
Beyond the Game

Introduction

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The significance of video game music does not end when we turn off the console, shut down the PC or leave the arcade. It has an extended life far beyond the boundaries of the game itself. Perhaps the most obvious way that video game music is encountered outside the game is through recordings and performances of game music.

Albums of video game music have been produced since the mid-1980s.¹ Once video games began to include substantial musical material, it was not long before albums started to capture that music. *Video Game Music* (Yen Records, 1984) featured music from Namco games, arranged by Haruomi Hosono, an influential musician and founder member of Yellow Magic Orchestra. Some of the tracks on the album were simply captures of the sonic output of a game round, while others were more elaborate reworkings with additional instruments. Similar records quickly followed. The same year, Hosono also produced a twelve-inch record in the same vein, with music from *Super Xevious*, *Gaplus* and *The Tower of Druaga*, written by Yuriko Keino and Junko Ozawa, while a full-length album, *The Return of Video Game Music*, arrived in 1985. It would not be long until albums for particular games companies and even specific games began to appear. G.M.O. records specialized in the former, rapidly producing numerous company-specific compilations from 1986 to 1988. A notable example of a game-specific album was the *Dragon Quest* LP (1986, Apollon), one of the

¹ Chris Kohler, *Power-Up: How Japanese Video Games Gave the World an Extra Life* (Indianapolis, IN: Bradygames, 2005), 131–64; Melanie Fritsch, *Performing Bytes: Musikperformances der Computerspielkultur* (Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 2018), 236–45; Melanie Fritsch, 'Heroines' *Unsung: The (Mostly) Untold History of Female Japanese Composers*', in *Women's Music for the Screen: Diverse Narratives in Sound*, ed. Felicity Wilcox (New York: Routledge, in press).

first game music albums recorded with orchestral musicians. The album featured three versions of the game's music: an orchestral recording, a version as it sounds in the NES game and a version performed on a higher-quality synthesizer. The tradition of arranging and rearranging video game music into multiple versions was thus embedded into game music recordings from the earliest days of the practice.

Now, soundtrack albums of video game music are commonplace. Furthermore, that tradition of arranging and adapting music into multiple formats has continued: the same game's music might be adapted into any number of different recorded and performed versions. Game music arrangements span orchestral music, jazz, electronic dance music, piano solos, folk traditions and so on. Almost any musical style imaginable has featured some kind of game music adaptation. More so than film music, game music is open to multiple radically different interpretations; rarely does one performed or recorded version of a piece stand as definitive. This is likely because the process of taking game music out of its interactive context necessitates at least some kind of adaptation, even if that is just deciding how many repetitions to include of a looped cue, or whether or not to replicate the timbres of the original game sounds.

Recordings of game music have facilitated radio programmes about game music (BBC Radio 3's *Sound of Gaming*, Classic FM's *High Score*, MPR's *Top Score*), not to mention circulation on YouTube and streaming services, where official releases sit alongside amateur and fan projects. Many of these recordings go hand in hand with live performances. Concerts of game music have been consistently produced since *Dragon Quest's* music was performed at a special concert in Tokyo on 20 August 1987. Game music concert culture has a complex relationship with classical music culture,² and can often be a force for creating a particular problematic canon of 'great' game music. Of course, live performances of game music are by no means the preserve of the classical-style concert. There is a thriving culture of game music cover bands,³ not to mention the innumerable ensembles and soloists who play game music as part of their repertoire. Often, these performances, whether as part of public concerts or just personal performances, are then documented and uploaded to YouTube where they become part of the broader online culture.

² William Gibbons, *Unlimited Replays: Video Games and Classical Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 157–71.

³ See Sebastian Diaz-Gasca, 'Super Smash Covers! Performance and Audience Engagement in Australian Videogame Music Cover Bands', *Perfect Beat* 19, no. 1 (2018): 51–67.

The vast online game music fandom motivates the continual production and reproduction of game music. Nostalgia is an important factor for engaging with game music; players are reminded of the past experiences of playing the games that they share with each other.⁴ Yet, it would be erroneous to characterize game music fandom as exclusively an exercise in nostalgia. The participatory culture(s) of game music include remixes, adaptations, mashups and all kinds of musical creativity. These extend into hardware and software experimentations, or the reworking of the game's materials in any number of ways. As in the chiptune scene, discussed earlier in this book (see [Chapter 2](#)), players recontextualize and adapt the materials of games to create new meanings and cultural objects themselves.⁵

A neat example is *Mario Paint Composer*, discussed in detail by Dana Plank.⁶ This adaptation of *Mario Paint* (1992) is a highly restrictive music sequencer. An online culture has developed in which innovative ways are found to circumvent the limitations of *Mario Paint Composer* to enable it to play pre-existing songs or new compositions. A lively community consists of gamer-musicians sharing techniques, organizing collaborations, critiquing each other's work and providing each other with support and mentorship. As Plank argues, this is not a culture based on nostalgia for the original *Mario Paint*; instead the appeal comes from the social practice and participatory culture founded on the game. While *Mario Paint Composer* is an extreme example, similar dynamics of participatory cultures built on game-musical materials can be seen across game modding and remix cultures.⁷ As Karen Collins puts it, game sound is 'an interaction between player and game, between players, and between player and society'.⁸

Aside from fan activities, commercial music endeavours have borrowed audio from games. From 'Pac-Man Fever' (Buckner & Garcia, 1981) to 'Tetris' (Doctor Spin, aka Andrew Lloyd Webber and Nigel Wright, 1992)

⁴ Diaz-Gasca, 'Super Smash Covers.'

⁵ See Melanie Fritsch, 'It's a-me, Mario! Playing with Video Game Music', in *Ludomusicology: Approaches to Video Game Music*, ed. Michiel Kamp, Tim Summers and Mark Sweeney (Sheffield: Equinox, 2016), 92–115, and, more extensively, Fritsch, *Performing Bytes*, 222–93.

⁶ Dana Plank, 'Mario Paint Composer and Musical (Re)Play on YouTube', in *Music Video Games: Performance, Politics, and Play*, ed. Michael Austin (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 43–82.

⁷ Jared O'Leary and Evan Tobias, 'Sonic Participatory Cultures Within, Through, and Around Video Games', in *The Oxford Handbook of Music Making and Leisure*, ed. Roger Mantie and Gareth Dylan Smith (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 543–66; Kyle Stedman, 'Remix Literacy and Fan Compositions', *Computers and Composition* 29, no. 2 (2012): 107–23.

⁸ Karen Collins, *Playing With Sound: A Theory of Interacting with Sound and Music in Video Games* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2013), 123.

and ‘Super Mario Land’ (Ambassadors of Funk, 1992), there is no shortage of novelty records based on games. More subtle integrations of game music into popular music include Charli XCX’s adaptation of the *Super Mario Bros.* coin sound in ‘Boys’, Drake using music from *Sonic the Hedgehog* (2006) on ‘KMT’, Kanye West’s sampling of *Street Fighter II* on ‘Facts’, Wiz Khalifa’s *Chrono Trigger* samples on ‘Never Been’ and Burial’s use of *Metal Gear Solid 2* on ‘Archangel’. Some musicians do not sample game music directly, but their work is nonetheless influenced by game music, such as jazz pianist Dominic J. Marshall’s ‘Deku Tree’ on his album *The Triolithic*. These examples indicate the extent to which game music has permeated modern musical consciousness. Games have also provided many opportunities for the presentation and promotion of pop music and artists. These include tie-in games like *Journey Escape* (1982) and *The Thompson Twins Adventure* (1984), app albums like Björk’s *Biophilia* (2011),⁹ or even the playlists for yearly editions of sports games.¹⁰

Classical music, too, has been integrated into games in a substantial way, both in the service of fun, and as part of an educational agenda. *Eternal Sonata* (2007) features Frédéric Chopin as the main playable character, and the plot of *Gabriel Knight 2: The Beast Within* (1995) focuses on the lives of Richard Wagner and his patron Ludwig II.¹¹ We have already mentioned the integration of classical music into games elsewhere in this volume, but it is worth reiterating that this is another way in which games and broader culture (musical and otherwise) intersect.

In more formal educational settings, games have been integrated into classroom teaching,¹² and video games have been used as a pedagogical

⁹ See Samantha Blickhan, ‘“Listening” Through Digital interaction in Björk’s *Biophilia*’, in *Ludomusicology: Approaches to Video Game Music*, ed. Michiel Kamp, Tim Summers and Mark Sweney (Sheffield: Equinox, 2016), 133–51.

¹⁰ See Holly Tessler, ‘The New MTV? Electronic Arts and “Playing” Music’, in *From Pac-Man to Pop Music: Interactive Audio in Games and New Media*, ed. Karen Collins (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 13–26 and Antti-Ville Kärja, ‘Marketing Music Through Computer Games: The Case of Poets of the Fall and Max Payne 2’, in *From Pac-Man to Pop Music*, ed. Karen Collins (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 27–44.

¹¹ On Chopin and *Eternal Sonata*, see Gibbons, *Unlimited Replays*, 126–40.

¹² Gianna Cassidy and Anna Paisley, ‘Music-Games: A Case Study of Their Impact’, *Research Studies in Music Education* 35, no. 1 (2013): 119–38; Jen Jenson, Suzanne De Castell, Rachel Muehrer and Milena Droumeva, ‘So You Think You Can Play: An Exploratory Study of Music Video Games’, *Journal of Music, Technology and Education* 9, no. 3 (2016), 273–88; David Roesner, Anna Paisley and Gianna Cassidy, ‘Guitar Heroes in the Classroom: The Creative Potential of Music Games’, in *Music Video Games: Performance, Politics and Play*, ed. Michael Austin (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 197–228; Andrew Lesser, ‘An Investigation of Digital Game-Based Learning Software in the Elementary General Music Classroom’, *Journal of Sound and Music in Games* 1, no. 2 (2020), 1–24.

model for teaching music.¹³ Video game music is now mentioned on syllabi for national music qualifications in the UK, and game music is included in some Japanese schoolbooks, which use them to teach musical skills through performance. Once again, these examples testify that game music is not a sealed subgenre of music, but bound up with other areas of musical activity.

This mobility of game music is also clearly evident when game music moves across media, being used in advertisements, TV shows or films. Films based on games may replicate and adapt music from games. For instance, the *Silent Hill* (2006) film soundtrack is closely modelled on the game's score.¹⁴ Media that draws on geek culture more generally may also feature game music (as in the use of music from *Zelda* games in *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* (2010) or the *Super Mario Bros.* theme in an episode of *The Big Bang Theory*).¹⁵ Games are part of multimedia franchises, and draw on, and contribute to, these networks. In the case of the game *Star Trek: Klingon* (1996), not only did the game share a musical style (and composer) with the series, but a song introduced into the fictional world in the game was later reprised in the television series. These examples all emphasize that music is part of the fabric that binds together media networks.

Ultimately, to consider game music only within the bounds of the game text is to only see part of the story. Similarly, to limit our understanding of games and music to compositions written for games is to underestimate the ways in which games can shape our musical engagements and understandings more generally. Instead, by recognizing the ways that games draw on, contribute to, enable and reconfigure musical activities and meanings, we can better appreciate the significance of video games as a musical medium.

Further Reading

Collins, Karen. *Playing With Sound: A Theory of Interacting with Sound and Music in Games*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2013.

¹³ Meghan Naxer, 'A Hidden Harmony: Music Theory Pedagogy and Role-Playing Games', in *Music in the Role-Playing Game: Heroes and Harmonies*, ed. William Gibbons and Steven Reale (New York: Routledge, 2020), 146–58.

¹⁴ On *Silent Hill* games and films, see K. J. Donnelly, 'Emotional Sound Effects and Metal Machine Music: Soundworlds in *Silent Hill* Games and Films', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Sound Design and Music in Screen Media*, ed. Liz Greene and Danijela Kulezic-Wilson (London: Palgrave, 2016), 73–88 and Florian Mundhenke, 'Resourceful Frames and Sensory Functions – Musical Transformations from Game to Film in *Silent Hill*', in *Music and Game: Perspectives on a Popular Alliance*, ed. Peter Moormann (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2013), 107–24.

¹⁵ *The Big Bang Theory*, 'The Launch Acceleration', Series 5 Episode 23 (2012).

- Diaz-Gasca, Sebastian. 'Super Smash Covers! Performance and Audience Engagement in Australian Videogame Music Cover Bands.' *Perfect Beat* 19, no. 1 (2018): 51–67.
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- Plank, Dana. 'Mario Paint Composer and Musical (Re)Play on YouTube', in *Music Video Games: Performance, Politics, and Play*, ed. Michael Austin. New York: Bloomsbury, 2016, 43–82.
- Tessler, Holly. 'The New MTV? Electronic Arts and 'Playing Music'', in *From Pac-Man to Pop Music: Interactive Audio in Games and New Media*, ed. Karen Collins. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008, 13–26.