

A postmortem of game audio and music: how mindset and surrounding can shape creative processes

A transcription of a talk by Eli Rainsberry in February 2021, commissioned by the British Council as part of PlayUK 20/21.

Thank y'all so much for tuning into this talk. I'll be making a transcription of this, as well as my slides, available afterwards on my website and on my Twitter @EliRainsberry. And I have a list of music for folks to check out in the corner there; I heavily recommend giving them a listen alongside this. Links to the streams will be posted in the chat, and can hopefully be set up easily whilst I introduce this; I hope this helps inform my talk!

I firstly wanted to thank Cel Davison for not only being a constant stream of support, but also inspiring me to write this talk in the way that I intend to, and also giving me general invaluable writing advice. I also wanted to thank the folks that I lived with in these places from late 2016 up to now, as well as the folks that I've worked with over this time. And I wanted to acknowledge the sources I've used for this talk, including Lewis Gordon and Hannah Nicklin's writing for their article and zine respectively. You can check out more about each of them, as well as other things I want to share, at the end; thank you both for the inspiration.

This might be a different postmortem to what you're used to. At some point I would like to go into more technical things, but I won't be doing this too much today.

My memory has never been too great, even in the short term, and sometimes I struggle with the executive function to keep on with things at all. This has come from a combination of things: my physical surroundings at the time, the atmosphere around them, both politically and socially, and my personal mindsets, and wellbeing, and how it fluctuated overtime. As an autistic person, this can naturally waver depending on the changes occurring over that time. And there were a lot of them. All seemingly happening as I was getting more confident, and, luckily, more connected within my work in games.

I grew up in Stratford upon Avon, and in 2011, I started my undergraduate degree in Guildford. I also lived in London for a year as part of my degree's work placement. I spent the earlier part of 2016 living back in my hometown, working between smaller games and media, and a part-time job. That was until I got my offer to start my postgraduate degree in London, which, at this point, is where we'll begin.

SE4

The howls of cats and foxes in the distance. Or the cargo train rumbling behind the building. Or sirens. The domestic disturbances across the road. The patterned mural trailing the street wall.

Avignon Road was between stations. At least three of them. One was right by a bakery, which I walked past each day. I'd sometimes be welcomed back into the area, after a day at uni, to the fresh smell of baked bread. Another was right next to a garden shop with two kittens on guard. The railway line towards that station backed behind my flat's garden, where a train, mostly cargo, would run occasionally. I remember walking more around this area of London. Though I was also a bus ride away from Peckham, which I feel bad for not exploring more when I did. Walking twenty minutes from the flat, however, would eventually lead me to Peckham Rye Park, where it was good to be able to access greenery nearby.

The flat itself, as well as my room, probably had the most space I've had whilst sharing with others in London. A split level flat, I lived with some long-time friends where we're able to spend more time with each other; small gatherings with friends from time to time. The warmth of the heated floors and company that it kept. Significant friendships and relationships developed during this time. It felt like the start of growth.

In the 1980s, there was a movement of Japanese ambient music that sought to bring more naturalistic sounds to people living in cities and urban areas, using electronic instruments. Hiroshi Yoshimura was one of those composers, who had recognised a lot of his work as "environmental music".

Growing my practice in London, I felt that some of my work related to how he identified with his, and this was a gradual realisation, at first, when I started work on the game, No Longer Home. Its theme of graduating and moving away from home resonated closely

as I had recently did the latter myself, and adjustments to those sorts of changes will almost always come by with a degree of difficulty. Adjusting to change through an autistic lens can be subjective depending on the severity of it, and whilst, for me, it was not felt immediately, since I sought out independence as much as I could, I felt like a lot of how I felt slowly crept through into what I created.

Cel and Hana, at Humble Grove, Derek Daley, a session musician who contributed additional music, and I gathered together in my bedroom to develop a live soundtrack for No Longer Home's demo, as part of the video game and theatre event, Beta Public, at Camden People's Theatre. We had a small handful of sessions together before we performed some initial concepts whilst having an audience member play through the game in real time. Not only limited to music, we also had a handful of plates, sand and other items to create live foley.

It was the first time that I performed with an ensemble in years, which was one part of why it was memorable to me. It felt like a more intimate way to work with the developers and talk about the direction of No Longer Home's soundscape, which, as a result of this experience, was really special. I still keep the older Logic Pro projects from the performance, and a handful of the synth presets I created still act as part of the backbone for most of the soundtrack; overall informing the game's initial audio and music direction. It was also interesting to see how I was able to provide the sort of physical space, as well as mental space and drive, to have these sorts of rehearsals in the bedroom I was based in on Avignon, whilst I was just starting my masters studies.

What also felt unique to me here, was that with the five of us altogether in that shared space - both in my room and on stage - it was a warm feeling to feel recognised amongst my closest contemporaries. Not only in terms of creating at a similar age, but in terms of shared experiences, especially with studying in parts of South-East London and seeking stability. A couple of us would spend time between parks in Peckham and Greenwich, discussing the struggles of living in London, and, sometimes, musing over moving elsewhere to go for more naturalistic walks. Shared times sitting in those parks were a clean break for me moving between contrasting city and university settings, especially when I had to gradually move between environments more often as I moved closer to the end of my masters.

The university I went to had space to sit outside and observe the vines change colour across seasons; a rest between how bumbling and overwhelming the transitions between lectures can be, and learning new softwares and new systems to work with.

I was grateful to have the resources and space I was given, the chances to use the space to go further out of my comfort zone, a chance to challenge myself a little more. But with those challenges naturally came along struggles.

I remember having to receive support, from one of my lecturers, with trying to communicate the need for certain spaces to build my installation work in, or with access towards the heavily booked studio spaces. I've fought hard sometimes with trying to seek independence from certain types of help, since from experience I've felt undermined with getting help because of the accommodations I needed. Though disclosing my needs this time around alleviated some stress, I still felt like I needed to find other means of coping to get through the remainder of my course.

Most of the games I'm known for, I started working on during my masters. Though I was studying full-time, I was also freelancing part-time. In order to cope with the workload, I would hyperfocus, and found that both my freelance and uni work flowed together; this state became kind of an autopilot for me. Being in this autopilot state had some small benefits when balancing work and studies, since I would otherwise have difficulty with my executive function. I would allow myself to get into this stream of work because, some of the time, I was working to template with some of my work.

This would not only come more naturally when you have melodic variants working together well, or using similar instrumentation, but also, outside of a creative context, I had further limitations to the time I had to do everything. This has left me leaving fragments out of memory with where I got from point A to B with a piece, and being like: how did I manage to work out a piece of music like this? I have at times come out of the other side of completing a piece with the working memory of how I have mixed what I've done, and how happy I am, but I also come out questioning more on how I approached something creatively.

I joke from time to time about how the reason that the soundtrack for Wilmot's Warehouse has a meticulous feel, to the point that it has been motivating for others to clean their rooms or work on their own projects, was because I was living in the headspace of doing my postgraduate thesis, at the time. I composed the bulk of the soundtrack over the time I was making preparations to work on my thesis, going into completing my thesis and, eventually, graduating. I think part of this was a coincidence, but a lot of what I was going through when studying, and the stressors behind it, seems to have crept into it in some way or another.

Similar to how artists such as Yoshimura were composing music for specific, tangible locations and spaces, I found myself emulating almost the exact surroundings of my academic and working environment, and how I was processing everything in between.

Whilst my environment affected my creative process this way, the soundtrack was also affected by certain technical limitations, that ultimately benefited the music. The music had a lot of variations built up on Wilmot's recurring theme, that would dynamically shift depending on your game's status. The catch was this: because I was working within a single audio script, I had to keep the music tonally and rhythmically the same so that it can dynamically flow between one another seamlessly. I also wanted to be sure the sound design could work together tonally. I think back to how I was similarly limited by some of the work I had to contribute to my masters. I had to creatively design sounds for a short clip purely restricted towards what was featured; tap dripping, room ambience, a passing train. Between these experiences, these limitations can still let me play in a smaller, confined space, and, this way, explore as far as I could with it.

E1

The winding stairwell, with bare vines on the walls, creeping along its clean lines and elegant proportions, replacing the green ivy that would crawl along the last flat. Concrete steps echo as you ascend up to the upper row of flats; the neighbour's croaking cats remain at the foot of it. The rumblings of the train back in Avignon Road was replaced with an air ambulance rising or returning to or from the nearby Royal London Hospital, the low windings of their wings rumbling in the sky. During certain times of the day, the local mosque's calls to prayer can be heard from afar.

Treves House was an understated modernist block, with a strong history as well as a stronger community where I would have really liked to have got to know more. Especially since I didn't get much opportunity to connect with my neighbours before moving. Along with the nearby block, Lister House, it was in risk of demolition by the local council, and the residents came together in one of their flats, fairly close to ours, to meet and campaign. A year onwards since I moved out, I've since found out that they won their fight to stop its collapse.

It was walking distance from Victoria Park, the Barbican conservatory and a local Jewish-ran bakery, all in which I frequented during my time in the area. Both the flower market and city farm in particular were good places to seek out stimuli of the smell of lavender and fresh flowers, the sights of the farm animals and cats.

I was grateful to still be able to seek out these naturalistic spaces, especially when I was centered more closely towards the heart of the city. Compared to the rows of houses in South-East London, more of these spaces were homed between a heavier mix of modernist and brutalist structures.

Our flat hosted four people, in a more confined space than in Avignon, so both the communal space and my bedroom had less capacity for more collaborative ventures. But the room I was in worked just fine to “live in”. Enough space to at least have my desk facing away from my bed, to try and not think about lying down too much during the day. More intimate than my previous room. To the point where it felt too familiar to me. And a place where I felt like, for a while, I couldn't grow.

A resonating occurrence with albums like Yoshimura's 'Green', released in 1986, was that ambience can gradually become more alive when it becomes reminiscent of the spaces that they're trying to present themselves as. In the album's liner notes, Yoshimura wished to express “the comfortable scenery of the natural cycle known as Green”, juxtaposing against the city life he led in Tokyo. I think a lot about his use of sounds that you'll hear as you head further outside of cities, like the crickets in his track “Sleep”, and how it synthetically replicates them in a way that merges with the harmonies played. Travelling between small games studios at the time, I found myself wanting to hear more of those sounds in the everyday again, and one way I tried to realise this was when I was developing the soundscape for the game, Bird Alone.

George Batchelor, the game's developer, whilst discussing influences, introduced me to the works of another Japanese composer, Ryuichi Sakamoto, who had a more experimental approach towards capturing sounds both within and outside urban landscapes. “Walker”, a piece from his 2017 album, “async”, included field recordings of his footsteps whilst walking in a leaf-filled forest, layered over a bed of tonal reverberations. A combination of this listening, plus earlier inspiration taken from designing sounds creatively during my masters, lead me to take recordings of locations, room ambiances, and other similar places, then processing them through reverb plugins and effects to make something new out of them.

Though it would be nice to explore more analog options in future, Logic Pro's default reverb has various tonal options where it can bring out musical notes out of the ambiances. With combinations of pitch shifting and harmonising, you can really stretch out its capabilities.

This ended up becoming part of the basis behind developing the ambiances for Bird Alone. We wanted to give the perspective of the bird being alone in their own world. I took the soundscapes from what would typically be the natural habitat of the bird - a rainforest, in this case - and reduced them down to Paulstretch-like beds of sound. You might occasionally hear echoes of rainwater and animals still, but I like to think it makes the space you share with the bird more dreamlike.

Working with the soundscape for Bird Alone this way felt welcoming compared to everything else that was going on, and, due to the more ad hoc, free approach I took towards this, that was reflected a lot more through what I created for the game. For example, how I felt over the rare times I headed outside of my flat for solace, dipped into what I wrote for the game. This was especially apparent when watching animal behaviours through city farm visits, going to the Barbican and being in awe of the greenery as well as the amount of cuttings and leaves dropped to sneak out in your pockets. Or simply admiring the flowers I'd get from the market, to surround and brighten the inside of my flat and my bedroom.

I think about the busy feeling of where I was and how I felt like I wanted to completely contrast everything I heard by making something completely peaceful. Part of creating for Bird Alone included building up a musical garden, and working with more musical and playful sound design as a result. I was able to execute the peacefulness I felt from exploring, by developing tonal palettes akin to what could be heard in Yoshimura's "Green"; having the Monstera plant represented in low, reverberated tones, compared to a more acoustic piano for a bunch of roses.

Having been introduced to the works of Yoshimura much earlier, I was directly inspired by his work even further when conceptualising music for a later vignette in No Longer Home. I wanted to arrange an extended piece that would let each instrumental layer overlap as dialogue between the characters, Bo and Ao, progresses, and let those layers build up in a way that, even when at their fullest, still evoke a sense of both the feelings of struggling with impending change; including the eventual move away from home. I listened more extensively to Yoshimura's album, "Music For Nine Postcards", where, in the liner notes, he had asked himself, "how would this album sound if it were played in this space?" The space, in question, was the Hara Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo. Similarly to how he rooted his approach as a direct response to the museum, I found myself rooting mine as a direct response to both the quiet bedroom space in the flat No Longer Home is set in, and the dialogue it interweaves with.

Starting on both Bird Alone and this piece in No Longer Home came not long before I moved out of London. Leading up to then, I felt the weight of maintaining living in the city more heavily, and as much as I loved being closer to friends and partners, and it was generally easier to travel, I felt a lot more confined to the place that I lived in. Both physically and personally. And part of that included dealing with extremities. Extremities of either leaving my flat for whole weekends, or staying in aside from shopping. Extremities of either feeling secure in how I was able to sustain living where I was, or the opposite.

Unpredictability has never settled well with me, and it felt like it was almost easier to fall back into earlier autopiloting to not only distract myself from external circumstances, but also the internal conflicts I had within myself. Along with how my mindset was shifting, based on trying to accept myself from the ground up, I found myself feeling like I almost had to re-learn how I approached everything from scratch. Some folks who may have worked with me might not necessarily clock onto this and think “hey Eli you seemed alright with this to me” but. Masking as an autistic person. That’s that for you. Part of self-acceptance came with finding London to be more of a claustrophobic and overbearing place than it should be for me, and I found myself needing more of a respite from that. That’s part of why I felt like I identified even more with the music made by artists such as Yoshimura and Sakamoto, and how they both approached incorporating naturalistic soundscapes, both realistically and synthetically, as a way to escape from “the city”.

HX7

Staggered rocks and geology covered with moss and grass. Nearby streams and rivers run white noise. In the distance, a train runs around the valley, the rumbling ruminating from one side over to another. Minutes away are various sets of woods to walk to. One that’s easy enough to forage some fir and holly for winter, the other houses a small group of deer that watch over you as you walk to the lonely basketball hoop. Another is a place to settle, a place to listen to the constant waters.

An half hour walk will take you to some wild garlic and nettles to forage, with some bluebells in the summer. An hour out will take you to the moors, where I can feel the winds move differently compared to down in London. They shiver as they push you, and dance with the heavy rainfall.

I moved up to the north of the UK in early 2019, to a small market town at the bottom of a valley. I had visited often in the summer and the more I stopped by, the more I felt drawn to it, as I grew more wary of the anxieties that crept back in when I travelled back down south. I also got to a point where I haven't felt a need to be based somewhere like London, or other major cities, to be able to fit into the niche communities they have there. And before, well, early 2020, there was the option to travel to other towns and cities if I'd like to, but now, it's at least, an option. I'm happy to have found a place here with a vocal arts community, with a multitude of walking routes to boot.

Small birds congregate on the tree parallel to our house, whilst a ginger cat from one of the next door houses keeps watch. Howls from another small, elderly cat from the other house over. Two years on from moving into the house we're in now, and, compared to the spaces that were cultivated back in London, it's been the first place I've been able to have a consistent, shared workspace at home with other creatives; as well as it being separate to my sleeping space. Good, creative and close company, who cook for each other and tell stories and experiences. Who would host visitors whenever it was possible to. It feels like a place to continue growing.

Being able to hear out the sounds and ambiences that were representational of what I've been hearing in albums such as "Green" and "async", somewhere where I can access them with ease, was more meaningful to me than I thought possible. It felt like one thing trying to create music and sounds in a place where it feels like you're clashing with more bustling environments, and withdrawing your energy and resources away. But when you put yourself in a space where you can feel the temperature, the light, and the colours of the nearby woods and river give you more, rather than taking?

A selection of the ambient music I've mentioned, along with other pieces from Western composers, made it into a playlist I curated as I formally started work on both the soundtrack and sounds for A Monster's Expedition. Though a lot of these works have some electronic basis to them, I found myself drawn back to how acoustic pieces gather a sense of place. Satoshi Ashikawa, for example, composed ensemble pieces that, at times, only arranged for a harp, piano, and vibraphone in his 1982 album "Still Way". To me, it invoked feelings of the peace and contentment I would sometimes feel if I was sitting on a nearby bench next to one of my local streams.

Having been ad-hoc on the game since late 2017, I started working more consistently on it halfway through my first year in Yorkshire, in which I was given more of an entry towards reworking some of the practical parts of my workflow. This included being able to record with more acoustic and analog instruments and effects. Since moving, I've felt like I've been able to work from home more here compared to, say, at Treves House; it's been easier to control my surroundings. The space I share when working is mutual, as we usually keep to ourselves working on our own things, and whilst I was slower to adapt to it, it's been a good alternative to being in a workspace by myself, or in a typical office or studio setting. A good, communal inbetween, and what will eventually become the environment I found myself being influenced by for the first time in a while.

The space I've been given to incorporate guitar work comfortably again was a major difference. There had been times before where I would be so heavily focused on a more electronic workflow that I'd be on autopilot for a lot of it. And that can be okay, sometimes you need to do that to cope with changes and unpredictability, at the bare minimum. However, I've been able to record, and have become more confident with, acoustic and microphone-based recordings, which, for a long while, was always a low point of confidence because of the limitations I had initially. Some of that was constrained by what I had at the time, but mostly, to do with place, and my mindset, in connection to that. Whilst I had been able to record some work in London, I found that the motivation to record more has caught up more naturally to me, and that I can now give myself more of an option here.

That being said, a big relocation from one end of the country to another would still be a major point of change and readjustment to make, and due to how I process this kind of change, it mostly took more until closer to the end of production on A Monster's Expedition where I was gradually able to know what kind of template I wanted to work through for its soundtrack.

Initially, I was hoping to record a variety of dynamic acoustic tracks, including an acoustic, mandolin, and banjo to represent certain areas of the game. The tracks will gradually become more electronic and textural in nature as you progress. Whilst some of this concept was developed further for the game's more establishing themes, I found that I was overworking myself a little more than expected due to the anticipation of having this newfound energy, and this newfound space, as well as personally being a little overambitious, led to me needing to give myself longer periods of recovery later on.

I was also able to think more about giving compositional space towards No Longer Home again; for the first time in a while, I was able to work on the game on a more consistent basis. That, too, included some further acoustic and analog workings, which I thought more about when I approached composing for the liminal spaces when walking around the flat.

Near the beginning of the game, you hear a quiet, electric guitar sing to itself as you wander between rooms and get to know those spaces. Musical interludes within smaller rooms and corridors play back more repetitively; drawing out for longer in bigger spaces, like the garden. You can also interact with objects, triggering sounds that blend into the environment of the music. This way, I felt more able to directly respond, in a similar way to Yoshimura earlier, to “what would the music sound like if played in each of those spaces.”

Partway through the game, you will get to hear a small handful of pieces that were less influenced by the artists I’ve talked about today, and more from solo or small acoustic-indie bands. One piece in particular, heard whilst a group of friends are having a barbeque, is a change from the more meticulous, synthetic sounds I’ve written and it makes me wonder whether it would have been something I could have written as well and as authentically, compared to when I was living back in London; even after a few of us yearned to move away from the city beforehand. Though I’m going to be concluding my time working on No Longer Home soon, I’ve found myself relating to it again after five years; adjusting to the changes of moving away from home, once more. Though this time around I felt like I was able to have more control over the independence I sought, and with that came, albeit slowly as I settled in, self-advocating for myself.

Part of self-advocating also meant further accepting the changes that I went through over the last few years. It still took me a while to accept how those changes could still come through my work, in one way or another, due to how I was processing everything. And that’s okay. It was important for me to accept help, and not just on a mentor or peer-to-peer level. This can be in the form of vocalising any adjustments or accommodations needed to feel like I want to keep going with what I’m working on. I went through a long time as an autistic person thinking that it’d be more fair that I was treated the same as everyone else exactly, but that was masking for you. Having the extra space, time and energy I have here, compared to before, allowed me to reflect exactly on my needs and wants when wanting to work with like-minded people, whether that means having someone on the team, not necessarily a lead, to check in with more often, or closed-captioning during calls, and so on.

Feeling more confident to head outside has made a major difference towards how I work, and how I approach not working. It's been much easier for me to be able to take a break between everything by going off into the woods and letting the sounds of the stream flow through my head enough to give it the hard reset it deserves. The more immediate access, compared to the longer journeys that it would take to go over Epping Forest - which I still miss from living in London - has made the local forests and cloughs more of a lifeline. It also feels more encouraging to get more inspiration from what you hear, especially when there may be clearer distinctions between sounds compared to what you might hear in a city setting.

Ashikawa mentioned in his liner notes for Still Way, how certain areas and spaces are well accommodated for visualising, but sounds can, at times, be ignored. He wrote how he felt it was "necessary to treat sound and music with the same level of daily need as we treat architecture, interior design, food, or the air we breathe." I resonate with this need of the sounds that may otherwise be ignored in busier environments, especially within the greener spaces back in London. I was grateful for the amount of access towards this in both South and East London; though the latter I had to travel further out compared to before. Here I don't have to take up much time, since I am surrounded more by the greenery I wished to take up space in. It gave me the space I needed between everything else going on.

It feels like an obvious stance that a "change in scenery" would help boost creativity or your wellbeing, and I'm not going to lie about that nor the major differences I've noticed in my workflow since moving. Some may also think it doesn't really matter which city or place you have to be in to get the work, you can "work anywhere" and I technically can, I have that privilege. But it's worth taking note about what environments you thrive in, and don't, and what resonates with you when you think about how you go through your experiences in those spaces. That being said, I would still visit London again if and when I get the means to, and it's worthwhile to get a break from the places you usually thrive in, and think about how the places you were previously in resonate with you now, compared to then.

Having also mentioned earlier about the recovery time needed, a big difference between doing so here, compared to being in London, is that I felt like I was able to execute not only more regular breaks where I would take myself outside, but also periods of not working for more than a week.

Having felt the pressure whilst living in London to spend my working days, and some weekends, working on projects and burning myself out much easier, I was able to save up enough to take some time off. It's a privilege to be able to save, but as someone who needs further recovery between work than the average person, I found it essential to let myself do nothing, or at least make simple preparations for the next stream of projects, for about a month. Thanks to this, I was able to return to, and start on, work where I've been able to give more equal energy and time between each other.

Where you surround yourself and how you're going through things can and will drive how you approach doing creative work, and that's okay. It may be an entirely different way to do so for whoever else is watching, compared to what I spoke about today. I'm glad that I'm now at a point where I don't have to worry about changing places and spaces, and can now think about what days of the week I can work on one thing, or the other, or being able to approach what I do based on the accommodations I made for myself. And I'm relieved that this time, I can bring in the feelings and space I have to make more "environmental music", akin to the ambient musicians I've mentioned, into city areas or busier spaces, where I imagine folks would be listening to my music, without necessarily having to be in those spaces as much as before. I'm especially glad that I found myself in a place where I can keep growing.

Resources

Hiroshi Yoshimura, ['Green'](#) (1986)
Ryuichi Sakamoto, ['async'](#) (2017)
Hiroshi Yoshimura, ['Music For Nine Post Cards'](#) (1982)
Satoshi Ashikawa, ['Still Way'](#) (1982)
Hannah Nicklin, ['A Psychogeography of Games'](#) (2015)
Lewis Gorden, ['Another Green World: How Japanese ambient music found a new audience'](#) for Fact Magazine (2018)
The Gentle Author, ['Treves and Lister Houses are Saved'](#) for Spitalfields Life (2019)
The Gentle Author, ['Sophie Spielman, Victorious Campaigner'](#) for Spitalfields Life (2019)
Andrei Kashcha, ['City Roads'](#) (2020)