

VIDEO GAME MUSIC ANALYSIS
- For Educational Use Only -

Death by Glamour
from Undertale

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1 A ♩ = 140

Piano 2

Drumset

CORE leitmotif (2)

(1) Em¹³

LOL

Where do I even begin? Undertale is such an absolute masterpiece that it's taking every ounce of willpower not to write a gigantic essay on why it's one of the most creative, well-written, and thoughtful works of art in all of video game history. I will do my absolute best to try and stay focused on the track at hand :-)

CONTEXT: The player is in control of an (as of yet) unnamed human protagonist who finds themselves trapped in an underworld full of quirky monsters with a...*tense* relationship towards humankind. In a quest to return to the surface, the player encounters a robot - named Mettaton - that has been accidentally programmed to try and murder any human it encounters. After several close calls, the player is finally forced to confront Mettaton in a climactic battle that...turns into nothing less than a televised dance-off to the death as the robot transforms into an *absolutely fabulous* mixture of David Bowie, Prince, and...you get the idea. This track accompanies said battle/dance-off.

This is arguably one of the best tracks in the entire soundtrack. It sounds fantastic and is emblematic of Fox's unique and genuine musical voice, but it's also a treasure trove of thematic coherency. No less than *three* leitmotifs are woven into this track and - as a self-proclaimed leitmotif enthusiast - I couldn't be more thrilled! So, let's get into the nuts and bolts (robot puns, yay) of why and how this track works:

(1) - There's one "chord" for the entire section: Em¹³. Every note in the E Dorian scale is used in this section, and every note in the E Dorian scale belongs to the Em¹³ chord. Those just learning harmony might recall that the essential notes required to imply an extended chord are the root, third, seventh, and extended tone. And waddya know - in the motif, we get E (root), G (third), C# (13th), and D (7th) as our first four notes. A clever fox, that Toby...

(2) - This melody is one of three leitmotifs used to tie this battle to previously experienced situations. This particular theme is that of the dungeon (the CORE) that the player *just* traversed, the one that Mettaton is the "boss" of. Leading with this motif creates a great sense of continuity in gameplay as the player *just* heard this (albeit in a different key and context).

5

Pno.2

Pno.3

D. Set

8

8

The entire A section is composed using 2-4 measure loops that layer on top of each other, which is why you see two "piano" tracks. This is idiomatic of electronic dance music, which is appropriate as the battle is a dance-off.

9

Strs.

Pno.1

Pno.2

Pno.3

D. Set

8

8

- (1) - This texture is very dense (and there are more layers on the way), so Fox ensures the rhythm stays intelligible by aligning the syncopation so avoid *too* complex of a composite rhythm (see the colored notes above)
- (2) - The strings are the first of many timbres that will introduce a very "disco" feel to the track. Not only is this just an immense amount of fun, but it fits the situation to a T.

13

Strs.

Pno.1

Pno.2

Pno.3

Clap

D. Set

ties match up, keeping coherency

17

Trance

Pno.1

Pno.2

Pno.3

D. Set

The musical score is written for five staves. The top staff, labeled 'Trance', is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It features a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes, often beamed together. The second staff, 'Pno.1', is also in treble clef and provides harmonic support with chords and dyads. The third and fourth staves, 'Pno.2' and 'Pno.3', are in bass clef and play a driving bass line with eighth and sixteenth notes. The bottom staff, 'D. Set', is in a drum clef and shows a complex drum pattern with various note values and rests. Measures 17 and 19 have a measure rest (z) in the Trance staff. Measures 18 and 20 have an 8-measure rest indicated by a dashed line and the number 8 in the Trance staff.

21

Trance

Pno.1

Pno.2

Pno.3

8

Clap

D. Set

25

Rob. Nz

Trance

Strs.

Orch.

Pno.1

Pno.2

Pno.3

SFX

D. Set

It wouldn't be a love letter to retro games without the
almighty orchestra hits!

①

②

- (1) - I'm not entirely sure what sound Fox used for this lead, but the articulation of the phrase is meant to sound very robotic. Liberal use of staccatissimo, pitch bends, and other little intricacies make digital sound come alive.
- (2) - I believe this sound effect is the "Mario Jumping" sound effect. Not entirely sure...

Rob. Nz

Trance

Strs.

Orch.

Pno.1

Pno.2

Pno.3

SFX

Clap

D. Set

This musical score page, numbered 29, contains nine staves. The top three staves (Rob. Nz, Trance, Strs.) are in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The bottom six staves (Orch., Pno.1, Pno.2, Pno.3, SFX, Clap, D. Set) are in bass clef with the same key signature. The Rob. Nz staff features a complex melodic line with many beamed sixteenth and thirty-second notes. The Trance staff has a similar rhythmic pattern. The Strs. staff shows sustained chords with some melodic movement. The Orch. staff is mostly empty, with a few initial notes. The Pno.1, Pno.2, and Pno.3 staves provide harmonic support with chords and moving lines. The SFX staff has a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The Clap staff has a few scattered notes. The D. Set staff features a dense, repetitive rhythmic pattern of sixteenth notes.

33

Rob. Nz

Trance

Strs.

Orch.

Pno.1

Pno.2

Pno.3

SFX

D. Set

This musical score page contains measures 33 through 36. The staves are arranged vertically from top to bottom: Rob. Nz (Treble clef, 8 measures), Trance (Treble clef), Strs. (Treble clef, 8 measures), Orch. (Treble clef), Pno.1 (Treble clef), Pno.2 (Bass clef), Pno.3 (Bass clef), SFX (Percussion clef, 8 measures), and D. Set (Percussion clef). The key signature is one sharp (F#). The Rob. Nz and Trance parts feature complex rhythmic patterns with many beamed notes and rests. The Strs. part has long horizontal lines indicating sustained notes. The Orch. part is mostly empty with some initial notes. The Pno.1, Pno.2, and Pno.3 parts have a consistent rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes. The SFX and D. Set parts have a consistent rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes.

Wah

Rob. Nz

Trance

Strs.

Orch.

Pno.1

Pno.2

Pno.3

SFX

Clap

D. Set

This musical score page, numbered 37, contains ten staves. The top staff, labeled 'Wah', is in bass clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and contains whole rests for the first three measures, followed by a four-measure phrase of eighth notes. The second staff, 'Rob. Nz', is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp and contains a complex melodic line with many beamed eighth and sixteenth notes. The third staff, 'Trance', is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp and contains a melodic line with many beamed eighth and sixteenth notes, including some grace notes. The fourth staff, 'Strs.', is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp and contains a sustained chord in the first measure, followed by a series of chords. The fifth staff, 'Orch.', is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp and contains a series of chords. The sixth staff, 'Pno.1', is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp and contains a series of chords. The seventh staff, 'Pno.2', is in bass clef with a key signature of one sharp and contains a series of chords. The eighth staff, 'Pno.3', is in bass clef with a key signature of one sharp and contains a series of chords. The ninth staff, 'SFX', is in common time and contains a series of eighth notes. The tenth staff, 'Clap', is in common time and contains a series of eighth notes. The eleventh staff, 'D. Set', is in common time and contains a series of eighth notes. The page number '11' is located at the bottom right corner.

41 **B** "Metal Crusher" B Theme

Wah

Trance

Orch.

D. Set

Synth.

Syncopated sub-bass creates a "rushing" rhythm that propels the music along.
Also creates rhythmic contrast with previous "four to the floor" section

C	B	A [#] ma ^j 7 ^{#5}	B	Em	D	Em	D
Key of E: bVI	V	vii ^{7#5} /V	V	i	bVII	i	bVII

The B section switches to the parallel minor and the track takes a dark, intimidating turn; it's as if the music is reminding the player that - while this is fun and all - this David Bowie robot is still trying to murder you :-)

(1) - The second leitmotif emerges, this time the theme of Mettaton itself. This theme comprises the B section of "Metal Crusher", the battle theme that accompanies the various skirmishes with Mettaton that have preceded this climactic dance-off. Here the theme is largely intact (ensuring the player will recognize it), but it's subtly altered to fit this track's needs.

45 This melody deftly combines **angular leaps** with **chromaticism** to ensure memorability

Wah

Trance

Orch.

D. Set

Synth.

Little fill punctuates the end of the phrase group (known classically as a "period")

Same

Same

Wah

Trance

Orch.

D. Set

Synth.

This musical score page contains five staves for measures 49 through 52. The key signature is one sharp (F#). The 'Wah' staff is in bass clef and features a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes, including a triplet in measure 51. The 'Trance' staff is in treble clef and consists of block chords. The 'Orch.' staff is in treble clef and contains sustained notes. The 'D. Set' staff uses a double bar line and 'x' marks to indicate a drum pattern. The 'Synth.' staff is in bass clef and plays a rhythmic sequence of eighth notes.

53

Wah

Trance

Orch.

D. Set

Synth.

$D\#_{maj}7\#5$

$G\#$

Key of $C\#$:

$V^{7\#5}/V$

V

(1) - A sudden, startling modulation comes out of nowhere, injecting levity and serious energy into the already frantic pace of the track. Despite the abrupt shift in register and tone, the progression is a logical secondary dominant cadence, utilizing a chromatically altered chord (the $maj7\#5$) to progress to the dominant of the target key of $C\#$ (a minor third away from our home key, E).

Why does that matter? Well, Fox wanted to create a sudden and exhilarating effect, and there's little better way to do that - harmonically speaking - than a fast modulation to a chromatic mediant!

57

C Chordal 11th

4

A. Sax.

Trance

2

Pno.1

Chordal 7th

Chordal 7th

Perc.

D. Set

El. B.

1 C#m11

Bmaj7

B#°7

Key of C#: i¹¹

bVII⁷

vii°

(1) - Don't let the key signature fool you: we're in the Dorian mode again, characterized by the bVII and ii chords. Fox also utilizes 7ths and extended tones to drench this section in a modernity. The tonic 11th chord feels right at home with the retro, disco vibe.

(2) - The instrumentation of this section is:

a) A *great* contrast with the previous section, which is not only very fun (and funny) but *engaging*.

b) An over-the-top tip of the hat to the "disco" sound.

(3) - The piano stabs are entirely in Clave rhythm. It's a dance-off, so a dance rhythm seems appropriate!

(4) - Aaaand, lest we forget...the third and final leitmotif appears in this section, this time quoted from the track "It's Showtime!", itself a silly piece that plays when Mettaton broadcasts various reality-TV murder-plots starring the player (*hard to explain, I know...*). Point is: the silliness of the leitmotif is re-woven into an entirely different context. Why does this matter? It ***mirrors the evolution of Mettaton's character***. It's no longer a silly, comedic foil - it is now a full-on, bad-ass dancing machine of death ready to help you meet your maker in style, baby! (Still comedic, but bad-ass nonetheless...)

61

61

A. Sax.

Trance

Pno.1

D. Set

El. B.

$C\#m^{11}$

$D\#m^7$

$G\#m^7$

B^7

i^{11}

ii^7

v^7

$\flat VII^7$

65

A. Sax.

Trance

Pno.1

Perc.

D. Set

El. B.

This musical score page contains measures 65 through 68. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The staves are arranged vertically: A. Sax. (Alto Saxophone), Trance (Trumpet), Pno.1 (Piano 1), Perc. (Percussion), D. Set (Drum Set), and El. B. (Electric Bass). The A. Sax. staff features a melodic line with eighth and quarter notes. The Trance staff has a sustained note in measure 65, followed by a half note in measure 66, and whole notes in measures 67 and 68. The Pno.1 staff plays a continuous eighth-note chordal pattern. The Perc. staff shows a snare drum pattern with 'x' marks for hits. The D. Set staff shows a bass drum pattern with 'x' marks for hits. The El. B. staff plays a steady eighth-note line.

A. Sax.

Trance

Pno.1

D. Set

El. B.

The musical score consists of five staves. The top staff, A. Sax., is in treble clef and contains a melodic line with eighth and quarter notes. The second staff, Trance, is in treble clef and features a sparse accompaniment with half notes and rests. The third staff, Pno.1, is in treble clef and contains dense chords and sixteenth-note patterns. The fourth staff, D. Set, is in treble clef and shows a rhythmic pattern with 'x' marks above the staff. The bottom staff, El. B., is in bass clef and contains a melodic line with eighth and quarter notes. The key signature for all staves is three sharps (F#, C#, G#).

Outro

73

Rob. Nz

Orch.

Pno.1

Pno.3

D. Set

Synth.

E_m^{13}

And we're back in E Dorian. The A section's material is shuffled around to intensify the timbre and propel the listener towards the ecstatic finale. Other than pointing out the guitar-solo like "cadenza" in the lead voice, there's little left to be said about this track, theory-wise. However, there *is* something to be said about why this track *just works*:

Quite simply, it's music from Toby Fox's expansive and unfiltered imagination. No market testing, no trend-chasing, no playing it safe. Undertale - and its music - has a place in video game history not because it's a love letter to old, nostalgic games or because it has a particularly enthusiastic fanbase. No, it's because the game - and its music - is authentic, incredibly well conceived and written, and crafted with a level of depth, heart, and integrity that's quite lacking from 90-95% of AAA games.

Okay, I couldn't resist gushing a little about Undertale...c'est la vie!

77

Rob. Nz

I have no idea how to transcribe these two measures, sorry...

Strs.

Orch.

Pno.1

Pno.3

D. Set

Synth.

Rob. Nz

81

Strs.

Orch.

Pno.1

Pno.3

8

D. Set

Synth.

8

Detailed description: This is a musical score for a track named 'Rob. Nz'. The score is written for seven staves: Rob. Nz (melody), Strs. (strings), Orch. (orchestra), Pno.1 (piano 1), Pno.3 (piano 3), D. Set (drum set), and Synth. (synthesizer). The key signature is one sharp (F#). The Rob. Nz staff starts at measure 81 and features a complex melodic line with many eighth and sixteenth notes. The Strs. staff has a few chords in the first measure. The Orch. staff has a few notes in the first measure. The Pno.1 staff has a series of chords and some moving lines. The Pno.3 staff has a series of chords and some moving lines. The D. Set staff has a series of eighth notes with 'x' marks above them, indicating a specific drum pattern. The Synth. staff has a series of chords and some moving lines. The score ends at measure 84 with a double bar line.

This track actually *does* loop in the game after this point. Perhaps a point of criticism that the loop point could be better, but I honestly didn't notice it while playing...I was too busy having fun!