

REFLECTIONS ON GROUP PROCESS FOR “SIBI”

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Abstract

This essay is a self-reflective overview of the process used by group 17, in the User and social innovation course, running in Spring 2012, at Politecnico di Milano, as a response to the group specific task component of the “SIBI” game, run by Roberto Fassone. The first part of the essay aims to orientate the reader with the nuances of the creative process used to respond to a challenge specifically posed to the group. The second part of this essay offers the group’s own personal subjective reflections on this processes.

As an exercise designed to explore the relationship of constraints and creativity, the requirements for our SIBI challenge were literally based on fifteen random rolls of a die; set in motion by the group members. The specific game dynamics that resulted, when the numerical inputs were decoded required us to make:

“(1) cover song of a song by a living woman. The cover (2) has to feature the sound of a metronome and has to be interpreted by someone between (3) 30 and 40 years old. The cover song has to be about (4) cinema and about (5) signs. The title of the cover song (6) has to start with a G.”

Our response was a demo recording entitled “the Girl from the Transformers Movie”, with altered lyrics based on the classic 1962 Antônio Carlos Jobim Bossa Nova composition “Garota de Ipanema” (“The Girl from Ipanema”), most famously recorded with vocals by Astrud Gilberto.

To arrive at this output our group worked in a number of stages, which although lateral and iterative in nature, could be generally chronologically flattened into the following overlapping divisions: (1) Assignment and general orientation to the task requirements by the group members (2) Consensus on how to manage the task between the group members (3) Generative research into potential song choices and concept directions (4) Generation of final concept and lyrics (5) Production and recording of the final recorded song. (6) Accompanying materials including the written description and accompanying album art concept.

The first four of these stages, which loosely included much of the insight efforts, were conducted with the participations of all three-group members. For logistical reasons, the later implementation stages had the sole input of group member Ashkan Shabnavard. This was clearly not ideal, as all members in our team realize the potential creative benefits of engaging the skills of all the team members. However since this output was one of two tasks simultaneously undertaken by our group as part of the SIBI our group made the practical decision to delegate the implementation of the two tasks to separate members of the group. Contributing factors to this decision were time constraints imposed by full course loads, the availability of various team members for scheduled group meetings, and varying aptitudes and technical skillsets amongst group members.

Given the nature of the task, a prime concern in developing a concept was deciding on a specific song on which to base our cover recording. Exploring the possibility of finding an ideal song, matching all components of the task, was seen as a first priority in developing the direction of the output. The team members spent a substantial amount of time searching for ideas about possible songs to use. We used free association technics based on our own musical preferences, and also conducted web searches for song lists starting with G and also looked for cinema specific music. Notable near hits included the

theme song to the James Bond film “Goldfinger”, Madonna’s “Vogue”, music of ABBA, Suzanne Vega, and Beyonce.

This stage of the process required intuition, and factored in the experience and personal knowledge about music that each member carried. It also highlighted the influence of cultural barriers, as two thirds of the group were Chinese students, and they were not—with the exception to the soundtrack to the movie Titanic—exposed to many of the most notable pop cultural references of western music, while the remaining member was raised in native English speaking context and had extensive experience in music performance and recording. Therefore, in the opinion of the latter, many of the suggestions by the Chinese group members lacked strong resonance with respect to the overall context of western pop culture. They were generally commercial pop without a strong identity, or any culturally known anthemic elements that could make them impactful to the class audience. At the same time these suggestions lacked strong compositional elements like unique melodic hooks, and were ultimately deemed unusable for the purposes in the game.

Ultimately, despite considerable time devoted to research, we were unable to find a single song that fit all the criteria of the SIBI task, and so we had no choice but to find a pre-existing song that could be altered to fit. At this point we considered new constraints to define the song choice. There was a consensus amongst the group that taking a completely unknown song would not make sense— and that with an altered song some semblance of anthemic quality would help ground the reinterpretation. Thus, we considered logical touch points that could make the song interesting or humorous to listeners. In the same way, we felt that the constraints of an original Female vocalist, and the title starting with G, were generic enough to maintain to help narrow down our choices. Thus we dropped the constraint of signs and cinema as subject matter in the lyrical content.

Ultimately the decision to use Girl From Ipenema was made at a stage where time constraints required the group to stop generative creative process for song choice. After already having spent an exhausting day working on the SIBI, this song was seen to include an instantly recognizable melody for even the two Chinese students. The choice of using the banal reference to the Transformers film franchise, to meet the original needs of the SIBI game variables, was also serendipitously made because it resonated with all group members regardless of national backgrounds.

Lyrics were primarily written in a marathon working session with all the team members present, though the team member who was a native English speaker wrote and directed almost all the reworked lyrical content. What could possibly be considered our group’s eureka moment came when the group was inspired to incorporate a crude and childish reinterpretation of the robotic mechanized transforming sound effect used in the Transformers cartoon’s program. This was seen as a cultural reference that could be understood by someone in their thirties (another constraint), who had originally watched the program in the 1980’s.

Thus it can be said that when the SIBI constraints engaged with the individual skillsets, cultural backgrounds, knowledge base, interests, and intuition of our team members, they inspired and drove the overall creative process leading to our final output. The need to make it a “cover song” directly let us to consider actually recording music. For example, since, one of our group members had experience with performing and recording music, he became a driving force in this part of the group’s output. So constraints even helped orientate the management of the project towards the specific competencies, in a causal cycle feeding back between the task and various forms of tacit knowledge. Clearly, for us there was a relationship between constraints and creativity.