At the dawn of video game history, music was nothing more than a series of monophonic beeps, directly contrasting today’s full-orchestral scores. Despite this contrast, music has always been used to colour virtual realities and is an integral component to video games. Video games immerse a player in a reality where music helps establish the setting, emotion, and overall experience of game play. Music in Video Games: Studying Play—a collection of eleven essays by twelve authors—discusses, challenges, and investigates music in video games, providing a well-rounded understanding of the different genres of video game music. The editors organize the collection around two central themes: how music helps immerse players in a video game, and how music allows the player to actively embody her or his avatar.


The fourth essay in the collection, Steven Beverburg Reale’s “Transcribing Musical Worlds” examines how dynamic music is used in video games. Reale uses the example of the game BIT. TRIP. RUNNER, stating, “the player can make [her/his character] jump, kick, or block to avoid oncoming obstacles; musical cues reward successful actions while a failure to avoid oncoming obstacles resets the level” (82). Because the game play stems from a musical score, every jump or advancement in the level changes or enhances the music in some way. In the case of BIT. TRIP the game embodies the music—the game’s mission is to create these sounds—unlike Super Mario Bros., where the music serves a background role and the overarching mission is to save a princess.

In the sixth and arguably the most intriguing essay, “Wandering Tonalities: Silence, Sound, and Morality in Shadow of Colossus,” William Gibbons aims to educate the reader about how music complicates the morality of a player’s avatar through the use of silence within the game. This essay is extremely well written and dives deeply into the overlooked study of silence in gaming. Gibbons discusses how silence disconnects a player from the character they are embodying and causes her/him to reflect upon the decisions s/he has made. Gibbons states: “like game players, film audiences are made uncomfortable by silence... audience members in theatres become alienated from the film, forcibly reminded of their position outside the diegetic world” (126). He then states, “there are two related results to this loss of diegetic immersion: players create a strong bond with the wanderer, and they are given space to question the ethical ramification of their actions (127)”.

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attention.” Gibbon’s essay on silence introduces a new area of study that should be further explored by composers and theorists alike. Anyone interested in composing for video games or film should consider this chapter and ways to step out of “the loudness war.”

Horror video games manipulate certain emotions in a player by doing the contrary. As Rebecca Roberts discusses in her riveting essay, “Fear of the Unknown: Music and Sound in Psychological Horror Video Games,” “various sequences within [horror video games] contain sound effects coming from one direction, which the players will instinctively investigate, but the enemy will actually approach from another direction” (144). This act of deception pulls the player into the game only to deceive them by throwing something at them from a different angle. This deception makes many players more cautious and anxious. Additional research, such as that by Guillaume Roux-Girard, reinforces this relationship between fear and sound, stating, “the orgiastic commingling of noises in Silent Hill [can] lure the gamer into thinking that there are more threats than there actually are and diverting the gamer’s attention from the threats in the game.” Roux-Girard, here, directly reinforces Robert’s point that sound can be used not only to reinforce a players’ experience, but it can also distract.

The final essay, “From Parsifal to the PlayStation: Wagner and Video Games,” is a compelling piece by Tim Summers that discusses the use of leitmotifs and how they immerse a player into her or his video game. To quote from a fan website, SWE3tMadness writes, “If a certain song plays every time a specific event occurs or a character enters, the viewer starts to associate that event or character with the theme, and remembers that connection whenever the song is played. It’s Pavlov’s condition[ed] response applied to storytelling.” This reflection by a gamer resonates with Tim Summers’ argument that complete computer game immersion occurs when recurring themes give a player the chance to recognize when a villain is approaching, or when a players have completed a quest, to name but two examples. The soundtrack in this sense connects the player even further with a virtual world.

Karen Cook’s “Music History, and Progress in Sid Meier’s Civilization IV” does a tremendous job of exploring the problem of how a composer might represent hundreds

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1 Karen Collins, From Pac-Man to Pop Music: Interactive Audio in Games and New Media (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2008), 129.


of characters simultaneously, using as her example *Sid Meier’s Civilization*, a top-down strategy game in which the player takes control of hundreds of units at a time. In terms of embodying a character, Cook describes how each player embodies different cultures, which the players then control. Cook enhances her argument by referencing three similar strategy games, *Civilization IV*, *Heroes IV*, and *Age of Empires III*, where the narrative is driven mainly by the music. She writes, “[w]hile these three soundtracks fulfill Munday’s narrative function, communicating the ‘particular setting and narrative genre,’ even if there is no overarching storyline” (169). Soren Johnson, the music director for *Civilization IV* states that, “[b]y choosing preexisting music, we were able to include pieces of the highest quality which also gave a historical flavor.” Additional evidence supporting Collin’s argument comes in the form of an interview with Kyle Roderick and the composer for *Civilization IV*, where the composer argues that, used in this way, video game music allows the player to embody an entire culture and, overall, drive the narrative of the story.

In the following essay, “‘The Place I’ll Return to Someday’: Musical Nostalgia in Final Fantasy IX,” Jessica Kizzire discusses the use of nostalgic music as a way to allow players to reflect on experiences playing previous games in the franchise. In her article she discusses the uses of the music in *Final Fantasy IX* to return the player to nostalgic moments in the first *Final Fantasy* games. Kizzire identifies nostalgic music as a way of recalling the past in video games. In this sense music encourages a player to remember the last time s/he was in a certain city or met a certain player or enemy. This sense of recollection allows the player to re-immerse him/herself into a previously-explored world. Indeed, Kizzire argues that the opposite can be true, and that if a player is placed into a similar world where the music has changed, it will throw the player off and disrupt the sense of immersion. Kizzire’s work presents an important topic of music in video game sequels and explores how this sonic element might enhance a player’s experience of a video game.

Chapter Two, Chris Tonelli’s *The Temporary Avatar Zone: Pico-Pico Parties in Tokyo* discusses the famous Pico Pico music genre of Japan. He writes, “[i]n the pico-pico scene, the frequency of depictions of the performers as avatars, the themes of travel prevalent in lyrics and imagery, and the textures and timbres of the music itself all worked to encourage listeners to re-conceptualize themselves as avatars.” This essay is best suited for the final essay in the book, because of its discussion of the physical embodiment of a player’s character. Artists who take part in the pico-pico genre dress up as their 8-bit video game avatar and perform music in the style that matches the game. Matthias Pasdzierny argues that Pico-pico music is “a scope for nostalgic geeks,

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who romantically try to recall the look and feel, and especially the sound, of their childhood and youth.” Comparing Pasdzierny’s argument to Tonelli’s article reveals that both authors believe there is something nostalgic about dressing up as an avatar and playing 8-bit music. Overall, Tonelli’s essay would have served as a refreshing conclusion to the book, especially given it is the only chapter that does not talk about playing a video game.

As an avatar one can play music outside of a gaming environment, but one can also play music inside a game, such as the avatar-based experience discussed by: “Meaningful Modular Combinations: Simultaneous Harp and Environmental Music in Two Legend of Zelda Games,” written by Elizabeth Medina-Gray. Medina-Gray does an extraordinary job of explaining that the act of playing music in video games furthers one’s involvement with one’s game. As Iain Hart states “the player’s interaction with the video game reflects the player’s self and is, therefore, an expression.” Hart emphasizes that interaction in a video game emits expression and therefore you are more emotionally committed to the game itself. I see resonances between Medina-Gray’s work and that of Hart, especially when she discusses how playing the harp in both of the games she writes about makes the player interact with the music and therefore generates expression. This transmission of expression can be translated into a player’s becoming more involved in a video game.

Neil Lerner’s essay, “Mario Dynamic Leaps,” was not the most effective choice for the first essay of the book, or even as a featured piece within the collection. Particularly problematic is Lerner’s description of the interactive music of Super Mario Bros as a tool used to immerse a player in a video game. I would argue, framing Mario Bros.in this way changes the entire purpose of the game, and drives the player away from the mission at hand. Karen Collins describes four components of dynamic music composition: “1) The ability to create music that changes with each play-through; 2) The ability to create a multicoloured production by transforming themes in the same composition; 3) The ability to add new surprises and increase game play enjoyment; and 4) The ability to add musical elements as gameplay features.” When playing Super Mario Bros., each world has its own background music alongside additional musical


7 Karen Collins, Game Sound: An Introduction to the History Theory and Practice of Video Game Music and Sound Design (Cambridge: Mit Press, 2002), 139.
sound effects. For example, the notes B followed by E when Mario jumps to get a coin, are added elements that distract from the overall mission of rescuing the princess, turning what was a rescue mission into a coin collecting game. Indeed, Marty O'Donnell, the composer of the Halo franchise, addresses the nature of dynamic music in video scores by stating:

Dynamic music can vary in length or change in volume and intensity based on conditions that occur in the game. I never want the player to be aware that they have the ability to change the way music is being played. That would call attention to something that should be more subliminal, and remain on an emotional rather than cerebral level. For example, if music goes up the scale when ascending stairs and down when descending, the player might stop playing Halo and start playing the ‘making the music go up and down’ game.8

I agree with Marty O'Donnell that when players are aware of dynamic music, it detracts from a sense of overall immersion. Many players forget about the narrative at hand and instead will likely attempt to manipulate action so as to manipulate the music. If Studying Play’s aim is to present a collection that discusses the role of music in the overall immersion of a player in video games, Lerner’s discussion in “Mario Dynamic Leaps”—which discusses music as an affect—contradicts the editors’ main theme.

Two other essays that were not the strongest include Chapters Three and Eight, both of which come across as repetitive and do not contribute much to the overall purpose of the book. “Nintendo’s Art Music” written by Roger Moseley and Aya Saiki and “Lawn of the Dead: The Indifference of Musical Destiny in Plants vs Zombies” by K.J Donnelly, are questionably relevant. The first of these essays discusses the creation of the Ele-Conga, a percussion instrument meant to be played like the guitar in Guitar Hero. The essay informs the reader how the Ele-Conga came to be, yet does not discuss the music it creates or the video games in which it is used. This chapter drifts too far from the main topic of the book and, like Lerner’s piece, is questionably relevant. Similarly, Donnelly’s essay also drifts far from the book’s central focus. Instead of discussing player immersion, this essay does the opposite and discusses the need for avoiding repetitive music in video games such as that found in Plants Vs. Zombies, stating that this music is not psychologically stimulating.

Overall, the content of Studying Play speaks to theorists, entertainment composers, and students alike. Some chapters discuss new and unique material, such as

“Wandering Tonalities: Silence, Sound, and Morality in Shadow of the Colossus,” while other chapters give the reader a brief history of video game music, such as “Nintendo’s Art Music Play.” There are many strengths and some weaknesses to this collection. Positive elements include eleven tremendously well-written essays through which the reader learns about many different genres of video game music. Also, the essays read as a story of the history of video game music that keeps the reader engaged. Some drawbacks include a handful of essays with questionable content that detract from the effectiveness of the collection as a whole. Overall, editors K.J. Donnelly, William Gibbons and Neil Lerner have created an excellent book that provides the reader with a well-rounded understanding of immersive video game music.

For Further Reading:


