

Terry Eagleton perfectly stated the most fundamental lesson about identity when he penned the line: ‘Nothing ever happens twice, precisely because it has happened once already.’¹ In other words, a second iteration of an event is always different to a first occurrence, and changes in context, temporal or spatial, reconfigure the meanings of objects and events. When we posit sameness, even sameness to self, there’s always something we’re missing, some difference we’re failing to account for. Our failure to realize that the secondness of the later happening in Eagleton’s sequence makes it different from the first stands in nicely for all the differences we fail to consider when we experience people or things as possessing identities.

Jean-Luc Nancy puts it a different way. He points to how we are prone to look at the formula $A=A$ and see both A s as identical, ignoring that they are in different positions on the page and in distinct relations to one another.² The perception of identity requires reductiveness, because it identifies sameness in different contexts and ignores the ways relations between those contexts exist as a part of what an object or event means. But this ‘failure’ is inevitable, despite the advantages we gain when we remind ourselves of the many differences that perceptions of identity obscure. The fact is that we are users of language, and language forces us to experience the world in terms of identity. No matter how deeply we consider the truth of Eagleton’s statement or Nancy’s intervention, we are bound to forget it at times; we are bound, all of us, to reduce our perception of eternal difference to reductive (but sometimes empowering) cognitive constructions of categorical sameness.

We are all also bound, it seems, to crave identification for ourselves. As much as we might try, we do not seem capable of consistently viewing ourselves as constantly renewing entities, distinct in substantial ways from what we were moments ago and possessing meaningful differences from any reified identity category others might want to slot us into. We crave two

¹ Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (New York, Basic Books, 2003), 66.

² Jean-Luc Nancy, ‘Identity and Trembling’, in *The Birth to Presence*, trans. Brian Holmes (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 9–35 at 11.

distinct types of identity: *qualitative group identity*, which indicates identities that are perceived or felt as existing and shared amongst groups of individuals, and *personal identity*, our feelings of our, or others', or things' sameness to our/themselves across time. Personal identity encompasses our sense of what matters most about who we are, or who others are as individuals, beyond our belongingness to shared reified qualitative group identities like African, Texan, Deaf, male, white, Black, and so on.

In this chapter, we will reflect on the ways game music contributes to the processes that generate and constantly renegotiate personal identity and qualitative group identity. We will consider both self-identity and our perception of the identities of others in the world around us.

But before we start to talk about game music, I'll acknowledge one more awful truth: identification is often fuelled by a process cultural theorists call Othering, with a capital 'O'. Othering means coming to understand one's own identity by positioning another perceived identity group as an inferior opposite. This deleterious process is signified by the capital 'O'. Othering is an element in the process through which slavery has been justified – enslaved groups have been constructed in a multitude of ways as less human than their captors – and Othering is part of the process through which governments and individuals in recent years have justified not acting to eliminate and prevent widespread forms of suffering and death in the contexts of recent national policies towards refugees. All forms of media hold the potential to contribute to processes of identification and Othering. The musical choices made by game designers and players are part of a broader constantly shifting mediascape in which every musical choice plays some small role in the unfolding of these processes. The stakes are high in the micropolitics of everyday aesthetics. Or, in other words: game music matters.

Some Key Terms Before We Click Start

The word 'affordance' is important throughout this chapter, as is its counterpart 'articulation'. To speak about musical meaning we need to understand that the sounds of music only give rise to meanings when listeners *articulate* meanings with those sounds. To *articulate* is to attach. Think of an image of an articulated vehicle: the attachment of two or more parts together by a pivot joint articulates the parts of the vehicle together. As the sounds of music manifest in different contexts, the meanings listeners articulate with those sounds will not necessarily be the same.

For certain meanings to arise, listeners need to have been exposed to the idea that meaning x is connected to sound y and they need to recall that connection in the act of listening; they need to *re-articulate* that sound and that idea. Affordance refers to the opposite side of this process; it refers to the agency of sounds in determining what meanings might be articulated with them. While I could potentially associate any sound with any meaning, the sounds themselves always play a role in the process of determining which meanings come to mind, which meanings remain articulated, which dearticulate and disappear quickly. Concerning articulation, it is important to note that the attachments are *always* temporary; even very well-established and broadly shared associations will not be present when certain listeners encounter the sounds in question. The material properties of the sound play a role in shaping the articulation process. This does not mean they determine the meaning or that every time a particular quality of sound manifests for a listener, no matter who the listener is, they will experience the same meanings or feelings. This simply means the material qualities of the sound are present and their presence contributes to, or frustrates, the articulation process. The material presence of certain kinds of game music trigger certain players to make certain associations – *they afford a process of articulation*. Other players will experience the same music without being affected in the same way by this affordance, but that property remains an affordance of that particular music; it remains part of what that music might give rise to in a distinct encounter or context.

Just like we are not good at recognizing the irreducible singularity of everything around us, we are also not good at being aware that musical meaning (and the meanings we associate with all the materiality we encounter) is always contingent and temporary. We often speak as if types of music *have* meaning rather than *afford* meaning in a new way in every instance of their appearance. This is a shortcut that sometimes saves us time but often leads us into false assumptions and problematic claims. In fact, it often leads us into the kinds of problematic claims that serve the process of Othering. It leads us to claim that the music our identity group has created or is associated with *means*, for example, the nobility of the human spirit while the music of our Others is primitive or less valuable or sophisticated.

To begin to understand what the many kinds of video game music in existence 'are', or what they 'do' – what processes of identification and Othering they serve – we need to look at particular examples without falling into the trap of reducing music's ability to *afford* meaning to a notion that musical sounds or structures *have* meaning. Because of the

nature of the processes of articulation and affordance, music that sounds in distinct temporal and spatial contexts will have distinct effects. The full extent of these effects are unknowable, but as game music researchers we can begin to understand what certain kinds of game and game music design afford in certain environments and encounters. We can begin to hear some of the ways game music fuels identificatory processes.

***Civilization IV*: Articulating European Art Music with ‘Civilizedness’**

One of the most widely analysed examples of game music fuelling identity categories via articulation of meanings to the sounds of game music is *Civilization IV* (2005). Game music scholars Tim Summers and Karen M. Cook have both written on the ways music operates in this game, and their work can be consulted for greater detail than I will include here. What is important at this point is that in this turn-based strategy game the player is responsible for shaping the development of their ‘civilization’ over 6000 years, from ‘ancient’ to ‘modern’ times. Cook points out that ‘the overwhelming majority of *Civ IV*’s terrain soundtrack consists of compositions from the Western art music tradition’ and that ‘the commencement of the terrain soundtrack . . . aurally represents the first successful milestone in [the] cultural progress [the game stages]’.³ As the gameplay of *Civ IV* progresses, the game reinforces pre-existing articulations between European culture, art music, notions of progress and notions of civilizedness. Some might argue that by articulating European art music with notions of progress, the game is not necessarily articulating the non-European with the binary opposites of ‘civilized’ and ‘progressive’. However, by rearticulating these concepts the game contributes to a broader process of *naturalization* of these associations, a process through which these associations come to seem unquestionable in certain contexts. This naturalization can then play a role in contexts in which Othering occurs, bolstering various European or European-associated identities; because of this process the associations often come to feel less like cultural constructions and more like unchanging universal truths because the articulations have been reasserted in so many media texts – video games being one of many – that they make up the fabric of what many people feel to be real

³ Karen M. Cook, ‘Music, History, and Progress in Sid Meier’s *Civilization IV*’, in *Music in Video Games: Studying Play*, ed. K. J. Donnelly, William Gibbons and Neil Lerner (New York: Routledge, 2014), 166–82 at 170.

and true. Games, of course, function as part of a broader mediascape and symbolic mythscape.

However, *Civ IV* also directly contributes to the articulation of certain identities with negative associations. The music that was chosen for the earliest stages of civilization in the game 'draw on stereotypical sound-images of pan-African, Native American, or Aboriginal music'.⁴ The alignment in the earliest stages of the game of these three identity categories with the idea of 'less civilized' or 'less developed' via the appearance of musical features associated with these groups operates alongside articulation of Europeanness with the opposite sides of these binaries, contributing to a long destructive history of aligning various non-European people with primitiveness.

Cook is careful to point out that players engage with *Civ IV* in different ways. Players may play while remaining aware of and critical of the associations the game design is encouraging. Other players might read the articulations as ironic and find humour in the notion that the European elite, a group historically responsible for so much of the history of slavery and the economic and institutional results of that slavery that still linger in the present, is being musically associated with 'civilizedness' and 'progress'. And the game itself complicates the civilized/primitive binary by acknowledging the ways in which 'highly developed' societies have caused environmental crises that threaten the existence of those societies. Complicating these issues further, we need to recognize that some players may be playing with the soundtrack muted or replaced by different music of their choosing. Our study of the ways game music comes into play in processes of identification needs to remain open to the ability of the player to engage in oppositional readings and/or modifications of the gaming experience. Yet, at the same time, we cannot let our awareness of the presence of actual or potential oppositional readings lead us to dismiss the potential effects that standard encounters with existing game and game music design seem to give rise to. Most encounters with the music of *Civ IV* likely reinforce a damaging but widespread association of Europeanness with civilizedness and non-Europeanness with primitiveness.

The Last of Us: Affording Masculinities

One of the medium-specific dimensions of video gaming lies in the ways it is distinctly interactive in comparison with media like film, television, radio

⁴ Ibid., 173.

and literature. All media forms afford interaction, as their effects emerge from the ways individuals interpret and attend to texts. Media users add imagined elements as they engage with media, they ignore and misunderstand elements, they make unique associations based on their personal histories: they each play a foundational role in reconstituting media texts. Gaming is not *more* interactive than other media forms – as interaction cannot be holistically quantified – but it is *differently* interactive. Nearly all video games involve control of some form of avatar and some understanding that you as the player both are and are not that avatar, both are and are not the protagonist at the centre of the game. The relationship between player and avatar is *intersubjective* provided we create the sense that our avatar is a kind of subject, has some qualities that make it a unique (imaginary) entity, as we control that avatar and imagine their perspective. We should also acknowledge here that the player is not the only individual on whom the game music is acting in regards to identity-related processes; streaming audiences or other non-players in audible range of music from games can also be affected by the sounds of gaming as they develop relationships to other avatar and non-avatar bodies/identities.

Intersubjectivity is a term for the illusory sensation that we are sensing, feeling and thinking from the subject position of another subject. It is a sensation of a kind of blurring between self and Other. Disidentification is the theorist Jose Esteban Muñoz's term for a kind of intersubjective experience with an identity we have Othered and/or that has Othered an identity we claim. While most media and media texts offer opportunities for intersubjective experience across reified categories of identity distinction, games often place players into long durations of interactivity with particular avatars that may or may not be identified in ways that align with or coherently extend the players' own identity (or identities). The way game players dwell for long periods of time in an intersubjective middle space between their RL (real-life) selves and the avatars they control has a range of implications for the dynamics of identity. Studying these dynamics and these implications can help us understand the extent to which game music functions to make identities manifest that players 'try on' during gameplay. The intersubjective encounter, when it occurs across lines of (dis)identification, might give us temporary imaginary access to identities we do not feel entitled to occupy at any other time. This might have the effect of reinforcing senses of Otherness or disidentification, or, conversely, it might chip away at them.

I will now discuss in detail an example that displays identificatory, counter-identificatory (Othering) and disidentificatory (complex or oscillating blending

of Othering plus identification) dynamics involving encounters with both game avatars and game music through a close reading of the game *The Last of Us: Remastered* (hereafter *TLOU*) (2014). Though this example is just one amongst a vast range of distinct types of games and approaches to game music, this close reading can model some of the medium-specific considerations we encounter when we study the intersections of game music and identification.

Like countless action-adventure films, *TLOU* centres on framing working-class white masculinity as heroic. The main character is Joel. In the game's first sequence, a cinematic cutscene, Joel is marked with working-class precariousness, depicted on his mobile phone discussing how he can't afford to lose his job. As the avatar we control through most of the game, Joel is the game's narrative focal point. *TLOU* offers a third-person perspective, and so we see the body of this avatar, our working-class hero, throughout nearly every moment of the game.

The term 'leitmotif' is used to describe musical elements associated with particular characters or specific referents/concepts in a narrative context. Though 'motif' most often refers to a melodic device, it is not unconventional to refer to 'timbral' or 'instrumental leitmotifs', which are uses of particular musical instruments or instrument timbres in association with particular characters. The melodic, timbral and instrumental leitmotifs used in the *TLOU* game soundtrack help to construct Joel as a hero. The dominant soundtrack feature is the foregrounding of guitars. This choice of guitar as instrumental leitmotif is not surprising. The guitar as instrumental leitmotif for a male hero is a well-established film music convention, especially in the Western film genre (in films like *For a Few Dollars More*, for example). This convention has bled out of Westerns into countless other filmic, televisual, radio and digital media works, such that many media users who have never seen a Western still know that particular guitar timbres have been strongly articulated with masculine heroes (such as in films like the genre-blending film *Bubba Ho-Tep*, which draws heavily on Western conventions in the context of a comedy horror film about Elvis Presley saving his nursing home from a murderous mummy). *TLOU* makes extensive use of three distinct guitar timbres, all of which have been repeatedly articulated with male media heroes. Each of these three timbral leitmotifs function as markers of different dimensions of Joel's character. These include a tremolo-drenched electric guitar sound associated with Joel's heroism, a nylon-stringed guitar that comes to be associated with Joel's feelings towards his daughter and a steel-string acoustic guitar sound that comes to be associated with his feelings about Ellie, a substitute daughter figure that appears later in the game. Since all

three guitar timbres are associated with Joel, the leitmotifs are unified on the instrumental level, but differentiated on the timbral level, as the distinct guitar timbres represent different aspects of the same character.

The game establishes Joel's working-classness and masculinity in ways that make it difficult (not impossible, however) for players to ignore. The game also works to mark Joel as Texan. However, this articulation operates in a weak way and players are capable of missing or resisting this construction. Music plays a role in affording and encouraging these associations. Like the more general articulation of Texan or Southern as part of Joel's character through non-musical means, the success of music in affording these articulations is achieved to varying degrees that range from total to strong to weak to non-existent. Westerns, of course, also often invoke the American South, and all three of the guitar timbres in question here have been employed widely in this genre (the examples above all employ electric guitars most prominently, but we hear and often see nylon- and steel-string acoustic guitars in countless Western films like *Rio Bravo*, *Along the Navajo Trail* or the comedy Western *Three Amigos*). Beyond film, the tremolo soaked heavy-stringed electric guitar is strongly associated with 'Texas blues' and Texan 'guitar heroes' like Stevie Ray Vaughan. The nylon-string guitar is associated with Spanish music, Mexican music and, subsequently, the border cultures of the Southern states. The steel-string acoustic guitar has a wide variety of associations, yet, when it appears in the game it often employs scalar qualities that underscore its association with the blues genre, which, of course, developed in the American South.

The opening sequence of *TLOU*, where we first meet Joel, is set in Austin, Texas, but references to the setting are not so apparent that they will be acknowledged by every player. Troy Baker's voice acting of Joel in English-language versions of the game avoids a strong Southern accent, and many of the elements that reveal the setting would be recognizable only to those familiar with the Austin area.⁵ Game dialogue referring to Joel as 'Texas' has the potential to establish him as Texan, but judging from streamed gameplay, players can often miss or resist this implication. One such instance can be witnessed in a gameplay livestream by a streamer who identifies as Gibi. After twenty-five minutes of gameplay, non-player

⁵ During Gibi's liveplay stream that I discuss below (see www.twitch.tv/videos/279324500) one viewer revealed via a chat post that for her/hir/him the setting is unambiguous. S/z/he recognizes the freeways referenced in the game's second cutscene are roads s/z/he drives in Austin. The game design does include road signs that reference Texan cities Austin, Deerwood, Pleasant Valley, San Marcos and San Antonio, but they flash by fairly quickly and might not be attended to by the player.

character Tess refers to Joel as ‘Texas’, saying: ‘Alright Texas, boost me up’.⁶ In her playthrough, Gibi repeats Tess’s line in a flat tone, seemingly contemplating the sudden interpellation of her avatar into the identity of ‘Texan’. She seems unexcited by this interpellation, perhaps slightly unsettled by a line that altered the non-Southern identity she may have been ascribing to Joel.⁷ After about three hours of gameplay, prompted by her navigation of Joel through an ‘old museum’ with display cases full of maps and uniforms, Gibi asks: ‘What city are we in? Texas? I know Texas isn’t a city but what city of Texas are we in? Or, no, he’s not in Texas anymore. He’s from Texas?’⁸ This questioning of an identity that has been so frequently underscored musically, as well as in the game dialogue, seems to indicate a resistance to the articulation of Joel in terms of Southernness or a Texan identity.

On the other hand, it is also worth considering the media users for whom this articulation is strongly present. On a stream of the game by streamer NairoMK, after a portion of the opening cutscene that features a minor-key highly ornamented solo nylon-string guitar passage, one stream viewer posted the comment: ‘20 minute banjo solo?’⁹ The association of this style of guitar playing with a distinct instrument, the banjo, that itself possesses associations with the American South, reveals that the game’s music is affording the idea of Southernness to some players. Despite its African origins and histories of African-American use, the banjo has come to be strongly articulated with white American Southernness.¹⁰ The fact that the nylon-string guitar playing is, when paired with the visual and narrative elements of this opening cutscene, invoking an absent banjo for this viewer, might suggest that the

⁶ At the time of writing, the gameplay stream I refer to was available here: ggGibi, ‘Gibi Plays Last of Us – Part 2’, Twitch Stream www.twitch.tv/videos/279332170, accessed 10 April 2020.

⁷ Throughout her stream Gibi repeatedly comments on the resemblance between Joel and the character Dylan McDermott plays in the first season of the television series *American Horror Story*. The game’s construction of Joel is decidedly not the only force constructing Joel’s character; Gibi’s transmedial and intertextual conflation of the two characters is informing how she is co-constructing Joel. McDermott’s character, Ben, is American, but neither Texan nor Southern.

⁸ At the time Gibi posed this question, she was playing a sequence set in Boston.

⁹ Previously available in the chat bar of www.twitch.tv/videos/287187464 at 10:06.

¹⁰ The association of the banjo with the bluegrass genre and the association of the bluegrass genre with the south-eastern state of Kentucky and with ‘white’ rather than African-American musicians is one strong chain of association that often codes the banjo as white and Southern. Despite the dominance of associations of bluegrass with white musicians, scholars are working to make African-American histories in and around bluegrass more audible. For more on this, see Robert Winans’s book *Banjo Roots and Branches* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2018), or the website African Bluegrass, www.africanbluegrass.com, accessed 10 April 2020.

Southernness and whiteness of the characters is strongly, perhaps disidentificatorily, felt by this particular viewer. The reference to this guitar as a banjo may have been a means of counter-identifying or disidentifying with these instruments and/or certain genres with which these instruments are associated, and, by extension, the social groups and identities most strongly associated with those genres.¹¹ Regardless of whether this reading was, in fact, the identificatory assertion the commenter intended to perform, the fact that she/ze/he invoked the banjo in their comment seems to suggest the guitar was strongly invoking associations with the American South at moments when Joel is the game's focal point. It seems clear from these instances of gameplay that certain players will, and others will not, experience Joel's working-class masculinity as Southern or Texan. The music carries associations with Texas, but these associations themselves do not ensure that Joel's working-class masculinity will be experienced as Southern or Texan.

This distinction between players who attend to Joel's Southernness and those who do not points us to the diversity of ways gamers read game texts and paratexts. The functions of music always depend, in part, on what the listener brings to the experience. One of the medium-specific aspects of game music is that when and how music manifests in the gaming experience will often depend, to greater or lesser extents, on the choices the player makes in the game. This is important to keep in mind as I move on to explain how the musical devices in *TLOU* shape the identificatory aspects of the gaming experience. For example, the electric guitar timbre is present in the very first musical moment of *TLOU*, the song that sounds on the start screen. Players who have never played the game or encountered others playing it cannot associate that timbre with the character of Joel, since they have not yet been introduced to the character (the visual on the start screen is an open window with curtains swaying; it does not contain an image of game characters). The timbre and the harmonic minor modality it sounds in this sequence may suggest various meanings, but it will not yet suggest the interiority of a particular character. Players encountering the start screen after witnessing or participating in gameplay, however, may feel

¹¹ The reference to excessive duration (solos do not usually last 20 minutes) suggests counter- or disidentification with the way the nylon-string guitar manifests in this sequence. Also, the frequency with which the banjo is singled out for mockery compels me to read this comment's reference to excessive duration along with a reference to the non-present banjo to be an invocation of the banjo as a means of rejecting the nylon-string guitar playing as too 'country'. For more on the politics of anti-banjo bias see Jeannie B. Thomas and Doug Enders, 'Bluegrass and "White Trash": A Case Study Concerning the Name "Folklore" and Class Bias', *Journal of Folklore Research* 37, no. 1, (2000): 23–52.

intersubjectively connected to the subject position and/or identities of Joel, and may associate Joel with the minor modality of this opening. The same is true for the loading music that follows the start screen.

As mentioned above, *TLOU*'s opening cutscene deals with Joel's working-class uncertainty. The first image we see, however, is of Joel's tween daughter, Sarah. The loading music ends before this image and the cutscene unfolds and articulates the father–daughter relationship. Music re-enters after this sequence. The nylon-string guitar accompanies Joel carrying a sleeping Sarah to her bed and, in so doing, gains the potential to be heard as a timbral leitmotif signifying the father–daughter relationship or the side of Joel concerning his parental feelings. We may at this point also associate the timbre with Sarah. However, as the game progresses and the notion that the guitar symbolizes Joel's interiority becomes better established, a connection with Sarah alone, rather than with father–daughter feelings specific to Joel, is less likely to be maintained.

The electric guitar from the start screen re-enters after two gameplay sequences separated by a cutscene. In the second of these, the player navigates Joel carrying Sarah through a chaotic urban environment, where humans infected by a fungus are attacking the not-yet-infected. When this play sequence ends, a cutscene occurs in which Sarah is shot by a soldier. The melodic motif from the start screen recurs and then our reverberant guitar re-emerges with a VI-i chord succession at the moment it appears Sarah dies.¹² The movement to the minor root chord is likely to afford a sense of simultaneous closure and despair, and though we are actually the ones affected by these feelings, the visual components prompt us to associate these feelings with Joel, a father whose daughter appears to have just died in his arms. With Sarah's apparent death, the electric guitar takes over as the foreground of the music. Joel is all that is left and this guitar sound becomes strongly associated with him and his solitude in this moment.

A title sequence and theme song appear at this point, closing the game's introductory section. This is followed by another cutscene that establishes the setting for the post-introduction section and begins to unfold the game's plot. The electric guitar sounds again as the cutscene transitions into the next sequence of gameplay, where the player begins what, for most players, will be a substantial period of intersubjective relation with Joel as

¹² The melody here begins in a bowed string voice that is associated with Sarah and later Ellie, blurring the identity of the two characters. See the following note for further comment on the fact there are some minor attempts in the game to develop the female characters musically.

they navigate him through the game. In this appearance of the timbral/instrumental leitmotif, the guitar sounds alone. The solitary musical voice sounding an improvisatory, free-rhythmic melodic sequence is linked with the image of a solitary male hero remaining in control in the face of adversity. As the player becomes Joel, the music positions Joel, and the player-as-Joel, as a new hero in a lineage of male heroes who have faced adversity boldly, on their own.

While Gibi, who is female, gives no indication she identifies in terms of qualitative group identity with Joel's maleness or Southernness or his working-classness, she seems to perform an easy attachment to Joel that is distinct in kind from her attachment to other characters in the game. One of the unique qualities of *TLOU* is that Joel is not the only avatar the player must control. No matter what your gender identity, you navigate three avatars if you play through the entirety of *TLOU*: one male avatar, Joel, and two female avatars, Sarah and Ellie. The amount of time you spend in distinct sequences of the game depends on how you play. However, if you play through *TLOU* in a relatively conventional manner, you spend about nine times as much time in control of Joel than in control of the two female characters. And while you play, the timbral, instrumental and melodic leitmotifs of the game are positioned in a manner that affords a sense of access to Joel's interiority and a sense of his heroic presence. The relatively short durations of gameplay as the female characters leaves far less opportunity for development of their interiority via musical devices, and relatively little is done during these sequences to develop the female characters musically.¹³ Throughout her gameplay, attachment to Joel seemed to have been performed by Gibi far more frequently and strongly than attachment to Ellie, Sarah or any of the non-player characters. Attachment to Joel seems to have been felt by Gibi as an element of her personal identity, and the holistic depiction of Joel's internality via, in part, the game's music – the way it constructs a personal identity for Joel in a way it does not for any other character in *TLOU* – makes Joel the most nuanced subject for identification that *TLOU* offers. Since Joel is by far the most fully developed, emotionally textured character in the game – thanks in no small measure to the game music – there are many aspects about Joel's character that Gibi may have felt as points of connection that affirm both her own personal identity and the sense that Joel has qualities she identifies with.

¹³ Relatively little, but not nothing. Following dominant norms related to the gendering of Western musical instruments, upper-range bowed string playing (violin) serves as an instrumental leitmotif shared by both of the female characters.

Though Gibi does not align with Joel in terms of certain of Joel's qualitative group identities (male, Texan, Southern), forms of identification with Joel nevertheless unfolded during, and were afforded by, her gameplay and its musical aspects.

Game Music Styles, Affect and Intersections of Personal and Qualitative Group Identity

Considerations of personal identity in relation to game music is a complex topic that is distinct from, but cannot ever be fully isolated from, qualitative group identity. As Adrienne Shaw points out in her study *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture*: 'There is empirical evidence that identities are experienced at the nexus of the individual and the social.'¹⁴ Our tastes and attachments are almost always informed to some degree by the ways we feel belongingness to or exclusion from certain shared group identities, but these group identities are never fully deterministic of the ways we negotiate our personal identity or perceive the identities of other people or things. It is clear that game music is a vehicle for formation and maintenance of aspects of personal identity for many gamers (and some non-gamers!). Their celebrations of these aspects of their identities have led elements of game music to shape musical activities that occur outside of the experience of gameplay.

In the opening chapter of his book *Understanding Video Game Music*, Tim Summers discusses the system start cues of various gaming consoles. These are short musical gestures that sound when gaming consoles are turned on. They serve the functions of letting users know the console is working and that it is properly connected to working speakers, and, at the same time, these musical cues act as a sonic marker of the brand of the console. For some gamers, these might remain mere markers of brand identity. But for others they become entangled with both personal and qualitative group identities. Summers points to the fact that because 'these cues are so frequently heard by players they gain significant nostalgic capital'.¹⁵ The secondness that Eagleton points us to in the quote that opened this chapter manifests in the repetition that Summers points to. When we re-hear these start-up cues we are often cognizant on some level

¹⁴ Adrienne Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 43.

¹⁵ Tim Summers, *Understanding Video Game Music* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 16.

of both the previous times we have heard the cues, and aspects of the gaming experiences that followed. We articulate these memories with the sounds, and these memories then become part of the meaning afforded by those sounds. These affordances and articulations of memory and sound may, as Summers argues, lead to nostalgic feelings, but they may alternately lead to feelings better described not as the kind of longing for a return to the past that is central to nostalgia, but as a broader variety of feelings of connectedness to past experiences we have had. If we strongly value those experiences, these system start cues, and other sonic components unique to gaming or to specific games, may afford a feeling of connectedness to experiences we feel have played a role in defining us; they may trigger feelings that inform our sense of personal identity.

We may come to understand that we are not the only ones subjectivated by rehearings of these sounds. When we hear these cues, or witness others being subjectivated by these cues, we may experience feelings of interpersonal connectedness to others. These feelings of co-subjectivation may or may not afford, or be articulated with, the concept of a shared belongingness to a qualitative group identity. They may remain senses of parallel personal-identity construction, rather than characteristics and/or results of a shared group identity. Summers discusses the fact that hip-hop artist Frank Ocean began his 2012 album *Channel Orange* with a sample of the system start-up cue of the first PlayStation gaming console. A listener who feels subjectivated by hearing this cue might listen to Ocean's sample and feel that she/ze/he shares a belongingness to the practice-based qualitative group identity category of 'gamer' with Ocean, but this is not the inevitable or only possible affordance.

Regardless of what Ocean's inclusion of the start-up cue might afford, the presence of the sample on *Channel Orange* is one in a wide variety of examples of game music flowing beyond the spaces of gaming. However, the fact that the game is not present does not mean that the games are not brought to mind. The sounds will likely afford memories of gaming's other affordances for listeners who possess those memories. The music is primed to consciously or unconsciously re-articulate those memories with the sounds affording the memories. For individuals whose personal identities are afforded in part by their experiences as game players, game music (or music that sounds like game music) provides a tool they can use to structure non-game spaces. It allows them to perform their personal or qualitative group identities, prolong or reshape feelings of identificatory attachment or create an environment conducive to their preferred modes of sociability. Elements of the chiptune scene (described in detail in Chapter 2), the now common practice of orchestral performances of versions of works composed

for games, game music cover bands, personal practices of marketing and listening to game soundtrack recordings apart from the experience of gaming, and many other practices, are widespread and relevant to study of game music's intersections with identity.

Credit Music

Game music's (re-)articulation of meanings with group identity categories is an important process with real-world consequences. Some gamers do, and others do not, identify intersubjectively with their avatars. Yet Adrienne Shaw's work convincingly argues that media users are often not terribly concerned about whether the media they are consuming represents the qualitative group identities they align with in RL (despite the important sociopolitical benefits media representation of visible minorities can often lead to). The game players she interviewed for her study, she argues, 'connected more with texts that were affectively familiar, even if the identities of the characters were radically different from theirs'.¹⁶ These kinds of affective identifications operate on the level of personal identity, or what Shaw refers to as *identification with* rather than *identification as*. Though her study is not primarily about music, she discusses how for several of her consultants 'music engendered a great deal more identification than did other media'.¹⁷ This too, like her discussion of identification with media characters, operates largely on the level of affect and, as in the case of the music, with or without the mediation of the avatar-as-imagined-subject. Her respondents describe their connection with the emotions they feel certain music conveys and/or the emotional and imaginative affordances of that music. One of her respondents, Evan, discussed how listening to music while running allowed him to imagine 'he was a heroic figure'.¹⁸ This emotional configuration points to the ways in which personal identity is a process, not an object we possess, and music is a tool that commonly helps us negotiate feelings that we register and then expand into a sense of self-understanding, a sense that feeling this way matters, it is part of who we are. Conversely, music can emotionally configure us in ways we know we prefer not to be configured; it can put us in touch with feelings we counter-identify with, feelings we know we prefer not to feel, and we can perform and affirm our identity by marking our distaste for these varieties of emotion.

¹⁶ Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge*, 78.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Certain game music can configure us emotionally in ways where we become the versions of ourselves we most identify with, while other game music fails to affect us in that way. While these processes can unfold entirely in ways that remain in the domain of personal identity, they can also spill over into and inform processes related to qualitative group identity. Game music makes listeners like Evan feel heroic when he's running and this may feed associations he has with qualitative group identities he holds or doesn't hold (like males as heroic, Americans as heroic, working-class individuals as heroic, etc.).

One final angle from which we can approach the study of game music's intersection with identity is related to the fact that, contrary to games like *TLOU* that predetermine (most) aspects of the identities the game avatars represent, many recent games include the option for users to shape aspects of their avatar like race, gender, sexuality and other dimensions. Shaw's work argues that we need to recognize the problematic aspects of this practice alongside its positive affordances. She discusses how this shifts the burden of representation onto the player and, as such, is part of the broader contemporary neoliberal mindset that erodes social narratives advocating societies that are based on shared responsibility for the well-being of each member.¹⁹ In a neoliberal society, we are all on our own, competing in the free market for survival with no social contract guaranteeing our well-being or obliging us to one another. If we want to navigate an avatar that aligns with our RL identity, says a neoliberal attitude, we need to labour to make our own. Another related result of these adjustable avatars is, of course, that they can sometimes diminish the potential good that might come out of games forcing us to control an avatar whose identities might be distinct from our own and might foster identification across reified identity categories and/or challenge our impulses to Other.

The vast world of video gaming is getting more diverse. Pre-programmed avatars that represent RL identity categories that are not dominant in our mediascapes are slowly but surely coming to be encountered by both individuals who identify with those categories and players who do not. And as we get the chance to control a hero that mirrors our qualitative group identities, or one that allows us to intersubjectively imagine identities whose social locations we can never occupy in RL, music will be sounding, affording meanings that shape that experience, whether or not, at the same time, we are embracing the reductive and strategic comforts of identification.

¹⁹ Ibid., 35.