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Sound is integral to videogames. It is something that anyone who has ever picked up a controller, sat down in front of their television, and booted up the console of their choice has experienced on many different levels. Even the familiar start-up jingles of consoles such as the Sony Playstation and Nintendo Gamecube are designed with specific intents. In her book Playing with Sound: A Theory of Interacting with Sound and Music in Video Games (2013), Karen Collins demonstrates that the primary function of sound in games is to enhance player interactivity with their chosen game world, all in the name of creating the most immersive experience possible. Playing with Sound contains five distinct chapters with multiple sections found in each. The inner sections follow a brief introduction and are equally balanced throughout, resulting in a concise tone and even pacing throughout the book. With the exception of some images used to explain more complex ideas, Playing with Sound is a rather standard affair organizationally speaking, but it does its job effectively.

Engendering player interaction is a complicated process involving several factors detailed by Collins in the first chapter, aptly titled “Interacting with Sound.” Early on, Collins stresses that the “difficulty with defining interactivity is that a single media object or text may be fluid in its degrees of interactivity and may afford different degrees of interactivity at different times.” She explains that “this fluidity suggests that there are a variety of different types of interactivity that take place with media such as video games” (8). Effective interaction enables a deep sense of immersion, a factor that Timothy Sanders categorized as “a property of the system that allows a person to feel
presence.\textsuperscript{1} The types of sonic elements employed to enhance player interaction and strengthen immersion are as follows: discrete sound effects such as sounds tied to player actions (for example, jumping); ambient sound beds used to cultivate a game’s appropriate atmosphere; dialogue spoken by in-game characters; interface sounds used in menus and certain player interactions; and music. Collins describes these elements eloquently, and effectively explores them in a context with which gamers can relate, mentioning specific examples of audio usage in games such as \textit{Fallout 3}. The sound in this game aids the navigation of the virtual environment and subsequently rewards the player for responding to practical sound design as the developers intended.

In her subsequent chapter “Being in the Game,” Collins examines the essential inclusion of spatial and sonic cues in games that provide the player with information about how to react to a given situation. On discussing the importance of audio in the First-Person Shooter (FPS) genre, Grimshaw echoes the sentiments expressed by Collins and pushes them further when he observes that, “Player immersion, then, may be supposed to be primarily perceptual and is manifested by a shift of perceptual focus, from an awareness of ‘being in and part of’ reality to ‘being in and part of’ virtuality such that, in the ideal case, virtuality becomes substituted for reality.”\textsuperscript{2} Such intense player involvement can be achieved through efficient sound design, built with the intention of engaging a player’s cognitive and psychological responses to interactions within the game. Triggering a player’s emotional response is essential to creating a tangible environment where a player believes they exist; players experience the controller as an extension of their bodies and can be psychologically manipulated through the use of sound that fosters an emotional connection to a world that only exists in a virtual space. Nacke, Lennart, and Grimshaw’s work resonates with that of Collins, postulating that “emotions in this sense can be seen as psychophysiological processes, which are evoked by sensation, perception, or interpretation of an event and/or object which is referred to in psychology as a stimulus.”\textsuperscript{3} The connection the player feels to the game world is characterized by Collins as a deeply personal and multifaceted process where certain factors such as vocality may strengthen one player’s degree of immersion while simultaneously destroying another’s. There is an intrinsic balance of sound that game developers covet, yet even the most talented studios tend to fall short of their goal as gaming climates continue to evolve.

Developing the theme of player and voice, Collins shifts her focus to the quagmire of player expectations and the subsequent connectivity that a lack of sound may develop. In chapter three “Sound at the Borders” Collins describes players as “hav[ing] little difficulty adapting to fantasy if the visual character does not match their expectations, when the voice—an artifact from the real world—is involved, the stakes become higher, and that intrusion of reality into the virtual can greatly affect immersion” \textsuperscript{(82)}. She goes on to posit that the absence of voice for the protagonist of


role playing games can enhance player connectivity to the game world, because the player is then encouraged to attribute their own personal vocal, and by extension, bodily mannerisms to their in-game character. This can be effective in eliminating the disconnect between what the player expects a character to sound like and what the character actually sounds like in-game. Collins demonstrates clever insights in this section, “Voice and Role Play,” as she discusses the topic of voiced protagonists in role playing games; a conundrum felt by many gamers that is rarely acknowledged in the majority of videogame research. This is one of Collins’ most thoughtful chapters and sets her research apart from that of other scholars on sound and gaming.

In the twenty-first century, role playing games have been expanded to feature the inclusion of many social components, such as the development of multiplayer games and the ability to communicate with other players through the use of music. Collins’ fourth chapter cleverly investigates the cultural relevance of music within the spectrum of modern entertainment as well as the social implications of musical interactions between large numbers of players. Her perspective fits into the larger narrative about videogame music where authors such as Lipscomb, Scott, and Zehnder discuss “the serious attention given to the audio aspect of motion pictures and, in the most recent generation of video games, the importance of investigating the role that music plays in this context.” To explore the integration of music in online games, specifically massive multiplayer online games (MMOs), Collins delves into the universe of the Lord of the Rings Online (LOTRO), where developers have synthesized a digital interface that allows players to input musical notes that are then relayed into the game. William Cheng observes how “many players share their own customized keymaps on LOTRO’s online forums to assist others with the execution of musical pieces,” building a stronger sense of unity in LOTRO’s community. This simple inclusion has had a revolutionary effect on how gamers interact with each other in the game, according to Collins; players can regularly be seen gathering in the game’s virtual taverns to engage in communication with others over the backdrop of player-made music.

Despite the insightful exploration of music in videogames in chapter four “Embodying Game Sound in Performance,” Collins refrains from analyzing videogame music in general. It is disappointing that the breadth and quality of videogame music is left unexplored in her book, not to mention that the musical talent behind important soundtracks remains unacknowledged. Other scholars such as Tim Summers have done further research on this subject, explaining how “many guides to game music composition contain a breakdown of game genres and the compositional styles appropriate for each, or they put genre at or near the top of the list of considerations when beginning to work on a game.” Summers’ perspective contrasts with Collins’ limited focus on the discussion of composed music in games within Playing with Sound,

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where she largely devotes her analysis to music created by gamers instead of composers and performers.

In chapter 4, Collins does briefly examine rhythm games, focusing on the more technical side of the creative process. One of the technical aspects she discusses is known as quantization. Collins’ discussion of the subject is brief, but she aptly identifies the distinction between the uses of sound quantization across genres, similarly to other scholars in her field such as Martin Pichlmair. Indeed, Pichlmair observes how “most action music games work exactly the opposite of rhythm games. Instead of requiring the player to press a button in conjunction with the beat, the player can fire at any moment, and the sound is aligned to the beat by the game.” Collins explores how multiple styles of music have been integrated into videogames; however, others in her field such as Pichlmair have done much more extensive work on the subject. The information touched upon by Collins is more a summary of a few styles rather than a comprehensive examination of music in videogames.

The final chapter “The Second Life of Game Sound” sees Collins bring the idea of videogame sound to real-world interactions between players and to a discussion of the relationship players and game developers share on the basis of sound. According to Loïc Caroux, the connection between video game developers and players is fundamental in the process of videogame production, “even if there is no consensus with regard to the criteria used for the study of human–computer or player–video-game interactions, the majority of methods, such as user tests and heuristic evaluations, are nevertheless adopted by all designers.” However, player agency can contradict a developer’s best wishes, Collins explains, such as with “modding,” where fans alter an established game to create something the developers never intended. This section of the book is where previously absent jargon begins to creep into Collins’s writing. Pivoting her attention to “modding,” defined as external game conventions, and other aspects of social action that are engaged in outside of the virtual space, Collins focuses on the effects video games have on societal groups and teeters away from her discussion of sound. Collins describes this chapter as “demonstrat[ing] how games can become mediators of social interaction and the site of various performative and co-creative activities beyond the original context of the game,” (138) however, the section feels more tangential than necessary.

Overall, Playing with Sound: A Theory of Interacting with Sound and Music in Video Games effectively demonstrates the intricate mechanisms at work in the sound design of video games. For the vast majority of this book, Collins’ writing is fluid, precise, and practical. She uses examples of successful sound application in videogames that gamers both seasoned and casual can relate to while at the same time reinforcing her expertise with strong prose, allowing unfamiliar readers to easily grasp her argument. She seamlessly weaves a plethora of secondary sources into her writings to provide evidence for her arguments, resulting in an incredibly cohesive collection of game sound knowledge. This is less true for the latter half of the book, where Collins’

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exploration of the societal effects of games may potentially alienate those who are less in-tune with the world of gaming, while simultaneously using terms that may confuse video game aficionados as well. As for the noticeable absence of game music exploration, it feels as if Collins has missed an opportunity to cover such a diverse and essential realm of game design; however, the topic of music composition could possibly be too broad to cover in a condensed monograph. That being said, Collin’s examination of the multifaceted process of game sound expertly homes in on the majority of aspects associated with strengthening player interaction and is an excellent read.

For Further Reading:


