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Playing with Sound, by Karen Collins, is an exploration of the interactions between the sonic layer of video games and the player. The scholarly monograph is organized into five chapters, and speaks to gamers, philosophers, and psychologists. The text approaches the subject matter as more than just a question of sound and a listener, but rather as a question of sound and a partner. The partner (or player) uses the interactive sound in video games to find, create, obscure, and elicit meaning. Within the sonic layer of video games exist many types of sound, such as ambience, reverberations, responses in both language and action, sound effects, interface sounds and, of course, music. These elements can exist both inside and outside of the game. Collins explores video game sound as an experience and does so while adopting the perspective of the player and incorporating insights from disciplines as varied as philosophy, psychology, computer science, and film studies. Overall, she argues that interacting with sound entails a completely different experience than just listening to sound. Collins suggests that every sonic message relayed by the touch of a button has a different effect than a sonic message in a vacuum, that each “bwoop” a character makes at the player’s prompting carries with it a certain type of cognitive response.

Playing with Sound is among very few books to have broached the topic of sound in video games in its particular manner to date. Video games, over time, have become increasingly accepted as an art form with the expansion of three factors: the technology used to make them, the consumer interest in them, and
as a result) the production budgets for the development of further games. Movies, books, music and paintings have all been highly regarded in the world of the arts and have been the subject of academic study. Video games, on the other hand, have generally not been placed among these art forms—until recently. Video games have become more than just a past time; they have become a means for a unique, immersive storytelling experience. With games such as The Last of Us, Skyrim, Fallout and others, players are a part of the game like never before. This has kindled scholarly interest in the aspects that make these games what they are, such as the question of immersion. In particular, Karen Collins is intrigued by the immersive properties of interactive sound. Rather than simply analysing the concept on the surface, Collins uses an interdisciplinary approach to discern how and why sound, at its core, is different in video games than it is in movies.

Chapter one, “Interacting with Sounds,” establishes the key principle of Collins’ argument, that video game sound evokes a multimodal response from the player. She argues that in the player’s experience, the multimodality of sounds connects the sounds with a source. Players then experience these sounds and connect them with different senses. Visual, auditory, and haptic responses therefore glue this multimodal experience together. It is this congruence that distinguishes sound as experience; it is felt rather than just heard. This phenomenon is called “synchresis,” a neologism that combines synchronicity and synthesis, describing the process wherein a new experience is created by the interaction of separate things. An example of “synchresis” can be seen in any horror movie: without sound or with happier music, these films tend to be much less scary. When consulting videos of people playing video games, there is a direct correlation between visuals with audio and the player’s response. Collins draws a line between the existing theories of film sound (which argue that the congruence of sound and image cause a corporeal experience) and her theory of game sound. With film, sound is attached to image, but in video games, sound is attached to both image and player-action, thereby tapping into an additional dimension.

Congruence of sound, image, and player action existed in early video games, however, as Collins posits, this element has expanded with the introduction of motion-controlled video games, such as the Wii or Kinect. In standard video games, the player uses a controller that, though it may be intuitive, lacks the sort of full body involvement motion-controls have. Because of this uninvolved controller system, developers relied on samples (pre-recorded audio clips) to sound as players interact. Motion-controls introduced the idea of in-game sound synthesis to better reflect the player’s action. This mimesis is defined as a chameleon-effect: the mimicking of a user’s input to relay a seamless output, disguising the virtual medium with realistic responses. The sounds are

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designed to match the intensity and motion of the player, thus yielding a more immersive and personal response. The chameleon effect also assists in the development of algorithms that computers use to control non-player characters (NPCs), learning how to make mistakes in a realistically human manner so that players can play against NPCs. By doing this, both a video game’s overall output and the specific behaviour of its NPCs mimic player-controlled output.

Chapter two, “Being in the Game,” introduces the concept of a video game character being an extension of one’s self. Viewers of film identify with characters; however, it is a purely virtual connection. With video games, and the control the player has over them, there is a physical sense of connection with the controlled character. This connection, Collins argues, depends on how immersive the game is, and how immersive the game is relies on how well the visual and sonic layers of the game align. Collins suggests that the sights and sounds to which we are exposed shape our perception of everyday life and our sense of self. The realm of video games replicates this same process, giving some an extended self-identity: “Sounds we make—including in the virtual world—become a sensory extension of our self into that virtual world” (42). The players connect the established congruency of the corporeal experience to their character, thereby building an intimate connection with the virtual.

“Sound at the Borders,” the third chapter, examines the circumstantial action of many focused gamers: physical gestures that correspond to button pressing. For some, it comes in the form of leaning toward the screen, while others may stick out their tongue or move parts of their face around; circumstantial action is defined as the additional physical gestures in which a gamer engages. While these gestures may not seem relevant to Collins’ argument, the gestures generated in response to games such as Guitar Hero, Rock Band, and Dance Dance Revolution do support her claims. When playing Guitar Hero, a player might wear a guitar strap so they can stand, move around, and bop their head; or a Dance Dance Revolution player who only needs to move their legs might find their upper body moves and grooves. These gestures emulate the same kinds of gestures a rock-star or dancer might make, thereby thrusting the player into a more authentic gameplay experience. Collins expands on this idea by thinking of the player’s character as a blank-template for the player to define. If the player controls all aspects of a character’s personality, the character becomes a further extension of the player. Characters that have a personality—such as a voice or other traits that the player is not easily able to identify with—may pull the player away from the otherwise immersive atmosphere. Instead, performance of a character’s traits, in conjunction with the dynamic crowds and announcers that respond to a player’s performance, may result in a strong immersive pull.

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Chapter four, “Embodying Game Sound in Performance,” deals with player-generated music as an extra novelty in games. In the online multiplayer community of some video games, players synthesize music using instruments found or bought in the game. Using these virtual instruments, players play music that other members of the online community will hear. This gimmick, to some, allows for a more immersive game, enabling players to express musical ideas to companions; however, to others, this functionality hinders immersion, as it breaks down the fourth wall. Because of the subjectivity of music, this game-mechanic can be reductive; music that one person chooses to play may take away from another’s experience. Collins also examines the question of hardware being used to perform music through MIDI. All in all, this chapter was a slight digression for Collins, and the findings were less effective than what is otherwise a successfully argued text.

In the fifth and final chapter, titled “The Second Life of Game Sound,” Collins delves into the impact third party developers’ and hackers’ modifications have had on video games. She begins by discussing the interactivity of music in games such as Grand Theft Auto, where players are able to access a variety of radio stations to tailor the music to their tastes. This game-mechanic allows for deeper immersion; however, third party developers and hackers have taken this and similar concepts into their own hands, breaking down the game’s code and injecting their own ideas into it. Collins posits that this functionality allows for the game to be more personal for some, but for others, the destruction of a game’s integrity and the revelation of the game world’s artificiality is enough to remove a player from the experience. The desire for a more personal experience can also been seen in “the personalized ring-tone market that brought in more than $600 million in the United States alone” in 2005. Whether a song the purchaser enjoyed, or an audio-clip from someone’s favourite movie, many cell phone users paid extra money for personalized ring-tones. Video game developers saw this same attraction and began to offer similar kinds of in-game experiences. As Collins points out, such a personalized experience is undermined by the means by which it is accessed.

On the whole, Collins has constructed an excellent argument about the nature of video game sound, a subject that previous scholars had not explored in such detail. Collins’ argument is strengthened by her interdisciplinary approach that allows her to provide her audience with fresh perspectives. As stated, she does not subscribe to one single, particular methodology. Rather, she combines practices found in psychology, philosophy, film studies, and computer science to inform her conclusions. Karen Collins’ book, Playing with Sound, is a great resource for other scholars of similar disciplines and a good read for fans—ranging from the casual to the intense player—of video games.

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7 John Borland, Tomorrow’s Games, Designed by Players as They Play (CNET, February 2006), 1.
For further reading:


