall mega-skyscrapers. Six-wheeled muscle cars. Bubblegum pink katanas and aquamarine 3D-printed guns; unreliable, but cheap and easily available from the vending machines across the street. Neon, everywhere. Gangs, everywhere. Trash, everywhere, and if you go far enough, you find endless mountains of it. Lurid, explicit advertisements are so ubiquitous and unavoidable they have long lost their shock value. They scroll endlessly into the sky in the form of massive hologram towers – taller than even the oppressive monoliths that are the corporate headquarters housing the worst people you’ve never met. Meanwhile, the destitute inhabit every alleyway and street corner. You tussle with some corpo thugs – you’ve just learned that they’ve been sent by corporate to murder striking factory workers in cold blood – whip out the bubblegum pink katana, and the synths sound. Straight out of an 80s science-fiction film... or at least, close enough. Retro sounds, retro colors... is that a shoulder pad? This place feels familiar. Yet these thugs with their cybernetic eyes, chrome arms, and flying vehicles tell you this place surely must be the future. Somehow you feel a certain sense of nostalgia for the past, a past, whether you experienced it yourself or not.

Retrofuturism and nostalgia are present in many forms of media today. Nostalgia is capitalized upon through a seemingly endless stream of remakes, sequels, reboots, and spinoffs. In the absence of original material or the time to create original material, nostalgia provides a quick and easy source. One common manifestation of nostalgia is “retro”– things which identifiably belong to the past, and which today retain a certain charm or interest precisely because they are old or dated. It often seems that interest in the retro correlates to dissatisfaction with the current times. A common understanding of nostalgia is that it highlights the positives of the past, and tends to deemphasize, devalue, or ignore entirely the negative aspects of a particular

time or era. Video games— as long-form, actively experienced pieces of media which are intricately connected to their soundtracks and soundscapes— become interesting and complex sites of nostalgia and retrofuturism.

Retrofuturism is in part, I argue, a manifestation of nostalgia. It is an exploration of a past vision of the future, the product of nostalgia for an imagined future that is no longer within our grasp - as Mark Fisher would put it, a “lost future.”¹ Retrofuturism in its purest sense refers to the portrayal of the future as it would have been portrayed or imagined by a particular era. Typically this vision of the future is mixed with present imaginations of the future as well, or can instead be a blend of old styles with futuristic technology. In a sense, retrofuturism often entails both a futuristic vision of the past and a past vision of the future. Whatever the particular presentation of retrofuturism, the element of retro always suggests nostalgia, whether it be for past styles, past technologies, past ethos, or past imaginations. Popular visions of “the future” are constantly changing and evolving, and retrofuturism peers back to a previous era’s visions.

Theoretical Framework

For the purpose of analyzing retrofuturism and nostalgia in a selection of related video games and their soundtracks, I draw on two different authors who have written about nostalgia at length, Svetlana Boym and Mark Fisher. Svetlana Boym’s book *The Future of Nostalgia* deals primarily with analyzing post- Cold War cities and their inhabitants and emigrants, and she writes this as an individual who fled the Soviet Union and did not return until a decade later. Boym discusses the ensuing nostalgia that inevitably arose for the places that many emigrants fled from, including herself. However, I find Boym’s descriptions of nostalgia as a concept most pertinent and applicable. Boym describes in the introduction: “Nostalgia (from *nostos* – return home, and *algia* – longing) is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed.

¹ Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of my Life* (Zero Books, 2014).

Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy."² For Boym, nostalgia is heavily tied to both loss and place (more specifically, of home), or loss *of* place (or home). Nostalgia is also, due to its reliance on memory, flawed and unreliable. Perhaps nostalgia's "romance with one's own fantasy" is in part what makes it such a viable topic for fiction. Nostalgia is not reality; it is imagination, fantasy, and feeling, similar to retrofuturism's fantasy and imagination of both the past and future. For my own purposes of analyzing 20th and 21st century retrofuturist video games concerned with memory and nostalgia, Boym's descriptions become even more pertinent:

In the seventeenth century, nostalgia was considered to be a curable disease... By the twenty-first century, the passing ailment turned into the incurable modern condition. The twentieth century began with a futuristic utopia and ended with nostalgia. Optimistic belief in the future was discarded like an outmoded spaceship sometime in the 1960s.³

As we will see in the analysis of video games *Fallout 4*, *Cyberpunk 2077*, and *Final Fantasy VII*, these games encapsulate this shift from optimistic yet anxious utopic futures of the mid-twentieth century to the stylish yet pessimistic and dystopic futures of the 1980s and 1990s. Boym also lays out two different forms of nostalgia: restorative and reflective nostalgia. In simple terms, restorative nostalgia is a longing or attempt to reconstruct what has been lost, while reflective nostalgia seeks to commemorate or muse on what has been lost.⁴ Boym also argues that nostalgia, as a historical emotion reliant on the imagination, can be felt for homes that have never existed, and we can apply this to video games which cause players to feel nostalgic for times and places they have not personally experienced, or which maybe do not exist at all.

² Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, (Basic Books, 2001) XIII.

³ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, XIV.

⁴ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, XVIII.

The other author whose work on nostalgia provides a starting point for my analysis of nostalgia and retrofuturism is Mark Fisher, particularly Fisher's book *Ghosts of My Life*. Like Boym, Fisher discusses nostalgia at length, and focuses particularly on music and popular culture. Fisher agrees with Boym in the sense that he argues that the increasing insistence of nostalgia within popular culture is due to societal changes over time which create overall cultural pessimism for the future. Fisher, like Boym, asserts that the prevalence of media marketed on the basis of nostalgia is because this media is a quick, easy way to satisfy an exhausted, overstimulated society. Fisher goes further, and asserts that society has become less capable and less willing to create new, original culture and art because of this exhaustion and overstimulation, which is due to an increasingly capital and attention-driven society. Fisher also asserts that artists are less incentivized to create new forms of art and music because the market has become so saturated, fast-paced, and dependent upon immediate capital success. While artists are increasingly pressured to produce what will be immediately successful, and consumers only have enough time, money, and energy to consume what they know will satisfy them, art becomes stagnant, and increasingly reliant on what has been successful in the past. This, according to Fisher, is an explanation for what Boym calls "sweet ready-mades",⁵ or in other words, our steady stream of remakes, sequels, reboots, and spinoffs.

Fisher also discusses hauntology – a term originally coined by Derrida that combines *haunt* with *ontology*⁶ and refers to the persistence of the past in modern culture and being "haunted" by lost futures. Furthermore, Fisher links nostalgia and hauntology with loss similarly to Boym, when he describes hauntology as "failed mourning."⁷ This haunting of lost futures explains retrofuturism well, and is very much applicable to our examples of video game music

⁵ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, XVII.

⁶ Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of my Life* (Zero Books, 2014) 19.

⁷ Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of my Life*, 22.

and their soundtracks. Fisher calls the progressive cultural pessimism and loss of unique vision of the future the “slow cancellation of the future.”⁸ Fisher argues that today, nostalgia and looking backward to the past and focusing imagination on past-futures, instead of imagining brand new futures, is so prevalent that society at large tends to not even notice it. With regards to music and the gradual disappearance of truly new forms of music, Fisher writes:

Those whose expectations were formed in an earlier era are more likely to be startled by the sheer persistence of recognizable forms. Nowhere is this clearer than in popular music culture. It was through the mutations of popular music that many of those of us who grew up in the 1960s, 70s and 80s learned to measure the passage of cultural time. But faced with 21st century music, it is the very sense of future shock which has disappeared.⁹

Fisher furthermore claims that the twenty-first century is plagued by cultural exhaustion and pessimistic uncertainty. He states that this century is “oppressed by a crushing sense of finitude and exhaustion. It doesn’t feel like the future. Or, alternatively, it doesn’t feel as if the 21st century has started yet. We remain trapped in the 20th century.”¹⁰ I apply this to a selection of video game examples and their musics. *Fallout 4*, while released in the twenty-first century, is in a franchise of games which started in the 1990’s. *Final Fantasy VII* was originally released in the 1990’s as well, and has rebirthed into the twenty-first century in the form of its overhauled remake, split into three separate games released years apart for maximum nostalgic effect (and profit). *Cyberpunk 2077*’s premise is to exemplify the cyberpunk genre, which is heavily and almost inherently tied to the era from which it emerged. This game is also itself a nostalgic object which incorporates a vast array of easter eggs and references to other pieces of cyberpunk

⁸ Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of my Life*, 6-7.

⁹ Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of my Life*, 7.

¹⁰ Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of my Life*, 8.

media, most of which are from the 20th century. And yet, despite the inarguably dated quality of these games' settings, each one begs players to consider their own futures and what may become of them. In line with Fisher and Boym's explanations, each of these games looks to the past in order to consider the future, and this phenomenon is increasingly prevalent in our popular culture. Instead of dreaming up completely new futures. As Fisher goes on to say, "The phrase 'the slow cancellation of the future' is so apt because it captures the gradual yet relentless way in which the future has been eroded over the last 30 years."¹¹

Mark Fisher explicitly draws a correlation between technological advancement (particularly in the area of communications), capitalist society, and the phenomena which he writes about, and this becomes important when we analyze futurist video games which criticize or otherwise comment on anxieties stemming from capitalism. He explains that "the combination of precarious work and digital communications leads to a besieging of attention... desperately short of time, energy, and attention, we demand quick fixes... retro offers quick and easy promise of a minimal variation on an already familiar satisfaction."¹²

Why video games? Why video game music? Video games are similar to films in that they offer a certain amount of immersion and interaction between the media and the audience or player. However, due to the nature of video games, players arguably experience a higher degree of immersion and interaction than they do in films. Music plays a critical role in creating, heightening, and expanding player immersion, as well as in signaling emotional depth and responses in the player.¹³ Video games vary in length, but many (including each of our examples) take several hours to complete at minimum. Our examples (*Fallout 4*, *Cyberpunk 2077*, and

¹¹ Mark Fisher. *Ghosts of my Life*, 13.

¹² Mark Fisher. *Ghosts of my Life*, 13-14.

¹³ Karen Collins, *Game Sound: An Introduction to the History, Theory, and Practice of Video Game Music and Sound Design* (MIT Press, 2008), 123-136.

Final Fantasy VII) each take at minimum around 30 hours of playtime to complete the main storylines, and this excludes side content or exploration. Typical playthroughs of these games can easily exceed 100 hours. Thus, players spend a great deal of time experiencing the soundtracks and musical worlds of these games, and typically experience a game in full over many sessions across days, weeks, or months. These soundtracks thus tend to be quite large, and their music must at once add to the game's world and immersion, increase emotional depth and response, and not become too boring or monotonous. Some video games, especially more recent ones, utilize adaptive soundtracks wherein music reacts and changes based on player choices and actions, and this adds to the music's immersive and emotionally influential quality.

Each of the three games we will analyze are related in their usage of retrofuturism, evocation of nostalgia, settings, and themes. We begin with *Fallout 4*, whose setting comments on the futurism of the mid-twentieth century, or the Atomic Age, yet is decidedly pessimistic and critical in its messaging. Its soundtrack consists of both original ambient music meant for background accompaniment, as well as pre-existing songs from the mid 20th-century. *Cyberpunk 2077* comments on the futurism of the 1980s and 1990s instead. *Final Fantasy VII* is discussed last, as its usage of retrofuturism and music diverges somewhat from the other two. Its setting and style is similar to that of *Cyberpunk 2077*, but instead of taking place on Earth, it is set on a fictional planet; therefore, the times and places that players feel nostalgia for do not exist in real life as they do in the other two games.

Music plays a similar role in all of these games – it helps generate feelings of nostalgia in the player, while providing a soundscape for the game worlds. However, each of these games' soundtracks achieves this in very different manners and modes. This usage of music to create feelings of nostalgia in such different ways highlights the importance of music as well as

emotion and memory in the experience of nostalgia, and this aligns well with our two frameworks presented above. Each game is an example of retrofuturism, and each is concerned with past and present anxieties around capitalist and neoliberal societal change. I argue that retrofuturism is intimately tied to loss and memory, and thus, retrofuturism is tied to loss and memory. The music in these games shapes these different versions of retrofuturism by generating and enhancing feelings of nostalgia in the player. Each of the games analyzed demonstrates how nostalgia, memory, loss, and capitalism are intricately intertwined.

All three of these games are related through their retrofuturistic settings, importance of nostalgia, and underlying criticism of advanced capitalist society. They are all derived from the cyberpunk genre as a whole, though this may not be immediately obvious. We will delve into the topic of cyberpunk as a genre in depth in the section dedicated to *Cyberpunk 2077*, but it is important to understand that even the other two games are heavily influenced by cyberpunk. Cyberpunk as a genre of media emerged in the 1980s, and in short, refers to futuristic settings, usually with advanced technology (“cyber”), paired with low standard of living and some form of oppressive government, which itself is often enabled by advanced technology. Cyberpunk’s ethos is rooted in criticism of capital-driven power structures, particularly those which are enabled by advanced technology, as well as the loss of humanity that comes with accelerated capitalism, unchecked technology, and the resulting societal suffering.¹⁴

Each of our examples feature oppressive, corrupt governments and institutions which use advanced technology to further their agendas and enable their control and oppression of lower classes. *Fallout 4* is aesthetically not what most would consider cyberpunk today, regardless of its themes. However, it is worth noting that the particular aesthetic style and setting of *Fallout 4*

¹⁴ Caroline Alphin, *Neoliberalism and Cyberpunk Science Fiction: Living on the Edge of Burnout* (Routledge, 2021).

can be called “raygun gothic”: a specifically retrofuturist style and setting based on aesthetics, styles, and characteristics of the mid-twentieth century. This term which describes *Fallout 4* so well was in fact coined by William Gibson, an important and extremely influential early cyberpunk author, and was used in a short story that later was added to one of Gibson’s cyberpunk short story anthologies, *Burning Chrome*.¹⁵ *Burning Chrome* also contains the short story *Johnny Mnemonic*, which directly influenced the story and characters of *Cyberpunk 2077*, as well as an introduction with a description that has now become a functional definition of cyberpunk: “high tech, low life”.¹⁶ *Final Fantasy VII* is also influenced by the cyberpunk genre, and thematically it incorporates advanced technology as well as a zaibatsu-style,¹⁷ all-controlling, oppressive governing body. Its retrofuturist setting combines elements of high-tech as it was envisioned in the 1990’s when it was released, as well as “older” style technologies and aesthetics which resemble “dieselpunk” – a retrofuturistic term, similar to cyberpunk, that describes settings using diesel-based technologies and aesthetics from the early-to-mid twentieth century¹⁸; this is contrasted with *Fallout 4*’s “raygun gothic” or “atompunk”, but these science-fiction “punk” aesthetics and settings indeed are all derivative of cyberpunk.¹⁹ “Atompunk” itself first emerges from a short story by Philip K. Dick,²⁰ who also authored the novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, later adapted into the classic cyberpunk film *Blade Runner*.²¹

¹⁵ William Gibson, *Burning Chrome* (Ace Books, 2000).

¹⁶ William Gibson, *Burning Chrome*.

¹⁷ Zaibatsus were Japanese industrial or financial conglomerates, which controlled much of Japan’s economy from the Meiji Restoration through the end of the second World War. They were typically controlled by a single family and were large enough that they had a high degree of influence over Japanese politics and society. They were forcibly dissolved by the Allied Powers after Japan’s surrender during WWII.

¹⁸ Iolanda Ramos, “Alternate World Building: Retrofuturism and Retrophilia in Steampunk and Dieselpunk Narratives.” *Anglo Saxonica* 17, no.1. 2020.

¹⁹ Vladimir Yurchenko, “The Art of Retrofuturism: Steampunk, Dieselpunk, Cyberpunk”. *Siberian Art History Journal*. *Siberian Art History Journal* 2, no. 1 (2023). 96–107.

²⁰ Philip K. Dick, *Solar Lottery* (Gregg Press, 1976).

²¹ Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (Ballantine Books, 1996).

Fallout 4

Background

Fallout 4 is the fourth numbered installment in the *Fallout* series, released in 2015. It is an open-world action-role-playing game with rich and extensive lore, as well as a uniquely identifiable aesthetic which closely resembles the original conceptions of retrofuturism.²² The world of *Fallout 4* works tightly together with its messaging and aesthetics and thus with its music.

Fallout 4, as with all of the games in the *Fallout* series, is set primarily in a near-far-future, post-nuclear-fallout United States. Most games in the series take place in the mid-to-late 2200s. In the *Fallout* universe, this future is suggested to be an alternate historical timeline in which nuclear energy and technology become central in American society by the late twentieth century and fuel most forms of technology including electricity, automobiles, and appliances. This timeline realizes the imagination, hopes, and fears of the Atomic Age—it is in a sense a what-if scenario of what the future would look like if the Atomic Age's imagination of the future came to fruition. However, in this world fossil fuels are still needed and relied upon for certain technologies and for producing goods, and in the near-future (the 2070s) are becoming harder and harder to obtain, leading to international resource wars. These resource wars culminate in a massive, apocalyptic nuclear attack by China against the United States, leaving most of the country completely destroyed and highly radioactive.

Prior to this nuclear fallout, a government-affiliated defense megacorporation called Vault-Tec has sold both the United States government and the American people a system of underground fallout shelters called Vaults. These Vaults are for the most part isolated from each other, and spots are sold to American citizens who fear nuclear escalation of the ongoing

²² Bethesda Softworks. *Fallout 4*. 2015.

resource wars. They also serve as a promise to the United States government that the nation would at least partially be preserved in the event of nuclear war. However, Vault-Tec eventually loses faith in the United States government, and takes it upon themselves to secretly change the nature of their Vaults to suit more company-centered interests; Vaults instead became covert social and human experiments, with end goals of preserving the power of the corporation after the war. Each Vault is constructed to conduct a different (typically highly unethical) experiment.

Fallout 4 begins with the player character, either a husband or a wife with a family and infant child, the day the bombs drop in 2077.²³ They are sold a spot in a Vault coincidentally moments before the bombs fall, and they flee with their family to this Vault, where they are promptly ushered into cryo-pods and frozen against their will. The player character partially awakens some time in the future to see their spouse murdered and their child stolen by mysterious figures and awakens fully again to find the rest of the Vault deceased in their pods. Due to this, the player character in *Fallout 4* is colloquially known as the Sole Survivor, and this is what I will refer to them as going forward. The Sole Survivor escapes the Vault to find a bleak, scorched landscape, and sets off to find their missing child. Unbeknownst to the Sole Survivor at first, it has actually been more than 200 years since they were frozen.

The world of *Fallout* draws on many elements from the real-life “Atomic Age,” a period of time around the mid-twentieth century following World War II and the development of nuclear weapons, when much of American society was both fascinated by and concerned about nuclear technology.²⁴ The Atomic Age was associated with a particular set of design aesthetics which were considered modern and innovative, and which today we tend to associate broadly with the

²³ Curiously, the date of nuclear apocalypse in the *Fallout* series is the same year *Cyberpunk 2077* is set in; this seems to be mostly coincidental, though it arguably points to a similar idea of when exactly the “near-future” is between the creators.

²⁴ Laura Cigliani, “Masses and Historical Consciousness: Beauty and the Nation in Western Culture during the Atomic Age.” *Journal of Contemporary History* 56, no. 4 (2021).

1950s. These design aesthetics are deeply tied to the sociopolitical climate of the time. This era of post-WWII, Cold War America was characterized by prosperity for the middle class and rising mass consumerism, as well as a mixture of fear and optimism for the future, especially with regards to nuclear technology. The post- WWII economic boom created a “compression” of wealth—lower and middle classes experienced less income inequality than in previous decades, and this encouraged a growing advertising-driven consumerist culture. However, the Cold War and new nuclear technologies created constant anxieties and fears among Americans of an ever-looming threat of nuclear war and fallout. At the same time, these anxieties were mitigated by a deliberate trivialization of nuclear technology and the atom bomb by the American government, marketing, and media.

Nuclear and atomic symbols, imagery, and subject matter were incorporated into everyday life and design. This was done to address American collective anxiety around nuclear technology as well as to desensitize the public. For example, in 1953 President Eisenhower launched “Atoms for Peace”, a speech and ensuing media campaign which aimed to acknowledge American fears of nuclear war and promote a utopic future of peaceful use of nuclear energy technology. During this time, atomic and nuclear imagery, such as visual representations of atoms and mushroom clouds became commonplace in marketing and design. Nuclear fallout became frequent subject matter in both fiction, such as films depicting the heroic reclaiming of the American landscape post-nuclear fallout, and government addresses to the American public, such as in brochures meant to teach post-fallout survival skills.²⁵

These collective anxieties and optimistic hopes for a utopic, technological future were deeply intertwined with consumerist culture, and by extension, architecture and design

²⁵ .Laura Ciglioni, “Masses and Historical Consciousness”

aesthetics.²⁶ Several terms have come to describe related mid-century design aesthetics, including Googie, Streamline Moderne, and Populuxe. Googie refers to an architectural style influenced by automobiles, the Space Age, and nuclear technology, which was primarily used to construct consumerist spaces such as restaurants, cafes, gas stations, and motels.²⁷ The style is characterized by futuristic bold shapes, fonts, colors, neon, a mixture of sharp and curved lines, parabolas, and atom motifs. It evolved out of Streamline Moderne, an earlier design style inspired by Art Deco, aerodynamics, and sleek industrialism.²⁸ Also related to Googie is Populuxe, a term which combines “populism” or “popular” with “luxury.”²⁹ This design aesthetic highlights consumerist culture, optimistic futurism, and middle-class comforts. In the *Fallout* universe, these aesthetics and cultures combine in a way that resembles the real and remembered mid-century America, but somewhat exaggerated and with a particularly extra-futurist flair.

Nostalgia in *Fallout 4*

As we will see in each of the other examples, nostalgia operates in *Fallout 4* on two different levels: the real-world nostalgia of the player and the in-game nostalgia of the player character. The Sole Survivor experiences nostalgia in a particularly unique way due to their circumstances of having awoken suddenly two hundred years into their future to a completely changed world from the one they have been used to. This new world is filled to the brim with remnants and reminders of the past, contrasted with people and creatures who do not have any memory whatsoever of a pre-fallout world. The Sole Survivor, who has been cryogenically frozen for the past two centuries, awakens to a reality which is immediately and starkly different to the one experienced mere minutes prior. For the Sole Survivor, we can imagine, the distant

²⁶ Robin Schuldenfrei, ed. *Atomic Dwelling : Anxiety, Domesticity, and Postwar Architecture*. (Routledge, 2012). 13-15.

²⁷ Alan Hess. *Googie Redux: Ultramodern Roadside Architecture* (Chronicle Books, 2004).

²⁸ William Kowalik, “Streamline Moderne Design in Consumer Culture and Transportation Infrastructure: Design for the Twentieth Century.” *New Errands: The Undergraduate Journal of American Studies* (2025). 38-67.

²⁹ Mark Lytle, “The Era of Populuxe” in *The All-Consuming Nation* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 93-114.

past feels like yesterday. Analogously, for the player, mere minutes have passed. Yet for most of the NPCs the Sole Survivor encounters, the pre-fallout world is not even a distant memory—it is a distant historical event that, despite the environment filled with its remains, is no longer consciously relevant. The Sole Survivor experiences a unique form of nostalgia wherein they personally remember a time forgotten by almost all those around them. Simultaneously, they are surrounded at all times by remnants of a world which they must remember very clearly: partially destroyed buildings, cars, suspiciously well-preserved food items, long-dead skeletons, landmarks, and many pieces of still-functioning technology, which for many of the NPCs are part of daily life yet thoroughly decontextualized. They are mostly alone in their memory of the old world, and with few exceptions, the present world does not remember nor care about this past world beyond the utility of its remnants.

According to Boym, nostalgia is dependent on both loss and memory, particularly of one's home, which can consist of not just locations, but of people and things.³⁰ *Fallout 4* begins with many losses—loss of spouse, child, society, and physical home. One of the first places the player visits upon leaving the Vault in the opening of the game is what is left of the Sole Survivor's old home. This home can be turned into a base; in other words, the player can attempt to reconstruct this location as a post-apocalyptic "home". The game clearly aims to frame the Sole Survivor as a character marked by extreme loss of home, whose goals ultimately align with restoring what has been lost. The Sole Survivor's missing son turns out to be an adult, and is working for a deeply flawed and antagonistic organization focused on scientific development. Ultimately, the Survivor's efforts to restore what they have lost are futile, and this aligns well with Boym's argument that even restorative nostalgia aims to restore things which are fundamentally un-restorable, and nostalgic feelings are the result of coping with this loss.

³⁰ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (Basic Books, 2001).

Simultaneously to the in-game nostalgia experienced by the player character, the real-world players experience a different form of nostalgia. Some of the very same elements which evoke nostalgia for the Sole Survivor do so for the player as well. For the player, nostalgia is experienced for the real-world past-future rather than the game-world future-past. We can assume most players do not personally remember the mid-twentieth century, and the nostalgia experienced is actually for an imagined version of this past, or rather for this imagined past's lost vision of the future. The Atomic Age had a lasting impact on American culture and society, both politically and aesthetically. Today, "midcentury modern" aesthetics are a popular design choice for many, particularly due to their nostalgic and retrofuturist qualities. This nostalgia for a past-imagined-future is coupled with the fact that, in the game, this version of the future has come, and since been ruined and lost. As previously discussed, nostalgia relies on loss, and retrofuturism relies on a lost expectation of the future. In this case, this imagined future has been lost twice: once in its absence from reality for us in the real world, and also its destruction in the game-world by nuclear war. These two losses are experienced simultaneously by the player, while in the midst of experiencing vicariously the losses of the Sole Survivor. While we get to experience a brief moment of the future-past (the pre-fallout world), the game truly takes place after this realization of the Atomic Age future has been destroyed. The player experience of almost all of the retrofuturist elements in the game is interrupted and superceded by their post-apocalyptic context.

In addition to this, the player also experiences another layer of real-world nostalgia while playing *Fallout 4*, which is nostalgia for the *Fallout* franchise. The first game in the series was released in 1997, and was originally a top-down, turn-based PC game, developed by a small studio and relatively niche and small-budget compared to the franchise that exists today. Because

Fallout games are all set in the same world and incorporate many of the same gameplay elements, there is a certain amount of nostalgia baked into *Fallout 4* for players who have played previous games in the series. These players undoubtedly approach the game with certain expectations based on their memory of previous games, and these expectations are either fulfilled or subverted based on what is familiar and what is new; in either case, nostalgia is felt based on the absence or reappearance of certain expected aspects of the game. Furthermore, for some players there may be nostalgia for the original *Fallout* game of the 90's, whose premise, world, and lore are preserved in the more recent games but whose overall look and play-style are lost.

Music in F4

The soundtrack of *Fallout 4* is, like its visual aesthetics, quite a recognizable asset of the franchise. As is common in video game music, the soundtrack in the game serves several different roles; however, these roles are hyperspecific and are intricately woven together with the nostalgia and retrofuturism present in the game. *Fallout 4*'s soundtrack is probably most recognizable due to its particular mixture of diegetic and nondiegetic music, in the form of an ambient background soundtrack and a collection of in-game radio stations. These two separate parts of the soundtrack contrast strongly with one another and also work in conjunction to enhance game experience, as well as explore and expand the game's retrofuturist and nostalgic feeling.³¹

The background music in *Fallout 4* can arguably be described as the game's "default." This is the soundtrack and music which is most often heard if the player chooses not to turn on their in-game radio. The background music in this game directly reflects the post-apocalyptic environment the player traverses and serves primarily to set mood and accompany the particular post-apocalyptic visuals and militaristic gameplay the player engages in. The gameplay revolves

³¹ William Cheng, *Sound Play: Video Games and the Musical Imagination*.

largely around combat, with elements of exploration and interpersonal relationship management. A large portion of the game is spent finding weapons, enhancing weapons, managing ammunition, and finding and operating pre-war military machinery. Additionally, if one chooses the male player character option, this character explicitly has a military background that they will occasionally comment on. *Fallout 4*'s opening also references military and war, with a quote: "War never changes." The ambient and background music reflects not only the post-apocalyptic landscape, but also this underlying theme of military, war, and technology.

The background soundtrack uses a typical orchestral base with added electronic elements, as well as the use of metal or machinery-inspired sounds. The orchestral instrumental base, common in video game music, provides a sense of story and adventure while also shaping the overall air and landscape of post-nuclear-apocalypse. This music is usually ambient in nature; often notes are long and move slowly, and melodic sections are relatively simple, short, and sparse. While it is tonal, there are often dissonances and drones. Paired with occasional melodic phrases, this gives a sense of a bleak, dark, melancholic landscape, sparsely populated, but not completely devoid of life. The music sounds a landscape which is largely destroyed, though a semblance of civilization remains. The added electronic elements provide a slight feeling of futurism and technology, and the metal and machinery sounds provide the militaristic and combat contexts that underscore most of the player experience of this landscape.

The civilization which remains consists of various factions, most of which are involved in violence amongst one another. One of these factions, called the Enclave, is explicitly the remnants of the American government, or more specifically, a deep-state paramilitary organization whose main goal is to preserve the American state post-war; this organization is extremist, aggressive, and openly genocidal towards any and all non-members, and they serve as

one of the main antagonistic forces in the *Fallout* franchise. It is difficult to overstate the extent to which military, combat, and machinery shape the landscape, player experience, and story. These elements are befittingly interwoven into the game's "default" musical soundscape, such that the guns, Power Armor, and militarized social factions provide as much of the environment as the barren vegetation, mutated wildlife, rusted metal, destroyed buildings, radioactive water, and cobbled-together shacks.

This "default" musical soundscape is sharply contrasted with the other portion of the game's soundtrack, which is split up into various in-game radio stations. The radio station element is a familiar and beloved one in the *Fallout* series, and it is perhaps one of the most recognizable and memorable aspects of the game as a whole. While there are many radio stations accessible in different areas of the game, only a few are accessible in all areas of the map. One of these is Diamond City Radio, sometimes also called Galaxy News Radio. This radio station is available early on in the game, and is able to be turned on at any time via the player character's Pip-Boy, a multifunctional personal device worn like a watch. This radio station plays a multitude of songs which are actually real-world songs from the mid-twentieth century. Most are along the lines of rockabilly, rock n' roll, R n' B, and "novelty songs"; they tend to be upbeat, lively, and chipper in comparison to the ambient soundtrack, and they evoke an identifiably midcentury American feel. They also feature human voices and lyrics, which are absent from the nondiegetic, ambient background music, and which contrast with many of the abandoned and deserted urban areas of the game. The recorded human voices are striking in the context of the abandoned and deserted landscape of the game.

Most of these songs also tend to carry some amount of irony or comical literalness when presented in a post-nuclear fallout context. For example, "Atom Bomb Baby", a 1957 song by

The Five Stars, describes a woman's attractiveness by likening her to an atom bomb ("Atom bomb baby loaded with power/Radioactive as a TV tower/A nuclear fission in her soul/Loves with electronic control").³² Another song, "Orange Colored Sky" by Nat King Cole, describes falling in love by likening it to being hit by a bomb out of the sky, and whose lyrics feel much more literal given the game context ("I was walking along minding my business/When love came and hit me in the eye/Flash, bam, alakazam/Out of an orange colored sky").³³ Other featured songs do reflect much more literal 1950's sentiment towards nuclear technology - both excitement and anxiety. The 1960 song "Crawl Out Through the Fallout" by Sheldon Allman romantically tells a lover to survive an impending nuclear fallout ("Crawl out through the fallout, baby/When they drop that bomb/Crawl out through the fallout/When your white count's getting higher/Hurry, don't delay/I'll hold you close and kiss those/Radiation burns away").³⁴ Meanwhile another song, "Uranium Fever" by Elton Britt (1955), describes mining for uranium ("Uranium fever has done and got me down/Uranium fever is spreadin' all around/With a Geiger counter in my hand, I'm a-goin' out to stake me some government land/Uranium fever has done and got me down").³⁵

Several interesting things are happening with the inclusion of this collection of songs on the *Fallout 4* soundtrack. As stated before, this radio station can be accessed early on in the game and from anywhere on the playable map, and it is linked to questlines involving NPCs and in-game locations where the station is set up. When turned on, the music from the radio station replaces the ambient background music and, though in theory it is diegetic, it functions more as nondiegetic music. The player can sneak and engage in stealth even when their radio is turned

³² The Five Stars, "Atom Bomb Baby". Music by John F. Young (Kernel Records, 1957).

³³ Nat King Cole, "Orange Colored Sky". Written by Milton Delugg and Willie Stein (King Records, 1950).

³⁴ Sheldon Allman, "Crawl Out Through the Fallout". (High Fidelity Recordings, 1960).

³⁵ Elton Britt, "Uranium Fever". Written by Penny Britt (Victor Records, 1955).

on, and although NPCs at times discuss the radio stations or their music, they do not react at all to the player's personal radio. This music essentially becomes nondiegetic music for the player, and if chosen by the player, re-sounds their game experience.

If the player so chooses, this re-sounding of the world serves several purposes and functions. Firstly and most immediately, the upbeat, lively novelty songs on Diamond City Radio are both congruent with the ruins and remaining aesthetics of an Atomic Age, 1950s-inspired world, and also in contrast with the bleak, dirty, ruined, and violent post-apocalyptic environment. The lively, often-optimistic sounds of the "civilized" past contrast starkly with the present environment, and at the same time serve to almost highlight the level of destruction and change experienced by this world. The figurative and literal references to nuclear bombs and technology also provide a layer of real-time commentary on the world the player is experiencing, in addition to being ironic or humorous. A nostalgic feeling is evoked when the player experiences and explores a post-fallout landscape while hearing songs which express either interest in or anxiety about nuclear technology, and this feeling perhaps doubles on itself when the player remembers that these songs are taken from the real world, expressing real-life interest and/or anxiety from the real-life past.

This brings us to how music is functioning nostalgically in *Fallout 4*. When we consider the retrofuturism of *Fallout 4*, its music is particularly noteworthy. On one hand, the ambient "default" background soundtrack represents the present, while Diamond City Radio and most other radio stations represent the past. In game, both represent the future, near or far, to the player. At the same time, this music is cognitively taken from the real-world past, and represents either real or idealized midcentury America. To the average player, Diamond City Radio sounds identifiably 1950s (even the songs which are not strictly from that decade) and yet we are also

keenly aware that it is meant to represent a hypothetical future, with technology that is underdeveloped in some ways and more advanced in others compared to our own. *Fallout 4* takes place in the fictional future, and yet its most identifiable music is from the real-world past. Diamond City Radio songs are undoubtedly hand-picked to evoke the most immediate and visceral 1950s feelings and imagery, with additional nuclear flare, for the player - and these feelings are (for most) based on their idea of the Atomic Age rather than their personal memory of it.

This music is both retrofuturist in the sense that it is music from the real-past being used to depict the game's futuristic past and present, which for the player is a representation of an Atomic Age future, and it is nostalgic because it evokes our own real-world cultural memories, ideas, or imaginations of the past. As we discussed earlier, nostalgia is functioning in *Fallout 4* on two distinct levels: the in-game nostalgia of the Sole Survivor, and the out-of-game nostalgia of the player. This two-levelled nostalgia extends to its Diamond City Radio music, which is functioning both diegetically and nondiegetically. It is heard by the player character, we assume, but mostly is meant to be heard by us, the player. Additionally, for both the player and the Sole Survivor, the contrast between the upbeat rockabilly music and the Wasteland environment, as well as the sonic contrast with the default ambient background music, highlights the extent of loss that has taken place in this world. These songs, being musical emblems of the society from which they came, also serve to remind us of the powers that brought about this loss and destruction. There is a certain amount of uncanniness that comes with this contrast as well.

While Diamond City Radio is no doubt meant to be a fun, humorous, ironic break from the bleak Wasteland and accompanying ambient soundtrack, it is also perhaps meant to be a bit haunting: a

reminder of a lost past for the Sole Survivor, and for the player, a musical symbol of both a lost past and a lost future.

Concluding Thoughts on *Fallout 4*

Fallout 4 presents a synthesis of a variety of themes related to nostalgia, retrofuturism, loss, memory, and anxiety surrounding capitalism. The game's commentary on capitalism is both an aspect of its portrayal of a realized Atomic Age, Cold War consumerist dystopia ruined by nuclear fallout, and a result of contemporary concerns about the advancement of capitalism. The game additionally presents a scenario in which a capitalist state and society has fallen, yet its remnants shape the present. Overall, *Fallout 4* is a coalescence of nostalgias, in-game and out-of-game, and this is fueled in part by anxiety and critique of capitalism. *Fallout 4* is a realization of both 1950s anxieties of a consumerism and technology-driven society being destroyed by nuclear fallout, and also of contemporary worries that a corrupt, capital-driven power structure will eventually lead to the violent, irreparable demise of society as we know it. The plot and player experience of the game is shaped by two main avenues of experience: searching for a stolen son, who turns out to be irreclaimable, and slowly uncovering the depths of greed and depravity that led to *Fallout*'s nuclear apocalypse. Thus, not only is the game's retrofuturist setting inherently nostalgic, deeply linked with memory of the past and loss of a potential future, but so is its story. This relates to Boym's argument that nostalgia is a form of coping with the loss of home, people, or things which are unrecoverable due to the passage of time, and relates to Fisher's argument that lost futures and nostalgic feelings are deeply tied to the acceleration of capitalism. Music underscores every moment throughout this player experience, and is instrumental in communicating, conjuring, and enhancing nostalgic feeling.

Music denotes the game's apocalyptic present, as well as its lost past, which to players represents a lost future.

Cyberpunk 2077

Introduction

Cyberpunk 2077 deals with similar themes of retrofuturism and nostalgia. *Cyberpunk 2077* was released in December 2020, after much anticipation and several delays. The video game's premise is based on a 1988 tabletop game called *Cyberpunk* (later *Cyberpunk 2020* or *Cyberpunk Red*) by Mike Pondsmith. Pondsmith's game was inspired by the cyberpunk genre of literature and media that emerged in the early 1980s.³⁶ The video game is set in the same world and timeline as the tabletop game and takes most of its core elements from the tabletop version.³⁷ Similarly to *Fallout 4*, the world of *Cyberpunk 2077* is set in an alternate timeline, which branched off in the 1980s; in this timeline, the United States entered multiple global conflicts, and as a result of these conflicts, the Soviet Union never dissolved, and Japan became a world superpower. Additionally, the United States experienced a number of highly destructive and divisive internal conflicts which led to its near-complete restructuring as the New United States, and the states of Washington, Oregon, and California have seceded.

Cyberpunk 2077 takes place in Night City, a megacity in North California. Night City is controlled by megacorporations, primarily Arasaka,³⁸ a Japanese defense and manufacturing corporation with its own paramilitary, who gained control over Night City after saving it during a war between the Free States and the New United States. Thus, Night City and the greater world of *Cyberpunk 2077* embody the cyberpunk ethos and lifestyle—a corrupt corporatocracy has

³⁶ R. Talsorian Games and Mike Pondsmith, *Cyberpunk, the Roleplaying Game of the Dark Future* (R. Talsorian Games Inc., 2020).

³⁷ CD Projekt RED, *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020).

³⁸ Arasaka is another zaibatsu-style company, headed by a singular family.

created extreme wealth and class disparity. Meanwhile access to cyberware in the form of weapons and body modifications is easy even for the lower class, is normalized, and is often necessary given the widespread violence which occurs in the city. Society is broadly open-carry, and even unaccompanied children can be seen with firearms. In *Cyberpunk 2077*, nearly everything and everyone is commodified; sex work is widespread, legal, but deeply exploitative; prostitutes utilize cyberware which allows them to adapt to customers' every wish, no matter how extreme, then delete their memories. Advertisements are plastered on every surface, screen and building, and tend to be shockingly lurid and sexually explicit. The primary form of entertainment comes in the form of "braindances," recorded memories that capture every physical sensation, sight, sound, taste, and even inner thoughts of a person, and which are sometimes edited to be more exciting or appealing.

The story of *Cyberpunk 2077* revolves around a freelance mercenary named V who unwillingly becomes the host of the digitized consciousness of a dead rockstar-turned-terrorist named Johnny Silverhand, who has been dead for 50 years. This digital consciousness progressively takes over V's mind and body and will eventually kill them; the main goal of the game is to save V's life while grappling with the will of Silverhand. The program on this chip is being developed by Arasaka, the primary megacorp controlling Night City, for use in corporate warfare. Silverhand's digital ghost is hellbent on avenging his past lover, who was kidnapped and exploited by Arasaka. Throughout the story, more of Silverhand's memories are revealed to V through first-person flashbacks, which are played through by the player, but these memories are eventually revealed to be inaccurate and untrustworthy.

The story of *Cyberpunk 2077* also features a great deal of loss. V's story, and the game itself, begins with the player playing through what is essentially an extended prologue, in which

V goes through the violent and sudden loss of their closest friend, Jackie Welles. Throughout the story, as V progressively loses their mind and body to Johnny Silverhand, they also experience other traumatic losses of characters around them, usually to murder or suicide. As we recall Boym's argument that a sense of loss is crucial in creating nostalgic feelings, this element of the story is important when analyzing the game through the lens of nostalgia.

What is Cyberpunk?

To understand the retrofuturism, nostalgia, and anti-capitalist sentiment present in *Cyberpunk 2077*, it is necessary to have an understanding of the genre upon which the game is based. Cyberpunk's beginnings are typically attributed to the 1980s, with some earlier precursors in the 1970s. Some examples of early cyberpunk works are the 1982 film *Blade Runner*,³⁹ and the 1984 novel *Neuromancer* by William Gibson.⁴⁰ Cyberpunk also developed around the same time in Japan, with classic examples like *Akira* (1988), *Ghost in the Shell* (1995), and *Alita Battle Angel* (1993). There are many reasons as to why this particular subgenre of science fiction began in the 1980s, in both the United States and Japan near-simultaneously. This period in the United States was characterized by a boom in technological advancement and development, consumerism, and socio-political changes.⁴¹ At the same time, Japan also experienced a technology boom; in the United States this caused some to fear that Japan could potentially surpass the United States as a world superpower and technological leader.⁴² Rapidly-advancing technology led to questions and anxieties about society's ability to grapple with associated

³⁹ *Blade Runner*, directed by Ridley Scott (1982; Burbank CA: Warner Bros, 1999), DVD.

⁴⁰ William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (Ace Books, 2000).

⁴¹ Kevin Mattson, *We're Not Here to Entertain: Punk Rock, Ronald Reagan, and the Real Culture War of 1980s America* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 8-20.

⁴² Andrew C McKeivitt, *Consuming Japan: Popular Culture and the Globalizing of 1980s America*. 1st ed. (The University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

ethical concerns. This directly contributed to the emergence of cyberpunk, which often depicts advanced technology being used to facilitate oppression.⁴³

The genre of cyberpunk tends to have one core underlying theme: “High tech and low life,” as stated in the preface to William Gibson’s collection of short stories *Burning Chrome*. However, there are other common tropes that more or less define the genre. Common elements and tropes in cyberpunk include near-future settings, government and/or societal corruption as a result of unchecked capitalism, technology that combines with human biology, and the resulting decay of humanity amongst humanity. In the original *Cyberpunk* tabletop role-playing game, use of cyberware comes at a cost in the form of “empathy points” which equal a person’s level of humanity and ability to relate to other humans. When these points run out, a player’s character succumbs to “cyberpsychosis”—they go violently mad, are unable to be saved, and become an NPC. Cyberpsychosis is retained in *Cyberpunk 2077*, in the form of V being tasked with subduing cyberpsychos, as well as limits to the amount of cyberware V can have at any one time.

In addition to political themes tackling systems of authority, corruption, and oppressive capitalism, cyberpunk media often deals with themes of memory and identity, particularly manipulated memories, the fallibility of memory, and how this impacts identity. Some examples of classic cyberpunk media which feature these themes are *Blade Runner*, *Total Recall*, *The Matrix*, and *Neuromancer*. This is certainly also the case in *Cyberpunk 2077*, in which the digitized ghost and consciousness of Silverhand infects V’s mind; his memories are experienced first hand as if they are V’s own, and slowly over the course of the game, V’s personality and goals become more and more reminiscent of Silverhand’s. At a certain point, the game goes so far as to show Silverhand’s reflection in mirrors instead of V’s, and provides the player with his

⁴³ Dani Cavallaro, *Cyberpunk and Cyberculture: Science Fiction and the Work of William Gibson* (Athlone Press, 2000).

clothing and signature weapon. We never know to what extent the engram of Johnny Silverhand is truly conscious, or if it is simply a highly advanced AI constructed to appear as close to him as possible. Despite this, V's actions in the game are undoubtedly influenced by Silverhand. In the end, it does not matter to what extent the engram in V's head is really the soul and consciousness of the real Johnny Silverhand. He haunts the present regardless, in a highly tangible way through V's actions. Eventually, the line between V's identity and Silverhand's influence is blurred.

The term "cyberpunk" has in more recent times also come to describe a certain visual aesthetic that often accompanies cyberpunk media, and this particular aesthetic is heavily inspired by the 1980s and 1990s. Many pieces of cyberpunk media emulate the "original" cyberpunk classics of the 80s and 90s, which at the time featured both contemporary and futuristic elements. Many modern cyberpunk works retain a particular 1980s aesthetic flair. In *Cyberpunk 2077*, this manifests in a variety of ways, from the chunky profiles of advanced technology, to the colors and silhouettes of the futuristic fashion, to the designs of vehicles which appear deeply reminiscent of older vehicles we are familiar with in real life. However, it can also be argued that the ideas and anxieties which led to the creation of the cyberpunk genre very much exist today much the same as they did in the 80s and 90s. According to Mark Fisher, society is more and more "obsessed" with the pop culture of the past, and more and more relies on the recycling of pop culture and media of the past, a concept he expands on in *Ghosts of my Life*. To Fisher, the staying power of the 80s aesthetics in cyberpunk media is actually symptomatic of the very thing cyberpunk media tends to criticize and embody. According to Fisher, advancing capitalism and increasing pessimism for the future as a result of this has severely inhibited society's willingness or capability to envision new culture and new futures; instead, we are haunted by past futures which are now lost to us.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of my Life*.

Nostalgia and Retrofuturism in *Cyberpunk 2077*

Similarly in concept to *Fallout 4*, *Cyberpunk 2077* takes place in an alternate timeline which has branched from the 1980s. The game's aesthetics reflect elements from 1980s America and broad East Asia. The game also dwells on anxieties and problems about the future many people had during the 1980s, particularly about technology. Specifically, *Cyberpunk 2077* depicts a future that was feared or anticipated by some during the 1980s because of economic, political, and technological trends of the time, and fears that those trends would continue unchecked. It is similar to *Fallout 4* in that the future depicted is one that incorporates both the excitements and anxieties of the eras that inspired it. While *Fallout 4* depicts a future in which nuclear energy has become commonplace and household yet also has led to the destruction of society as we know it, *Cyberpunk 2077* depicts a future with impressively, almost incomprehensibly advanced technology, yet unchecked capitalism and widespread corruption has turned this technology into something horrifying and oppressive, that rips humanity away from its citizens.

Cyberpunk as a genre has led to a certain common visual aesthetic that is heavily influenced by the 1980s, sometimes intensely exaggerated. The video game incorporates this aesthetic, and for many, it may be the primary draw of the game. *Cyberpunk 2077* makes use of futurist elements from original 1980s cyberpunk media, and is in some ways visually very similar to *Blade Runner*: neon lighting, bold colors, huge and fantastically tall cityscapes, flying vehicles, a blend of Eastern and Western cultures, and advanced tech mixed with grit and grime. It also incorporates many aesthetic elements from the real 1980s: vehicles, while incorporating advanced futuristic technology, feature interiors that are visually very similar to cars in the 80s, and are also often cluttered and worn, giving them a palpable "retro" feel.

Fashion is also very prominent and integral to the world of *Cyberpunk 2077*, and a player can spend quite a bit of time exploring what the game has to offer in terms of clothing items. Much of the fashion featured in *Cyberpunk 2077* is directly influenced by 80s and 90s fashion trends, with added grit and technological flair. In fact, *Cyberpunk 2077* has its own invented set of styles, each with their own names and associations: Kitsch, Neokitsch, Entropism, and Neomilitarism. It is interesting to note that these names themselves almost seem to serve to encompass the overall retrofuturist cyberpunk aesthetic. “Kitsch” describes what is perhaps the most 80’s-influenced style in the game, characterized by accessible streetwear with bright colors, patterns, and bold-yet-functional silhouettes—asymmetry, broad shoulders, bagginess, etc. Neokitsch refers to a newer, wealthier appropriation of Kitsch, which attempts to mirror and refine the style but misses in its accessibility due to catering to the wealthy. Functionally, it is also clearly inspired by the real-or-imagined 1980s and 90s. Entropism refers to the style of poverty, and of function over style. In *Cyberpunk 2077*, this means use of “old” technology and clothing, which again carries the implication and feeling of “retro.” Neomilitarism is arguably the most futuristic-looking of the styles, and is associated with the “corpos” in the game. It is characterized by sleek, elegant, yet militaristic formality.

Cyberpunk 2077 is seemingly very self-aware of its status as an inherently nostalgic piece of media, and this goes beyond its use of retro aesthetics. Laced and strewn throughout the game are endless references to other beloved pieces of cyberpunk media. The plot of *Cyberpunk 2077* itself is very reminiscent of the plot of the 1995 film *Johnny Mnemonic*, in which Keanu Reeves (who plays Johnny Silverhand in *Cyberpunk 2077*), plays a man who has a data-carrying brain implant that threatens to kill him.⁴⁵ This film is itself based on a short story by William Gibson,

⁴⁵ *Johnny Mnemonic*, directed by Robert Longo (1995; Culver City CA: Alliance Communications and TriStar Pictures, 2003) DVD.

author of *Neuromancer*.⁴⁶ Keanu Reeves also stars as Neo, the main character in *The Matrix* (1999). Additionally, the perk tree (player perks and abilities obtained over the course of the game) is full of references to other pieces of media; one perk is even called “Blade Runner.” In the very first mission of the game, V is tasked with saving a woman named Sandra Dorsett; this is a reference to the main character of *Neuromancer*, Henry Dorsett Case. Another character in the game has an icon featuring a literal ghost coming out of a shell, a reference to *Ghost in the Shell*. A television advertisement shows a red pill and a blue pill, a reference to *The Matrix*. The sheer amount of references to older cyberpunk media, much of which have active cult followings, primes players for nostalgia.

The character of Johnny Silverhand presents a unique use of nostalgia within the game, and his rockstar character represents nostalgia both in and out of the game-world. Silverhand is long dead by the events of the game, and he is remembered by several NPCs as a bygone icon of the past. Silverhand, a dated nostalgic symbol in-game, is reminiscent of real-world nostalgia for the rock stars of eras past, and this is enhanced by Silverhand’s likeness to the glam rockers of the 80s.

Music in *Cyberpunk 2077*

The music in *Cyberpunk 2077* mirrors its retrofuturist visual aesthetics, yet in a markedly different way than our previous example of *Fallout 4*. *Cyberpunk 2077* utilizes both a background nondiegetic soundtrack and an in-game, diegetic radio similar to *Fallout 4*, although this radio is much more extensive and incorporates many more styles of music, and all of the songs featured were created specifically for use in the game. *Cyberpunk 2077*’s full soundtrack is quite large and involves a large array of musical styles; for our purposes, we will focus on the ambient or background music, which is the “default” musicscape and the music which

⁴⁶ William Gibson, *Johnny Mnemonic* (Ace Books. 1995).

accompanies important plot points and cutscenes. The radio in *Cyberpunk 2077* functions more for immersiveness and player enjoyment.

To start, it is perhaps important to consider that “cyberpunk” as an aesthetic category has also come to be associated with certain musical styles, in particular, synthwave, a musical genre characterized by intentionally emulating electronic music from 1980s action, horror, and science-fiction film as well as video games.⁴⁷ A relatively small and niche genre, synthwave typically features heavy synthesizer use and upbeat tempo and feel. Colloquially it is often tied to the aesthetic category of cyberpunk, although it is also worth noting that it often has little to do with the thematic or substantive elements of the cyberpunk genre such as capitalism or ethics.⁴⁸ Synthwave is also notable due to its “hauntological”⁴⁹ quality, or in other words, its relationship to lost futures.⁵⁰ Though synthwave emulates music from the 80s, it often does so with a liberal degree of imagination. The aim is to sound like the 80s as it exists in contemporary imaginations, and to conjure nostalgia for the time period in people who may or may not actually remember it. Its electronic and futuristic associations thus evoke a nostalgia for a time that either did not exist, or a future which did not happen.

Parallel to its visual aesthetics, the music in *Cyberpunk 2077* reflects a unique mixture of retro styles with a particular futurist flare. The bulk of the soundtrack is heavily or entirely electronic, and utilizes a variety of musical genres and styles, each of which we can trace back to the 1980s and 1990s. This broadly includes synth, various substyles of techno music such as EDM (electronic dance music), trance, and industrial music (which is itself often a combination

⁴⁷ Paul Ballam-Cross, “Reconstructed Nostalgia: Aesthetic Commonalities and Self-Soothing in Chillwave, Synthwave, and Vaporwave.” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 33, no. 1 (2021). 75.

⁴⁸ Paul Ballam-Cross, “Reconstructed Nostalgia: Aesthetic Commonalities and Self-Soothing in Chillwave, Synthwave, and Vaporwave.” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 33, no. 1 (2021). 75.

⁴⁹ Mark Fisher. *Ghosts of my Life*.

⁵⁰ Mattia Merlini, “More 1980s than the 1980s: Hauntological and Hyperreal Meanings of Synthwave Soundtracks.” *Sound Stage Screen* 3, no. 1 (2023).

of styles such as electronic and rock). It also utilizes some subgenres like “darksynth”, a darker version of synthwave which is also associated with cyberpunk aesthetics, and “cyber-metal,” which can only be described as an amalgamation of metal, electronic, and industrial metal. In an interview with Inlingo Games in 2021, the lead composer for *Cyberpunk 2077* stated that he wanted to lean more into the 90s musically, to create a familiar yet more unique soundscape from other Cyberpunk games and films: “We decided to use those 90s references and make music that feels edgy, feels dangerous but also at the same time feels fun... It also tied in nicely with the Cyberpunk motto, with style over substance, that your actions in Night City have to be loud and flamboyant.”⁵¹ At the same time, Adamczyk comments that Johnny Silverhand is inspired by 80s glam rock: “There he was almost like an 80s glam rocker who spends the nights in the studio, a mix of Eddie Van Halen and Vince Neil from Mötley Crüe.”⁵²

Another important aspect of the *Cyberpunk 2077* soundtrack that enhances its ability to conjure nostalgia in players is its use of leitmotifs. The use of leitmotifs relies on listener memory. Listeners are musically cued to recall characters, places, emotions, or other important facets of a story, and when leitmotifs change and develop, this is impactful due to the recollection of the original motif or theme as well as the thing it is associated with.⁵³ The recollection and commemoration leitmotifs utilize by nature makes them apt for triggering nostalgic feelings in the player. Like many video game soundtracks and film scores, *Cyberpunk 2077* makes use of leitmotifs to depict a wide array of elements, but the most notable are those which are associated with loss, memory, and identity. The most memorable and important themes in the soundtrack are “V” and “The Rebel Path”. “V” obviously serves as V’s leitmotif, yet it

⁵¹ P.T. Adamczyk, “‘The appropriate use of silence is important’. An interview with P.T. Adamczyk, Senior Composer at CD Projekt RED”. Inlingo Games (Inlingo Games, October 10, 2021).

⁵² P.T. Adamczyk, “‘The appropriate use of silence is important’. An interview with P.T. Adamczyk, Senior Composer at CD Projekt RED”. Inlingo Games (Inlingo Games, October 10, 2021).

⁵³ Karen Collins, *Game Sound: An Introduction to the History, Theory, and Practice of Video Game Music and Sound Design* (MIT Press, 2008). 130.

appears most prominently in the opening menu screen, and is not a very prominent theme during the game itself until closer to the end. “V” sounds very similar to the other most important theme, “The Rebel Path.” This theme is heavily associated with Johnny Silverhand and has two different versions, a default version and one that has an added electric cello playing the melody; this version is used for more emotionally intense scenes. The beginning of “V” features small hints of this electric cello, never playing melody, but nonetheless noticeable. This electric cello sound is most prominent throughout the game in “The Rebel Path”, particularly during sections of the game where the player plays through Silverhand’s memories in the first-person, just as they play V. This makes loading up the game a surprisingly nostalgic experience for the player, as they will over the course of the game start to recognize the cello sounds as reminiscent of “The Rebel Path”, which they will associate with Johnny Silverhand. Furthermore, because the two tracks share other similarities in melody and style, this serves to begin blending the two themes together, just as V’s identity starts to blend with Silverhand’s. It is notable that many high-intensity, action-packed moments in the game while playing as V are accompanied by “The Rebel Path” rather than “V.” Indeed, “The Rebel Path” serves as a theme not just for Silverhand, but also for rebellion in general; in a sense, the memory of Johnny Silverhand is the mood of rebellion, and though the theme serves functionally as Silverhand’s leitmotif, it is not named after him. However, in the interview with Adamczyk, he tells us that the motif is definitely supposed to represent him: “The track that’s now called Rebel Path that I did for Johnny Silverhand and which had a working title of ‘Rebel Theme’... When I was working on it, I knew I was doing it for Johnny Silverhand, which is why I added components that would fit him that were aggressive and punchy.”⁵⁴ This musical extra-contextualization of characters and their

⁵⁴ P.T. Adamczyk, “‘The appropriate use of silence is important’. An interview with P.T. Adamczyk, Senior Composer at CD Projekt RED”. Inlingo Games (Inlingo Games, October 10, 2021).

memories, which players physically visit as a place and time in the past, creates nostalgic feelings for them. After playing a certain amount of the game, players become nostalgic for the game itself, and the character of Silverhand, each time they load the game. The heightened emotional quality of the electric cello version of “The Rebel Path” enhances the player’s emotional response and thus memory and attachment of these moments. Furthermore, these two themes, along with the hints of cello in “V”, are eventually combined in the track “Been Good to Know Ya” which occurs at the climax of the plot. This emotional culmination of themes at the end of the game is made more impactful and memorable, and in turn nostalgic, by relying on player memory and experience of these themes throughout the course of the game.

Since its release, there has been much discussion online amongst players about the nostalgic quality of *Cyberpunk 2077* as a video game. Youtuber Dylan Switzerland’s video⁵⁵ on *Cyberpunk 2077* analyzes why players feel nostalgic for the game even when it is not very old. In this video, Switzerland cites several reasons for why this might be the case. One of the most substantial is the game’s soundtrack. Not only is the music in the game heavily inspired by 80s and 90s music, which gives it an inherent nostalgic quality, but it is also highly adaptive and immersive. The soundtrack itself is long, with some individual quests having their own unique tracks, and the addition of a large and diverse collection of diegetic radio music, all of which is original and created for the game specifically, make the sound-world of *Cyberpunk 2077* extremely immersive. This sound-world accompanies a large, fully-open map, which includes the whole of Night City as well as its outskirts. The way the game incorporates city life, sights, and sounds into every corner of the explorable area makes the world feel more real and alive. Music accompanies almost every minute of experience of the game; it comes in the form of

⁵⁵ Dylan Switzerland, “Why Cyberpunk 2077 feels so nostalgic...” Youtube Video, 21:05, January 24, 2025. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pE8bdoKB5k4&ab_channel=DylanSwitzerland

ambient background music, the player's own radio that they can control, and diegetic radios in the environment which, after hours and hours of playtime, play songs that become more and more familiar to the player. These songs, having been created specifically for the game itself, become nostalgic because they are part of a world that players cannot physically access. Their context is tied solely to Night City, a place players can only visit virtually. Leaving the game thus creates a sense of loss for this world, and generates nostalgia.

Concluding Thoughts on *Cyberpunk 2077*

Similarly to *Fallout 4*, *Cyberpunk 2077* presents a synthesis of themes relating to nostalgia and capitalism. It is a model of the cyberpunk genre, which is itself deeply rooted in reflecting and expressing both the anxieties of the time it was created in, and those anxieties which have continued over into present times. Cyberpunk's lasting associations with the 1980s and 1990s make it an inherently nostalgic genre. Similarly to *Fallout 4*, its nostalgic qualities are not limited to its retrofuturist setting. *Cyberpunk 2077*'s story is underlined with traumatic loss of characters and of the self, through the first-person experience of V. Both V and the player are accompanied by the near-literal ghost of Johnny Silverhand, a personification of a lost past both in-game and out-of-game. Music is a core part of this play experience, accompanying nearly every moment, and functions nostalgically due to both its retrofuturist qualities and its use of leitmotifs. It is no wonder that Johnny Silverhand's character is himself a musician, a rock star, an embodiment of music – and simultaneously a symbol of radical anti-capitalist resistance. Music is fundamentally inseparable from *Cyberpunk 2077*'s retrofuturism, nostalgia, and anti-capitalist sentiment, and plays a crucial role in evoking and immersing the player in nostalgia.

To conclude, I find one of Fisher’s descriptions of lost futures most striking when applied to *2077*, its retrofuturistic nostalgia, and the persistent ghost of Silverhand within V’s mind. Fisher states that lost futures are essentially “about refusing to give up the ghost or... the refusal of the ghost to give up on us.”⁵⁶

Final Fantasy VII

Introduction & The Built-In Nostalgia of *Final Fantasy*

Final Fantasy VII’s use of music departs somewhat from the games I have examined thus far, which is why I have saved it for last. While the soundtrack makes heavy and complex use of leitmotifs, not dissimilar to the leitmotifs used in *Cyberpunk 2077*, its compositional style is not used to depict a particular or specific time period. Nonetheless, the game uses music to evoke nostalgia and is just as steeped in it as the previous two games. Its overall themes also align very closely with the other two particularly in terms of memory, loss, and capitalism.

Final Fantasy VII, similarly to *Fallout 4*, is part of a franchise. *Final Fantasy* is an anthology series of Japanese role-playing games in which each installment has its own world, story, and (for the most part) characters, yet many facets and elements are the same or similar between each one. The series and franchise began in 1987, and continues into the present, with 16 main-series installments at the time of writing, and several spin-offs and sequels as well as other pieces of media such as films. Each game is fantasy-based, as per the title, but many—including *Final Fantasy VII*—also incorporate some degree of science fiction. Settings in *Final Fantasy* games range from traditional high-fantasy to futuristic science-fiction with fantasy elements.

While the settings and characters between each game are unique, the games feature recurring creatures, items, gods and dieties, systems of magic, and other elements central to

⁵⁶ Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of my Life*.

gameplay. This means that while a player can jump into the franchise at any point and play the games “out of order,” if they have had any prior experience with the franchise, some elements will be immediately familiar to them. One example of this are chocobos, large yellow birds that are usually ridden like horses. They are accompanied by their own musical theme, which appears in every game. Chocobos are, like other recurring creatures in the franchise, altered somewhat visually for each installment to match the style and setting, but are immediately recognizable. Items such as healing potions, with consistent names such as Hi-Potions, Phoenix Downs, and Elixirs, function the same throughout the franchise, and the in-game currency is always called “Gil.” There are even a handful of recurring characters, in a sense – although they vary widely in appearance and role throughout each game, sharing mainly names and particular associations. One example of this is Cid, who appears in nearly every *Final Fantasy* game, although his appearance and role is drastically different in each one. “Cid characters” generally share some common traits: they are usually older than the main characters, associated with technology or engineering, and are often associated with airships, which are another recurring element in the franchise.⁵⁷

The recurring elements in *Final Fantasy* offer a particularly interesting point of analysis when considering nostalgia in these games. When a player who has played virtually any *Final Fantasy* game plays any other, they will almost inevitably be reminded of their past *Final Fantasy* experiences when they encounter things like chocobos, Cid characters, or magic items. These elements, due to their continuity yet placement in new contexts, carry with them a built-in sense of nostalgia which is not tied to any linear overarching world or story, such as in the *Fallout* series or the world of *Cyberpunk 2077*.⁵⁸ When a player encounters them in a new *Final*

⁵⁷ Demetrius Shahmehri, “A Great, Never-Ending Sky.” *Journal of Sound and Music in Games* 4, no. 4 (2023).

⁵⁸ *Cyberpunk 2077* now also includes an anime as well as the tabletop games.

Fantasy game, there is a triggered nostalgia, a familiarity, or a feeling of returning to a home that does not exist - both because these are fantasy games, and because the new game and context they are placed in is still fundamentally different than the last *Final Fantasy* game in which those elements were encountered. Encountering these elements evokes the memory of past game experiences, and potentially triggers a feeling of loss, as those experiences are, though familiar and reachable in new contexts, tied to characters and settings which are confined to their original contexts.

Final Fantasy VII was originally released in 1997, and recently has been subject to a multi-part remake.⁵⁹ At the time of writing, only two of the three parts have been released. This remake is, compared to the original game nearly thirty years prior, indeed a *remake* in every sense of the word. It is essentially a complete overhaul—not just with modern graphics and a dynamic real-time combat style as opposed to the original turn-based style, but also some changes to the story, the true extent of which remains to be seen as the final part of the trilogy has yet to be released. As Fisher argues in *Ghosts of my Life*, remakes are both a product of nostalgia and a symptom of advancing capitalism. The *Final Fantasy VII* remake is particularly interesting when this angle is taken into account. While the original game is both a critique and product of capitalism, and evokes nostalgia in various ways, the remake is itself a product of both nostalgia and capitalism. The remake’s separation into three full-length (and full price) games, released over a several-year timespan, suggests an obvious attempt to maximize profits and capitalize off of nostalgia. The remake exists almost purely due to the nostalgia that has emerged for the original *Final Fantasy VII*, as the game had massive and lasting cultural impact and remains one of the most successful and memorable games in the franchise. Many consider

⁵⁹ Ryan Dinsdale, “Final Fantasy 7 Remake Part 3 Has a Completed Story at Square Enix.” IGN, January 23, 2025. <https://www.ign.com/articles/final-fantasy-7-remake-part-3-has-a-completed-story-at-square-enix>

the original to be a “perfect” game—so, why the need for a remake? Fisher’s take on remakes and the remake economy is that remakes, sequels, spinoffs, and re-releases offer a quick, easy, and ripe chance for both profits and enjoyment; this also coincides with Boym’s idea of the “sweet ready-made”. According to Fisher, they are fundamentally a symptom of advancing capitalism, and media producers increasingly rely on them due to their built-in familiarity and audiences. Additionally, the most important aspect of nostalgia in these games is its soundtrack, which, despite some differences in instrumentation, is spiritually congruent between the games and features the same themes and usages of these themes.

Final Fantasy VII takes place primarily in a city called Midgar, on a planet called Gaia.⁶⁰ This planet is controlled by an ultra-powerful, militarized megacorporation called Shinra, and this corporation is exploiting a magical life-force that the planet carries. This life-force (lifestream) is processed into a form called Mako which is utilized for various forms of energy. The city of Midgar, where the beginning of the game takes place, consists of a gigantic metal platform (made up of a set of segmented “plates”) with citizens living both above and below this platform. Society in Midgar is literally and physically stratified, with a physical barrier separating them; the rich live on top of the plates, while the poor are forced to live below them in an interconnected network of slums, rarely being able to see the sky. The game follows the protagonist Cloud Strife, who is a mercenary and former member of SOLDIER, which is a Shinra military force that uses Mako to enhance its members. The primary antagonist, other than Shinra, is Sephiroth, who is also a former SOLDIER and the result of an experiment by Shinra which utilized a hostile alien race called Jenova. Prior to the game’s events, Sephiroth learned the nature of his creation and went mad, murdering Cloud’s hometown and vowing revenge in

⁶⁰ The name “Gaia” was actually given retroactively. In the original game, the planet is never named, and is only ever referred to as “the planet.”

the form of mortally wounding the planet so he can absorb its lifestream and become god-like and all-powerful. Cloud joins an eco-terrorist group called AVALANCHE who is set on thwarting Shinra's efforts to exploit the planet's lifestream. One of the members of AVALANCHE is Cloud's childhood friend, Tifa. Soon after the game's start, the group meets Aerith, who is presented as a pure, almost angelic character, and who is one of the last surviving members of a race called the Cetra, who are deeply spiritual and possess the ability to communicate and interact with the planet's lifestream. Throughout the game, Cloud uncovers his past, memories, and true identity, which have been repressed or entirely altered due to both severe trauma and exposure to both Mako and Jenova.

Retrofuturism in *Final Fantasy VII*

Retrofuturism presents itself a bit differently in this game than in the previous two we have analyzed. While *Fallout 4* and *Cyberpunk 2077* are both "branching timelines" set on Earth in a hypothetical Earth-future, *Final Fantasy VII* is set on a fictional but Earth-like planet, inhabited by humans. Indeed, the name "Gaia" given to this planet evokes the Greek goddess of the Earth Gaia, and various elements of the game are inspired by real-life, Earth-bound mythologies. Gaia is symbolically meant to represent Earth, and its magical lifestream is meant to be a representation of life and resources of our own Earth. As such however, the setting of *Final Fantasy VII* is not meant to represent as much of a hypothetical future, or lost future, of Earth. Instead, the setting deliberately reminds us of our own Earth, and the events and themes serve as a warning of what could befall our own planet if we allow capitalistic forces to exploit life and resources. Additionally, the setting of *Final Fantasy VII* is a mixture of familiar Earth-based settings similar to what we see in *Cyberpunk 2077* and even to some extent *Fallout 4*. Aesthetically, *Final Fantasy VII* takes place in an industrialist, "high-tech" world mixed with

“low-life” widespread poverty and subjugation. The advanced technology in *Final Fantasy VII*, paired with its ultra-powerful, Zaibatsu-inspired megacorporation, resembles a cyberpunk setting.⁶¹ Certain elements also resemble a more dated technological time, as the game incorporates a more broadly dieselpunk or even steampunk aesthetic. Dieselpunk is a derivative of cyberpunk, and describes the mixture of science-fiction with aesthetics and diesel-powered technology of the 1920s and 1930s.⁶² Steampunk, also a cyberpunk derivative, describes a mixture of 19th century steam-powered technology and aesthetics with science-fiction.⁶³ The world of *Final Fantasy VII* falls somewhere between cyberpunk, dieselpunk, and steampunk, and additionally incorporates elements of traditional high fantasy. This combination of genres and aesthetics is what shapes the game’s retrofuturist setting. While the setting does not denote a particular or specific period of time in Earth’s past, such as in the cases of *Fallout 4* and *Cyberpunk 2077*, it does denote a more general feeling of “retro” or “past-ness”, while the inclusion of high-tech gives the setting the element of futurism.

More Nostalgia in *Final Fantasy VII*

Similarly to *Fallout 4* and *Cyberpunk 2077*, nostalgia in *Final Fantasy VII* operates on multiple levels, some with built-in nostalgic elements from the broader *Final Fantasy* franchise. Its soundtrack works similarly, as the franchise has a very distinctive musical style. *Final Fantasy* music is and has been widely beloved by the franchise’s dedicated fanbase, and is often thought of as some of the best video game music ever created. *Final Fantasy VII* specifically, both the game as a whole and its soundtrack, is arguably one of the most beloved and venerated

⁶¹ Steven Ericson, “The Wealth of Zaibatsu Owner Families: The Impact of Zaibatsu Busting in Occupied Japan.” *Shashi* 6, no. 1 (2021).

⁶² Iolanda Ramos, “Alternate World Building: Retrofuturism and Retrophilia in Steampunk and Dieselpunk Narratives.” *Anglo Saxonica* 17, no.1. (2020).

⁶³ Vladimir Yurchenko, “The Art of Retrofuturism: Steampunk, Dieselpunk, Cyberpunk. Decorative and Applied Art, Painting, Cinema.” *Siberian Art History Journal* 2, no. 1 (2023), 96–107.

of the franchise, even before the announcement of its remake.⁶⁴ Its age and impact on video gaming culture no doubt contribute to its innate nostalgia, and players have been commenting since its original release about the unusually visceral and strong impact the game has had on them. As Demetrius Shahmehri puts it:

When players remark on FF7—in YouTube videos and comments, internet forums, and private playthroughs and conversations—descriptions of the game tend to outstrip its status as a game, becoming an experience, a masterpiece, a world, a site of nostalgia so intense that it surpasses or circumvents the expressible.⁶⁵

Because *Final Fantasy VII* is not a branching-timeline story, and is not set on Earth, this means that the places encountered by players in the game hold no immediate nostalgic value on their own. How then, can the game prompt players to feel intense nostalgic connection to these places and characters immediately on a first playthrough?

I argue that *Final Fantasy VII*'s music, in conjunction with its narrative and structure, produce nostalgia for players in a particularly intense way by creating musical time-and-places. This aligns well with Svetlana Boym's argument that nostalgia is strongly tied to both time and place, and that we often perceive the past as a physical place we long to return to. *Final Fantasy VII*'s story is strongly concerned with place, loss (of both places and people), and memory. Cloud embarks on a personal journey of uncovering his true identity and past, revealing his repressed and altered memories, and coping with the severe trauma that losing his childhood home and friends has left him with. Other characters also experience loss and trauma associated with loss, often of people and places. One palpable example is Barret (a member of the ecoterrorist group Cloud joins, and one of his first companions), who is eventually revealed to be a survivor of a

⁶⁴ Demetrius Shahmehri, "A Great, Never-Ending Sky." *Journal of Sound and Music in Games* 4, no. 4 (2023).

⁶⁵ Demetrius Shahmehri, "A Great, Never-Ending Sky," 90.

massacre of his hometown by Shinra. This massacre and destruction of his town is what causes Barret to join AVALANCHE, and after this is revealed, Barret is forced to confront another survivor of the massacre, a physical reminder of his past.

The losses and traumas experienced by the characters in *Final Fantasy VII*, both in their backstories and throughout the course of the game, are almost exclusively caused by the megacorporation Shinra. Characters in *Final Fantasy VII* each experience loss, or have backstories which are marked by loss. Many of them experience a traumatic loss of home and loved ones, and Cloud experiences these in addition to a loss of his memory and identity when joining SOLDIER. Many of the game's most emotional, and thus memorable, moments are those in which characters express longing, yearning, or sorrow relating to what they have lost, or relive loss in the form of flashbacks. Characters in *Final Fantasy VII* are inherently nostalgic due to the way in which they are each characterized by loss, and this loss is explicitly linked both to memory, and to capitalistic exploitation and subjugation by Shinra. Players may relate to or empathize with the longing felt and expressed by these characters, and this primes them to experience the characters' nostalgia vicariously.

Time and place in the original *Final Fantasy VII* also primes players for nostalgia. Many places in the game are only accessible to the player for a portion of the game, and at a certain point are no longer able to be visited. This includes the very first "safe" area of the game, Sector 7, which the player spends a good deal of time in, and which is established as most of the beginning characters' current homes. Sector 7 is largely destroyed and rendered unvisitable when Shinra bombs the plate above it in order to frame AVALANCHE for the attack and sway public opinion against them. This also kills some of Cloud's and the player's early companions as well as many early NPCs encountered by the player. In a sense, this event causes the player to

experience their own Shinra-caused loss of home and people. This loss is experienced simultaneously to the on-screen characters, and thus enhances overall nostalgia felt by the player, as these people and their home are remembered in-game and out-of-game.

Additionally, while some character flashbacks are shown in the form of a cutscene merely watched by the player, others are more extended and involve the player playing through them, moving Cloud through a temporary time and space. This type of flashback constructs certain areas within the game as strictly tied to a particular point in the game's past, and inherently ephemeral, becoming unvisitable once the flashback sequence ends. This loss of both time and place further primes players for nostalgia, again experienced both as themselves out-of-game and vicariously through Cloud's memories.

How Music Generates Nostalgia in *Final Fantasy VII*

Much of *Final Fantasy's VII's* soundtrack is heavily reliant on an intricate and masterful use of leitmotifs, many of which are tied to specific characters and places within the game. As I discussed earlier, the use of leitmotifs as a musical device primes players for memory and nostalgia, due to their inherent status as representations, their recurrence, and relationship to memory. Leitmotifs, even in their most basic conceptual form, are constructed to provoke association and memory. Good leitmotifs are those which are most memorable, and memorable leitmotifs tend to both be musically interesting and represent well what they are associated with. Leitmotifs also usually convey some extra meanings, contexts, or interpretations which may go unspoken in a narrative. Thus, leitmotifs prompt not only memory, but also listener/player interpretation, which reinforces memory and association. When leitmotifs reoccur, as they are apt to do, they trigger memory of what they are associated with; furthermore, if these recurring leitmotifs appear changed or altered (as leitmotifs often do), this change is particularly palpable

to a listener/player, and no doubt rely on the memory of the original leitmotif. *Final Fantasy VII*, like the other games in the franchise, is full of leitmotifs; *VII* in particular is notorious for its intricately detailed web of leitmotifs, the full breadth of which is impossible to tackle within the scope of this paper. Instead, I will focus on several notable examples.

Before we delve into the leitmotifs specific to *Final Fantasy VII*, it is worth mentioning that the franchise itself has a set of leitmotifs that recur much like the other recurring elements of the game. *Final Fantasy VII* starts as every Final Fantasy game does: with a distinct melody that signifies the beginning of a new Final Fantasy story. This theme is usually called “Prelude” and consists of a series of ascending and descending arpeggios. In *VII*, this is accompanied by a simple chorale-like melody. Though simple in structure, this leitmotif has become iconic and emblematic of the Final Fantasy franchise, much in the same way as chocobos, Phoenix Downs, and Cid characters. This Prelude theme is present in the game’s opening, its title screen, and its end credits, and this is typical for the way Prelude themes are presented in other Final Fantasy games. Other recurring musical motifs include the “victory fanfare,” which typically plays after successfully completing a battle or fight; the “Chocobo Theme” and “Moogle Theme” which each accompany their associated creatures; and the “Main Theme” or “Opening Theme” which also often appears at the beginning or end of Final Fantasy games.

These cross-game recurring themes create a built-in musical nostalgia for players who are already familiar with Final Fantasy games. Due to Final Fantasy’s anthology structure, this is regardless of whether a player has played all the games, or only some, and regardless of what generation of gamer this player belongs to. However, *Final Fantasy VII* is special within the franchise, as the Prelude theme reappears in other tracks in the score, effectively creating nostalgia for the game and world from the very beginning and throughout the play experience.

Additionally, the Prelude theme also appears during the “Game Over” screen when a player dies and must restart from a checkpoint, and it plays at the very end credits of the game. The “Prelude” theme thus is quickly associated with loss, and, due to the nature of the game, is experienced and re-experienced before its final appearance at the end of the game. This, in addition to the theme’s reappearance in subsequent games, makes the theme emotionally impactful and nostalgic; in contrast to previous games we have examined, this nostalgia is for a place and time that does not exist.

Another theme with nostalgic quality is “Tifa’s Theme.” This theme, associated with one of the main characters Tifa, accompanies the first flashback sequence of the game. Tifa herself is Cloud’s childhood friend and, as this first flashback shows us, a source of nostalgia for Cloud as she represents not only his childhood but also their shared hometown, which no longer exists in the diegetic present of the game, as it has been violently destroyed. The flashback sequence occurs when the player meets Tifa for the first time, and Cloud is reunited with her for the first time in a long time. The theme begins inside of Tifa’s bar, continues as the flashback begins, situated as a visual memory above the heads of the present Cloud and Tifa. Tifa’s theme continues through the entire flashback sequence and back into the full present, underscoring the entire encounter, from the present into the memory from the past and back to the present again. Tifa’s theme is very melodic and lyrical, and it is the first time since the beginning of the actual narrative part of the game (that is to say, excluding the game’s introductory music) that we hear this type of melody; the game’s story begins with action and turmoil, with music that accompanies this, so when we finally arrive to Tifa’s bar, the lyrical melody is all the more impactful to the player. This melody recurs alongside other flashbacks involving Tifa and is reworked into other themes later on in the game.

The presentation of “Tifa’s Theme” is deeply tied to memory and the past. Tifa herself is then solidified to the player as a nostalgic symbol, with her musical accompaniment facilitating this memory both because it is a recurring leitmotif and because this leitmotif is immediately and simultaneously associated with her character and the past, particularly a tender, nostalgic past time and place that is now inaccessible to both Tifa and Cloud, and the player.⁶⁶

One of the other most recognizable and nostalgic leitmotifs in *Final Fantasy VII* is Aerith’s theme, which actually presents itself in two separate themes: “Flowers Blooming in the Church” and “Aerith’s Theme.” “Flowers Blooming in the Church” is in fact an arrangement of “Aerith’s Theme,” and the way they are presented primes a player to be nostalgic for both Aerith and the world that she is intimately connected to. Aerith is a character at the crux of the narrative for *Final Fantasy VII* and is one of the most important characters, both for the plot and for Cloud’s (the character the player plays as the most, excluding combat) development. Some of the most pivotal moments of the game’s story revolve around her—meeting Aerith for the first time, experiencing the loss of Aerith after she is kidnapped by Shinra, and seeing her murdered by Sephiroth.

The player experience of Aerith is underscored at all times by her presence or absence, and this is facilitated by the use of her two accompanying themes. Interestingly, “Aerith’s Theme” only appears when Aerith is absent (and her absence is felt) and instead, Aerith’s presence is accompanied by “Flowers Blooming in the Church,” which is the theme that plays when Cloud (and the player) meets her for the first time. This meeting occurs when Cloud falls into the ruins of an old cathedral, where Aerith, who we have seen in foreshadowy passing since the beginning of the game, is tending to a patch of flowers (and these flowers also become a

⁶⁶ Tifa’s theme appears similarly in *Remake*, though this time it also appears as the default track on a jukebox (which itself is arguably another nostalgic musical object) inside Tifa’s bar.

symbol of the game itself). The theme playing during this meeting is the theme that then accompanies Aerith's physical presence throughout the game. Additionally, it is notable that within the context of the game, this meeting and theme is starkly contrasted with what has come immediately before it—action, danger, and music that accompanies this. The stark contrast makes this meeting, and the theme associated with it, all the more memorable for the player, and thus initially primes them for nostalgia of both Aerith and this original meeting inside the church.

When she is absent, "Aerith's Theme" plays in its stead—musically marking her memory, and solidifying Aerith's character in the player's experience as an inherently nostalgic object, tied to absence and presence. It is also notable that the track titled "Aerith's Theme" is the version tied to her diegetic absence, and this implies that she is meant to be understood in terms of her absence first and foremost. These two themes used in conjunction with one another, paired with the palpable loss the characters and player feel when she dies, enhance player emotional connection to Aerith, and enhance the nostalgic feeling generated by her absence, as her absence is marked by a leitmotif that is melodically the same but recognizably a separate piece. Character and player experience of Aerith is marked by loss, and subsequent remembering. The first time we hear "Aerith's Theme," it is when her adoptive mother is describing Aerith's childhood to Cloud and his party, with Aerith absent. The last time we hear it in full is towards the end of game, just before the party enters the final dungeon, and is remembering Aerith and her death. A fragment of her melody is heard at the end of the game when Cloud sees her hand reach for him across the lifestream, another moment where Aerith's loss and memory are palpably felt. It is also notable that "Flowers Blooming in the Church" is named after Aerith's initial meeting, as well as the space this is associated with. Aerith's diegetic presence in the game is underscored by the musical memory of the player's first meeting with her, and this itself is linked to the

abandoned church. The player is then primed to feel nostalgic for a person and place which does not exist in their real life.

The style of music in *Final Fantasy VII*, both the original and the remake, differ substantially from the other two games we have analyzed. In *Fallout 4*, the music consists of an original soundtrack of background music combined with highly contrasting songs from our real-life past. The game's setting recontextualizes these songs as futurist and nostalgic. *Cyberpunk 2077*'s music uses 80s and 90s musical styles and blends them to create something that sounds both nostalgic and futurist, while also utilizing leitmotifs to trigger memory and nostalgia in another way. The musical style of *Final Fantasy VII* is, to the average player, removed from any specific time period, just as the game's setting takes place in an unknown time on an unknown planet. Unlike the previous two games, this soundtrack does not rely on our real-life nostalgia for past mainstream musical styles. Though one could make the argument that the style of music used in *Final Fantasy* games is heavily influenced by European Romantic music, particularly with its Wagnerian usage of leitmotifs, I argue that this is not how it is perceived by the average player, and it is not 19th-century Europe that the player is meant to be nostalgic for. Instead, the music and composition relies on the modern perception of the style as "timeless." This "timeless" music paired with the game's retrofuturist setting and themes of memory, loss, and identity seem to make it all the more effective in generating nostalgic feelings in the player. While the game takes place on a distant planet, it is clear that this planet is meant to remind us of Earth, and it is also clear that the perils facing this planet—an evil megacorporation abusing its natural resources and subjugating its people—are meant to remind us of our own Earthly problems and future.

Concluding Thoughts on *Final Fantasy VII*

Final Fantasy VII presents a similar picture as *Fallout 4* and *Cyberpunk 2077*, which combines a retrofuturist setting with themes of nostalgia, memory, loss, and capitalism. The cyberpunk-inspired, retrofuturist setting is punctuated by the presence and antagonism of an incomprehensibly powerful and corrupt megacorporation. Clearly inspired by real-life zaibatsus, this element alone speaks to the game's reflection of anxiety related to capitalism and corporations, particularly their impact on wealth inequality and the environment. Trauma is experienced individually and collectively by nearly every character in the game as a direct result of Shinra's violent and oppressive actions. The physical embodiment of class disparity and wealth inequality in the form of Midgar's plates and slums makes it clear that the game is commenting directly on the suffering caused by unchecked capitalism. Furthermore, the villain Sephiroth is himself the product of Shinra's depravity. Loss experienced by characters, and the ensuing evocation of nostalgia for the player, is at all times directly traceable to Shinra. In addition to the baked-in, out-of-game nostalgia of *Final Fantasy* games due to their shared elements, players also experience nostalgia through the vicarious experience of various losses and memories. As with the previously discussed games, all of this is accompanied at all times by music. In the case of the original *Final Fantasy VII*, music plays perhaps an even more important role, because there is no spoken dialogue. Music is the primary aural experience for the player, and thus the music carries even more responsibility in evoking and maintaining nostalgia and player immersion, and perhaps causes the music itself to take on an even more intense nostalgic quality.

Additionally, *Final Fantasy VII's* remake is itself an emblem of nostalgia. Its entire existence is owed to the collective nostalgia for the original game. Fisher's argument that an increasing amount of remakes are a direct result of advancing capitalism and an increasingly

exhausted, pessimistic society seem particularly relevant here, considering that the game itself criticizes ultra-capitalist power structures. The remake is both a result of and a literal product of the capitalism that it criticizes. Even more so, the form this remake takes seems tailored to capitalistic goals, being broken up into three separate games. The nostalgia for *Final Fantasy VII* is, it would seem, being stretched, extended, and capitalized off of for as long and as much as possible.

Conclusion

Through the course of analysis of each of these three games, we can see that music is an integral and vital element that, especially when paired with a game's world-building and narrative, prompts players and aids them in feeling nostalgia, likely for places and times they have not personally experienced. Each of these games are retrofuturist, but more than that, they are nostalgic objects. *Fallout 4* draws on nostalgia of the real and imagined Atomic Age, with both its optimistic middle-class consumerism and its anxieties of nuclear technological advancement and political turmoil. Its music contrasts original background music, depicting its bleak and combative post-apocalyptic setting, with nostalgic remnants of the real and game-world past in the form of hand-picked novelty songs. *Cyberpunk 2077* draws on palpable nostalgia for the 1980s and 1990s, and utilizes an original soundtrack that is crafted to sound at once futuristic and identifiably nostalgic for these eras. *Final Fantasy VII*'s original form draws on cyberpunk elements, themselves nostalgic, and utilizes a "timeless" musical style paired with intense usage of leitmotifs, which rely on memory and prove to be excellent vehicles for creating nostalgic feeling for entirely fictional places. Its remake is itself a product of nostalgia, produced because of its status as one of the most beloved and influential games to date, and its continued

relevance to the larger gaming community, as the themes and narratives of its story remain resonant with audiences.

Boym and Fisher offer keen and useful frameworks for analysis of nostalgia, and when we consider their work with regards to retrofuturist video games, we can draw several interconnected lines between the concepts we have explored and how they manifest in these games, which are examples of a larger trend. Mark Fisher's work on nostalgia, retrophilia, and popular music culture highlights not just what is happening within the games we have analyzed, but also the very reasons why cyberpunk—the root and joining factor between all three games—exists at all. Boym's work strengthens the ties between nostalgia, loss, and place, and we can see this manifest in our examples, particularly in *Final Fantasy VII*, where place becomes fundamental to the player experience of nostalgia. These three games are merely three examples within a larger phenomenon. There are certainly other games which exemplify these themes; the *Bioshock* series and *The Outer Worlds* to name a couple. Clearly this subject matter, from retrofuturist settings and nostalgia, to memory and identity, to fantasies of resisting corrupt, capitalist powers, remain both continually relevant and deeply intertwined. Why? As we have seen, retrofuturism and particular presentations of retrofuturism are often derived from cyberpunk. Cyberpunk, as we have discussed, is a genre birthed directly out of an acknowledgement and fear of an accelerating capitalist society, wherein the lower classes suffer in order to line the pockets of the ultra-wealthy. Each of the games analyzed presents different pictures of hypothetical advanced-state capitalism, but all highlight the greed and cruelty of these types of systems. At the same time, these presentations are also of lost futures, an inherently nostalgic concept. Broad elements of nostalgia are intertwined with human themes of memory, loss, and identity – perhaps, some of the very things we feel are at stake under these increasingly

oppressive capital-driven systems. Music is crucial, fundamental, and pivotal in evoking, enhancing, and maintaining nostalgic feelings in players, and these nostalgic feelings ultimately enhance player connection and understanding of the themes they encounter in these games.

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