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Michael Kamp, Tim Summers & Mark Sweeney (Eds),

Ludomusicology: Approaches to Video Game Music.

Michael Austin (Ed), *Music Video Games Performance, Politics and Play*

As an expanding interdisciplinary field at the intersection of game studies and musicology, as well as sound studies, the interactive symbiosis between audio and visual elements of video games is essential in understanding game experience. The editors of *Ludomusicology*, state that the discipline, “at its broadest, attempts to see our engagement with music, any kind of music, in terms of play” and emphasize that “there is a special relationship between playing video games and engaging in their music” (Kamp, Summers & Sweeney, 2016, p.1). In the afterword to Austin’s edited collection on music video games, William Cheng similarly observes that “much of ludomusicology’s literature to date upholds music and play as a match made in heaven” (2016, p. 297). Earlier collections have appeared on video game music, such as a set of case study essays edited by Donnelly, Gibbons and Lerner (2014), as well as a comprehensive seminal collection edited by Collins (2008) that provides both industry and musicological perspectives, and that gives recognition to the chiptunes scene and to the growing importance of mobile phones in game sound.

Both collections address the complexities, and pleasure, in the interactions between digital games and music. They provide an imaginative snapshot, and barometer, of the state of play in the study of game music, which has seen a steady growth in academic publications over the past decade.

While *Music Video Games* appears as part of a series in “Approaches to Digital Game Studies”, offering a broad approach to the study of musical gaming, the

Ludomusicology collection is published as part of a series on “Genre, Music and Sound”, which shifts the analytical focus to a musical understanding of video games. Born from an annual conference of the same title, organized by three musicologists who are also the editors of the collection, *Ludomusicology* takes on the task to systematize boundaries to the field of game music, albeit with an open attitude to the relationship between music and video games in general. This provides space for a range of methodological approaches from a musicological perspective. For example, music enhances both immersion into, and interactivity with, the game. In her paper, Isabella van Elferen develops a theoretical model in which musical affect, literacy, and interaction are identified as key elements in player immersion through the employment of game music.

An additional important characteristic of game music is that it is non-linear. Therefore, as Tim Summers points out in his study, the game must be played repeatedly to hear and analyze the variable, shifting, soundtrack. Only then can game music be fully understood in connection with its technical context, para-musical sources, and intertextual processes. In his paper, Mark Sweeney delves deeper into *intertextuality* through discussion of *Dead Space*, showing how cinematic conventions in the use of classical music can be heard in the use of neo-romantic (melodic) music as a narrative device, and the application modernist musical forms (which deconstruct traditional tonality) as underscore to signify and generate fear during game play. Michiel Kamp, meanwhile, investigates *paramusical* aspects of games, adapting Gérard Genette’s notion of *paratexts*, shifting the focus of analysis to game music also exists in the *peritext*: “all those materials that surround and are attached to the text itself” – p. 75), outside the diegesis of game play, including menus and start screens. Summers suggests reaching further, beyond the game environment, including interviews, for example, to better understand the context of composition.

Focusing, by contrast, on the object of music-led digital games, music video games offer an opportunity to delve into a specific relationship between music and games. Such games can range from tools that enable the creation of music through game play (a type of gamification of music making) to games that involve the contexts in which music is developed, played and interpreted. Within a ludomusicological assessment of smartphone music games, Anahid Kassabian and Freya Jarman narrow down what they would include into the category of music games by deconstructing the main concepts involved in what such a game may entail, such as the activity of play, the structure of a game, and the very notion of “a music game”. On the one hand, they include games, such as *Guitar Hero*, that allow control of “the production of sounds [during] the entirety of game play” and in which sounds are “a major part of the play” (p.122). On the other hand, they exclude games about music and musicians, and also games, in which sounds are only “a consequence of game play”, including (perhaps surprisingly) games such as *Rez*, characterized by an explicit attempt to make sound an integral part of the gameplay mechanics.

The *Music Video Games* collection offers a broader view of what to include as a music game. In the editorial introduction, Michael Austin provides a range of definitions of music game play, suggesting that engagement with music can be compared to both the pleasure of game play as well as the structuring aspects of a game. Here he briefly considers music games as musical instruments. This is further explored in a separate chapter, where he theorizes music-controlling games as types of sequencers. In this way, games are understood in terms of mechanics, dynamics, and aesthetics, whereby gamification of music sequencing opens up new approaches to making music. Back in the editorial introduction, though, Austin also calls for an object-oriented approach that approaches music games in terms of genre rules and interface interactivity, such as rhythm-matching, pitch-matching, music-mixing and musical-making games. In this way, the focus turns to performance, on the personas that players may adopt during gameplay, and on the resulting music.

To illustrate the difference in approaches between the two collections, research by Melanie Fritsch appears in both collections. In *Ludomusicology*, she addresses the reinterpretation of the musical scores of *Super Mario* for orchestral performance. By contrast, in *Music Video Games* she investigates the use of Michael Jackson as a musical persona. Rather than enabling music making and performance, metonymic music games, then, allude to (known) musicians, to music making, or to the music industry. This type of music game veers away from how Kassabian and Jarman define music games in their contribution to *Ludomusicology*. The scope of *Music Video Games* collection is broad; it considers a wide range of music-focused digital games from historical, cultural and pedagogical perspectives, inspiring Cheng to call for “a ludomusicology that bounces along feelings of musicality, pleasure, and imagination, rather missions that get mired in agonism, definitional boundaries, and high scores” (p. 303).

There is space for the further development of a ludomusicology as a rich subject area that is more than a sub-discipline of musicology, to further engage with the technological, social, cultural and economic dimensions of game music. There is also space for an inquiry into the symbiotic relationships between popular music and game music, both within games as well as within the sounds, attitudes, and interfaces of popular music forms.

Both collections address the complexities, and pleasure, in the interactions between digital games and music. They provide an imaginative snapshot, and barometer, of the state of play in the study of game music, which has seen a steady growth in academic publications over the past decade. Where they do differ, though, is that *Ludomusicology* aims to establish a sub-discipline in musicology of varying conceptual perspectives, including Medina-gray’s discussion of modular video music composition and Gibbon’s assessment of the role of classical music in games. *Music Video Games*, however, offers approaches to

games that, rather than residing in musicology, are anchored in the interdisciplinary fields of media and cultural studies, with an interest in the politics and performance of play; for example, Plank's detailed study of online communal participation in *Mario Paint Composer*, and O'Meara's contextual study of *Rocksmith* as a music game and as pedagogical device.

Such diversity shows there is space for the expansion of ludomusicology as a rich subject area that is more than a sub-discipline of musicology, to further engage with the technological, social, cultural and economic dimensions of game music. As a field of study, there is scope for the further development of debate in order to refine critical approaches to the analysis and understanding of game music within variable contexts of creativity, production, distribution, performance, subjectivity, and play. There is also space for an inquiry into the symbiotic relationships between popular music and game music, both within games as well as within the sounds, attitudes, and interfaces of popular music forms. We've only begun to scrape the surface of a vibrant area of study that is still to be systematically explored.

ADDITIONAL REFERENCES

- Collins, K. (Ed). 2008. *From Pac-Man to Pop Music*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Donnelly, K.J., Gibbons, W. & Lerner, N. (Eds). 2014. *Music in Video Games: Studying Play*. London and New York: Routledge.

REVIEWER'S INFO

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