On relinquishing creative control

Musician Christopher Taylor (Body Meat) discusses balancing multiple creative roles, combining his love of video game development with music, and coping with the pressures of promoting your art.

September 30, 2024 -

As told to Jessica Kasiama, 2686 words.

Tags: Music, Collaboration, Adversity, Creative anxiety, Process.

Going through the credits of your projects, your commitment to world-building is undeniable. Looking back on a project such as the "Twigs" music video, which you directed, art directed, and performed intricate choreography for, what have you learned about balancing multiple roles in your work?

I am interested in so many different things [and] I find it fun to learn how to execute several parts of a project. I don't have the money to hire all these people, so I'm going to learn how to do it myself. It can be stressful but then by the end of the process, I'm grateful that I took the time and drilled myself into doing it. I like dipping my hands into every part of the process, almost to an annoying degree. Even when working with people, I have to have a piece of each part of it, especially for Body Meat. I started this project so that I could have control over every little piece, and I'm willing to do the work to maintain that. The circle of people I work with is small because they've had to learn to work with me and I've had to learn to trust them.

When you get in touch with a long-time collaborator, such as Daniel Brennan, what are your conversations like alongside maintaining creative control?

Dan and I have known each other for so long. Nowadays, I'll send him [a couple] key points of what I'm seeing for [a music video], and he'll fully get it. He and Rich Smith [understand] what my brain and music look like together [and] they're good at deciphering what I like. It is years and years of friendship. And the visual aspect is important because of the experimental nature of the music. Although the music can be abstract at times, the visual is what you're seeing and I get to be more direct [with what I am trying to say]. Dan and Rich get that flow. They know that the music can be chaotic and we want to be able to find the purpose of the song and put that in the visual, and not make the visual be a one-to-one of the music.

That's why I love working with them. It ends up just being a couple of friends hanging out, making something cool. Sometimes we have money and get to do something interesting but then other times we have very little and that's when the insane stuff happens.

Your latest album, *Starchris*, combines your love of video and computer games with your music. You even developed a video game as a companion to one of the songs, "North Side." For you, how do these interests interact with and speak to one another?

It's mostly in the design of how games are made. There's a programming pattern called the Singleton pattern where everything has to speak to one script independent of itself. So things in the game or the program don't know that the other things in the program exist. With the music, I wanted it to feel like each sound didn't know the other

one existed, and yet they're working together based on this global script that controls the flow of [*Starchris*]. There are little Easter eggs I put in the album. For example, the last song on the record has bits and pieces of each song from before it within the song. It's acting as the global script, so that's why it's called "Paradise." I do a thing where I use the same scrubby effect in "Crystalize," and I bring that in at the end, and then the same synth from "North Side," plays, but at double time at the end of the song. Things like that are happening in that song that I'm hyped for.

Lyrically, the album leans on ambiguity to encourage various interpretations, mirroring role-playing games in how they leave room for the player to affect the gameplay and chart their own path. How did you factor in the agency of the audience when working on the album versus working on the game?

You have to relinquish some control of the technical aspect of making the music, just like you would relinquish it in video games. I'm trying to make an album where everyone can perceive something in the same way, but also get different outcomes from this thing just like in an RPG, right? I'm using sound palettes throughout the album that can sometimes sound confusing but if you're familiar with odd time signatures, you'll grab onto that throughline of the album. But if you're maybe more of a synth person, you'll grab onto that. Just like in an RPG where you're choosing your character in the beginning.

One of the biggest things I have taken from [the video game director and writer] Yoko Taro and his work is that he always presents alternate ways to feel about a story, especially in *NieR: Automata*. He's throwing your expectations out the window. I'm interested in concepts and technical adventures where you're like, "How can I make it so that everyone can take their own path through this album?" Everyone's going to hear something different anyway. I might as well just lean into that, right?

And this is the first record I've mixed with somebody. My friend Mike [Bloom] is an amazing mixing engineer. I'd never worked with someone [in that way] but I needed another ear. There was a month when I took the train to the city and was in his studio every single day [for up to eight hours].I had to relinquish full control over it because I knew it would be better for what I was trying to do. And he was patient enough to meet me in the middle. I was more interested in [executing] throughlines than making the most perfect-sounding thing. I spent more time just crafting the shape of [the album]. I think that's more important.

In a [Game Developers Conference] talk that Taro [gave in 2014], he talked about world-building and player freedom in game design. I love his take on it because he's saying you don't give them everything at first. Imagine a circle, and then there's people in the circle, and they see the wall and they're like, "This is as big as the game is. Okay, that's fine." And then you [bring them to] a point in the game where they can break through that first wall and the circle gets a little bigger. So the player goes, "I could do that the whole time? Wait, what else can I do?" I was trying to do that with the music. I take someone from a song like "The Mad Hatter" to "High Beams" [to] expand the world dramatically. I'm trying to make you question what the hell the next song is going to be.

For the accompanying video game, you worked with playtesters who supported development by checking for glitches or bugs, right? What was that process like?

That was the most fun I've had in a very long time creating something, and the most stressed out I've ever been. At first, a lot of people couldn't finish the game, so that was a little frustrating. But I wanted it to be a little confusing. Even on the first screen, I had friends being like, "How do I *start* the game?" because you're just [placed] in a room with the orb. I wanted that to be part of the game. It was awesome because then people were in my Discord sharing information on how to figure it out.

That's the whole point of everything I make. I want people to engage with each other and talk about it in that way. Through play testing, I realized how important it is to see the people's reactions to the thing you're making and how they communicate with each other, as well as getting feedback on what they like, what they don't like, or what confuses them. I wish that [existed] more in music.

I enjoyed the [process]. I had gotten no sleep because I was trying to fix everything that was broken, but it

cemented my desire to [continue to] make games.

The music video for "High Beams" tells a story of the programmer creating a game inside a cave while being shadowed by a copy of his own design. That made me think about the whiplash between the more solitary parts of the creative process juxtaposed with the public facing responsibilities that come with being an artist. How do you prepare to emerge from the allegorical cave to navigate the promotional part of the work?

I don't know if I have the answer. I know there are a lot of people like me that create in a solitary confined space at home, where you're not really getting a lot of feedback, just bouncing around in your head about things, and then you have to go to release it. I kind of have to diminish [the project] a little bit in my head or move on from it a bit before it comes out. When I'm releasing something, I tend to think that no one's really going to like it and then try to release that pressure where I'm like, "It doesn't matter." I think you create a copy of yourself at that moment. You create this data structure that is meant to not feel things and not care, and you're like, "I'm going to promote the thing. I don't care what people think," but that's not you, because you do care. You do love it.

So when I build up that structure of me that doesn't care and can crawl out of the cave of creating things to be this forward-facing artist, I also have to destroy that character so that I can go back to making something or go back to feeling what I feel after the rollout of a song. I am probably too emotional to be the person that doesn't care what people think, and can just put things out. I care deeply [*laughs*].

The double life that comes with being an artist.

Social media can mess with your brain about the whole thing. I think that creates the copy faster. But then I do have to think sometimes, "Hey, it is my art. I do want to express it to people." I go back and forth on that. That moment before releasing something, I love the things that I've made but then when it gets closer and closer, I create that copy to protect myself. There are moments where I've listened to my music, and I'm crying, dancing, so happy, [because] I know what it took to make it. The thought of having someone else judge it can take all that stuff away. Sometimes I make things [and] don't ever release them. I don't talk about them because I don't want people to ask me to [share] them.

Listening to the album, I was reflecting on how streaming platforms have introduced more gamified elements to their platforms to boost engagement from algorithmic playlists to end-of-year listening statistics. It was refreshing to engage with video games and music, to have those mediums side by side, in a way that centers the artist.

To me, this is one of the most beautiful things about game design and I try to use it in music: when you're making a game, you're only worried about that thing and what goes into that. I like listening to music, making music, and playing music. I don't like having to look a certain way or present a certain vibe. I hate it. You can ask anyone I know. In game design, no one cares what the developer looks like. That's why I love Yoko Taro. He wears a mask on his face that he never takes off.

I think it can be cool that certain platforms are adopting this more of a gamified [approach] and making things more interactive but there is a bit of it that's pretty malicious. They are trying to buy you, or buy your attention, right? They're trying to steal your attention instead of inspire your attention, and you have to be very careful of those lines.

In past interviews, you've talked about having a more open-ended approach to making music. What does a typical workday look like when you're working on a song with little to no expectation around where you will land?

It's all feeling. I never try to plan any of it. I don't really write off of song structure. I try to go from a rhythm that's interesting to me, to an even more interesting rhythm, etc. Till the song's done, till I say the song's done. Sometimes the song ain't done, but that's it. It's not that complicated. I go in and try to make some drums that sound fun. And if I can make the next part of the drum track sound even better, I run with it like that. It's fun to make yourself move. It's the same thing with the games. I want to make something that I

want to listen to or I want to play.

You go in with an open mind, make whatever you're feeling, and keep going from there. And then that's when it can turn into a fight where you're trying to finish this thing and you're like, "What did I do? How can I make this a good song?" And maybe that's the thing with me is I never really give up a track. I keep sculpting it, removing things, and shaping it to be something because I believe in that first feeling I got from the [initial] drum track. I probably have 50 different versions of the song, "Crystalize." I hate that song, but I love it. It's my favorite song and I hate it. It was maybe the hardest one to make.

Once again, those copies of yourself re-emerge. Your past self who started off that song bounces off of the versions that follow.

Exactly [*laughs*].

What lessons from your creative journey have you applied to other parts of your life?

You learn to build a home by making art. You get creative with your problem-solving. I can tell you right now, it has not been an easy ride at all. And I've had to be so creative with everything I do in every aspect. I've learned that from making the things that I make out of passion. How can I utilize every ounce of my being to figure out we can make that bill payment? How can we make that deadline? It's the same thing with making music. I don't have much and I need to make something out of [a] few pieces of sound.

Christopher Taylor recommends:

Game Programming Patterns by Robert Nystrom. Great book about game design in programming and understanding how to manage and scale work while maintaining a readable and sound structure. I feel that the ethos of some of these patterns are really useful even outside of game development.

Dysnomia by Dawn of Midi. Incredible poly-rhythmic work that feels so electronic but is all played by hand. I love this album. Highly inspiring, I learn a new thing each and every time I listen.

MX Master 3 Mouse. Truly the pinnacle of ergonomics, unreal comfort in mouse design. I've put thousands of miles on mine.

a crying poem by claire rousay, More Eaze, and Bloodz Boi. Quiet, beautiful, contemplative and emotional body of music, this one gets me every time. just put it on and go for a walk.

Working near a window. I need light when I work, I don't like feeling locked away in some dungeon programming or making music. I'd sacrifice the acoustics of a room for sunlight any day.

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