
Kyle McKaskill-Newhook
Fourth-year undergraduate Music (Major)
University of Guelph

Music has the ability to lull our minds into an imaginative stasis by its sheer expressive power. Video games can transport us to intricate worlds by allowing us to assume a sense of virtual consciousness. The combination of these art forms—video games and music—creates a platform wherein composers can manipulate sound to further submerge players in virtual worlds far distant from reality. Sound Play: Video Games and the Musical Imagination by William Cheng considers the relationship between audio stimuli in video games and the aesthetic, moral, and socio-political stakes of the genre. Cheng details how game composers and players manipulate the components of music in the gaming world that would not be possible in the real world. In his 262-page book, Cheng presents five case studies of video games that focus on the interactivity of sound and play. Chapter One, on Fallout 3, explores the distressing theme of how violence can connect insidious connotations with everyday music. Chapter Two, on Final Fantasy VI, analyzes the sentiment of nostalgia in early game music. Chapter Three, on Silent Hill, examines the use of industrial audio to intensify horror, influencing a gamer’s decision-making process. Chapter Four, on The Lord of the Rings Online, investigates the controversies of players exploiting music to aggravate other players. And the final chapter, on Team Fortress 2, discusses gender politics presented through the voice’s
control of speech and silence. Overall, these case studies effectively prove Cheng’s argument that the interaction of sound and play exemplifies the terms and conditions of human coexistence.

Cheng’s case studies of Chapters One and Two present some fascinating information, but are somewhat limited in their ability to encompass the experience of all players. Music and video games are subjective forms of media, meaning experiences differ from person to person. This complexity is evident in the different perspectives players experience during their time traversing the Capital Wasteland in *Fallout 3*. In Chapter One Cheng’s analysis of *Fallout 3* provides insight into the upbeat popular music being juxtaposed with the graphic brutality caused by a player’s actions. Cheng suggests that the game’s musical repertoire is not fundamentally violent, but malicious conventions of gameplay portray the music as what Cheng describes as “contextually dissonant,” implying the reaction of optimistic music becoming pessimistic (37). The difficulty with Cheng’s analysis is that *Fallout 3* was designed with player choice imbedded within game play. Gamespot reviewer Kevin VanOrd clarifies what player choice entails by stating, “your actions have far-reaching consequences that affect not just the world around you, but also the way you play [within] it.”1 Player choice essentially influences what the music can represent. During my play through of *Fallout 3*, I interpreted “The Stars and Stripes Forever” by John Philip Sousa as expressing my libertarianism when I chose to play benevolently. Cheng interpreted the song otherwise, choosing to connect it to his own malevolent actions within the game. As psychologist Phoebe Ellsworth puts it, “our emotional life occurs in streams which change all the time in response to ever changing evaluations, ever evolving actions and action tendencies, ever changing bodily states and feelings.”2 Therefore, it is possible to associate the various musical qualities within *Fallout 3* symbolically and subjectively.

Despite this, I agree with Cheng that the overall intent of the music in *Fallout 3* is to engross a player in her or his exploration of the Capital Wasteland. Cheng states, “the fact that the game’s underground music hails from the Western art tradition— which, in our world, is often glorified for its alleged universal


appeal—provides a fittingly ironic reflection of the wasteland’s cultural upheavals” (32). The purpose of the music adheres to the symbolic and metaphorical reinforcement associated with *Fallout 3*’s story. Players follow the narrative path of the game, allowing the music to reflect a multitude of ideals depending on the player’s direction.

Idiosyncratic views are applicable throughout the history of music and video games. Regardless of technological advancements, connoisseurs may appreciate video game music of the past as much as the present. I find that older video game music can hold emotional power, despite hardware limitations that only allowed for synthesized “beeps” and “boops.” In Chapter Two, Cheng argues that the nostalgic value of older video game music trumps aesthetic conventions (78). He argues this by examining the opera scene in *Final Fantasy VI* in terms of its ability to convey a sense of nostalgia and enchantment to the game’s fans. Again, I take issue with Cheng’s argument. Just like *Fallout 3*, interactivity generates one’s own emotional attachment to the many features of any interactive game. The work of Jonathan Sykes and Simon Brown echoes this idea, when they state: “emotional reaction(s) and interaction(s) represent significant potential in being able to adapt and manipulate gaming environments in response to emotional and affective states of the user.”

Sykes and Brown’s theory suggests that interactive stimulation can create the sense of a cause-and-effect relationship between player and game.

Indeed, consider *Final Fantasy VI*’s opera scene. Because I am required to participate in *Final Fantasy VI*’s opera scene, I will have a subjective emotional attachment to the scene’s music, especially because of the work required to prepare and accomplish the game’s task. Cheng fails to address the sentimentality a person can gain when contributing to the completion of a project. Karen Collins describes this seductive experience as “the suspension of disbelief, adding realism and creating illusion.” Collins continues: “The illusion of being immersed in a three-dimensional atmosphere is greatly enhanced by the audio, particularly for newer games that may be developed in full surround sound, although even simpler stereo effects still have a considerable impact.”

Despite its two-dimensional aesthetic, *Final Fantasy VI*’s opera scene represents a moment where players participate in a virtual world believed to be realistic by many of the game’s

---


players. Witnessing the subsequent performance may therefore be fulfilling and emotional.

Cheng does mention the unique affection players have for *Final Fantasy VI*’s opera because of their appreciation for producing and listening to an opera that contains sounds barely reminiscent of real opera. He goes on to say that the successful simulation of the music relies on the imagination and will of players to hear it as such (90-91). I agree with this argument because of its applicability not only to *Final Fantasy VI* but also to *Fallout 3*. Both games successfully entangle music and gameplay, allowing a player to imagine new expressive connotations to the music without compromising the overall narrative purpose of the music. Overall, however, I found myself arguing with Cheng’s case studies of *Fallout 3* and *Final Fantasy VI*. He presented his information intriguingly, but his engagement with these games does not encompass the subjectivity of other players. Tom Bissell echoes my own argument for the subjective connection between gamers and their games, writing “more interesting to me is what games can do and how they make me feel while they are doing it.”* Fallout 3* and *Final Fantasy VI* are designed with a particular goal in mind, with players providing their own emotional commentary as they accomplish this goal, a flexibility not entirely accounted for in Cheng’s interpretation.

Conversely, Cheng’s case studies in Chapters Three and Four are excellent for their explanation of how music is manipulated in video games. Both case studies complement one another: one concentrates on the influence a composer has on gameplay through sounds and music and the other focuses on the influence a player can have on sounds and music. In Chapter Three, Cheng examines how audio stimuli generate fear, using *Silent Hill* to discuss the auditory devices present in horror games. Horror is another subjective quality, but Cheng’s explanation of *Silent Hill*’s effective integration of fear-inducing music alongside gameplay is more convincing than his previous chapters. *Silent Hill*’s use of industrial audio is appropriate because of its desire to unhinge a player’s mental stability. Cheng states, “the sheer density of this industrial audio is enough to create the impression of surround sound; that is, noises in the game... can so extensively saturate a player’s physical space that they might sound as if they are invading from all directions”(99). Rebecca Roberts builds upon his argument by saying, “the interpretations of spatial planes within sound design creates another dimension for

---


*Critical Voices: The University of Guelph Book Review Project* is part of the curriculum at the School of Fine Art and Music, University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada.
players to exist within." The soundscape of Silent Hill manipulates the player’s engagement and expectations, creating an air of suspense and ambiguity. For many enthusiasts of the horror genre, the sinking feeling of something looming in the shadows is heightened through effective music. Real world sounds intensify the horrific atmosphere, creating a stressful environment for players wherein they question where danger is actually lurking.

In certain instances, games permit players to immerse themselves in their own compositions, either for the gratification or infuriation of others. In Chapter Four Cheng traverses the realm of Middle Earth in Lord of the Rings Online to investigate how its music programming is garnering it unwanted attention. He succeeds in using anthropological techniques to discuss the divide between players involved in the music making system, which is an integral gameplay component to Lord of the Rings Online. Some players believe the music should be reflective of the Lord of the Rings mythical aesthetic, not for the deconstruction of immersion through unnecessary performance (130). A player attempting to perform popular tunes is viewed as “irrelevant” to J.R.R. Tolkien’s universe by many within the community, especially because these disruptive participants diminish the feeling of adventure. I would suggest that fiddling with instrumentation in the virtual context of Middle Earth, however, could enhance one’s own journey. To quote Elizabeth Medina-Gray, “the player may, on one level, have a positive experience with this virtual instrument that automatically produces a wide variety of sounds without requiring any special effort of musical knowledge... Players can enjoy the music-making act—a form of experimentation, or play.”

And yet, I do not disagree with Cheng’s research that player manipulation of music can aggravate other players; his field studies document specific occasions when players spammed nonsensical melodies into in-game public events (134-136). I argue that player interaction with music in an experimentally playful way can transform a gaming experience into an ethnographic or pedagogical opportunity. Learning how to influence music originally intended for the Lord of the Rings Online

---


8 Grimshaw, Game Sound Technology, 203.


represents a moment where pedagogy becomes an immersive tool. Learning the intricacies of instrumentation in the virtual world may speak to those wanting to study music in reality. The pedagogical techniques players employ to alter the instrumentation of the game is a form of music manipulation. For some, this may result in an involvement with the *Lord of the Rings Online* soundtrack in a way that parallels studying music in the real world. I found Cheng’s case studies of *Silent Hill* and *Lord of the Rings Online* to be enlightening, as he presents two excellent analyses, informing the reader that both composers and players share the process of manipulating music for immersive purposes in some scenarios.

I remain somewhat lukewarm about Cheng’s case study of *Team Fortress 2*, found in Chapter Five. Here, Cheng explores a player’s use of speech and silence, asking how this reinforces gender politics. The voice’s ability to generate distinct noises is relevant to the concepts of Cheng’s book, as players can control the properties of their speech in the gaming environment to conceal their genuine instrument. Cheng quotes anthropologist Tom Boellstorff, as he argues that what “made debates about voice particularly impassioned were questions of presence and immersion that implicated the boundary between virtual and actual. Some residents felt voice would facilitate great intimacy, [but] other residents felt that voice would damage a border between the virtual and the actual that they wished to maintain” (139-140). Cheng’s examination of voice manipulation in *Team Fortress 2* provides fascinating insights into how players choose to depict themselves in the virtual world.

This case study’s relation to musicology, however, is questionable. Cheng’s discussion of *Team Fortress 2* raises debates about whether speech and silence play the same role as the music presented in previous chapters. John Cage’s own musical philosophy could certainly support Cheng’s case study, as Cage firmly believed speech and silence could be classified as core musical elements, even though some would disregard them as such. Cage argues that, relations would exist between sounds as they would exist between people and these relationships are more complex than any I would be able to prescribe. So by simply dropping that responsibility of making relationships I don’t lose the relationship. I keep the situation in what you might call a natural complexity that can be observed in one way or another.\(^\text{11}\)

---

Cage argued that any sound could be categorized as music, even if the sound does not necessarily seem musical, including speech.\(^{12}\) Cheng does not discuss the musicality of the voice, but rather the consequences of spoken female audibility in *Team Fortress 2*, and how this use of the voice may be attacked. Cheng establishes the social implications of speaking in the game thoroughly, but I detected a lack of musical relevance. The previous case studies emphasized the control game developers and players have with sound and music. Cheng’s case study of *Team Fortress 2* only analyzes sound, making it seem slightly inappropriate.

Overall, *Sound Play: Video Games and the Musical Imagination* presents interesting observations about the uses of various audio stimuli in a diverse group of video games. Cheng’s examinations are not necessarily unique. Similar arguments can be found elsewhere in the scholarly literature, yet Cheng extends previous work, examining how composers and players exploit sounds in ways to which I was oblivious during my experiences with most of the games he considers. Cheng presents his arguments in a manner gamers would appreciate. That said, I wish he had incorporated a more wide-spread array of player experiences throughout the text. At times, one gains the impression that Cheng only cites views of players that reinforce his observations. Moreover, Cheng’s case study of *Team Fortress 2* presents interesting points about the social implications of sound, but the chapter seems more sociological than musicological. Despite the issues I have raised, I recommend this book to anyone fascinated by video games, music, or both.

**For further reading**


\(^{12}\) Grimshaw, *Game Sound Technology*, 229.


