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***The Cambridge Companion to Video Game Music.* Ed. by Melanie Fritsch and Tim Summers. Cambridge Companions to Music. (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York, 2021. £22.99. ISBN 978-1-108-46089-7.)**

Video games are perhaps the primary pop cultural differentiator between myself and my parents' generation. In the early 1960s, my Grandad would order his 9-year-old son to turn off the unfamiliar noise produced by four long-haired louts from Liverpool emanating from a tiny monochrome TV set. Thirty years later, the pattern repeated itself and it was my mother's turn to beg me and my brother to turn off *Pokémon* on our Gameboys or *Ocarina of Time* on a newly-acquired N64. We had been brought up alongside such technology as it developed, with memories of *Doom* and *Fun School* on cumbersome desktop computers, London's SegaWorld, and the aesthetics of digital imperfection. There were exceptions, of course. My maternal Grandfather rather liked the Beatles, and owned records by The Rolling Stones, The Who, Santana, Eric Clapton, and George Benson. Similarly, my parents remember playing the iconic Atari game *Pong* in pubs and arcades during the early 1970s. But what tends to unify each generation as it falls in love with the definitive icons of its own era is the sense that it is privy to something entirely new and bemusing to outsiders. For Baby Boomers, it was the sound of the British Invasion; for Millennials, it was video games.

It's unsurprising, then, to find *The Cambridge Companion to Video Game Music* appearing as Millennials like myself find tenured positions in academia and begin digging around the pop cultural world they grew up in, trying to understand its magic. This pattern extends well beyond the academy. To take just one example: the cover art of the seminal 2010 cassette release *Chuck Person's Eccojams Vol. 1* (an experimental project by Daniel Lopatin) features imagery from the 1992 Sega Mega Drive/Genesis game *Ecco the Dolphin*, providing a visual analogue for its ludic plunderphonics of late 20th-century pop. This album set the precedent for vaporwave, with its frequent allusions to video games, virtuality, and Japanese iconography. We could tell a similar story about the 1986 arcade driving game *Out Run* that provided inspiration for the eponymous 2013 album by Kavinsky, along with an entire subgenre of nostalgic synthwave obsessed with 1980s gaming aesthetics. We might also mention the Dizzee Rascal instrumental 'Streetfighter', sampled from *Street Fighter II*. As Fatima Al Qadiri points out in the brilliant documentary mini-series *Diggin' in the Carts*, video game music is the one genre that has truly 'touched the hearts of the global masses'. My generation's most significant exposure to electronic music came not through DJs, but via consoles and arcade games. Invented by a handful of composers whose identity was unknown or deliberately shrouded in mystery, these 8- and 16-bit sounds defined our adolescence.

Since its inception in 2008 with Karen Collins's *Game Sound*, video game music studies (sometimes referred to as 'ludomusicology', though this can encompass a far wider conception of music and/as play) has already produced a small library of book-length studies by Kiri Miller (2012), Karen Collins (2013), William Cheng (2014), Michiel Kamp (2014), Winifred Phillips (2014), Andrew Schartmann (2015), Roger Moseley (2016), Tim Summers (2016, 2021), Melanie Fritsch (2018), William Gibbons (2018), Kenneth B. McAlpine (2018), and Andra Ivănescu

(2019), not to mention the edited collections *Music In Video Games* (2014), *Music Video Games* (2016), and *Ludomusicology* (2016). Much like these books, *The Cambridge Companion to Video Game Music* symptomizes an ongoing proliferation of sub-disciplinary specialization epitomised by the increasingly inventive ‘The Oxford Handbook of...’ series. A postgraduate student beginning their studies now will find it challenging to master even one small area, let alone have a sense of musicology or the humanities as a whole. This has changed in the short time since I began my doctoral research, when such work would simply have fallen under the rubric of popular music studies.

At over 450 pages (including a prefatory timeline), *The Cambridge Companion to Video Game Music* is by far the longest of the edited collections to appear on the subject, and one hundred pages longer than *The Cambridge Companion to Recorded Music*. Its 24 chapters survey a multitude of themes from chiptune and autoethnography to affect, identity, and globalization. The editors offer a succinct overall introduction followed by short summaries of the literature that serve as introductory essays to each of the six main sections. Although no doubt helpful for undergraduate students, scholars working in the field will be hard pressed to find anything new in these overviews and would surely expect more than the word ‘problematic’ in reference to themes such as race, class, gender, and disability (given one paragraph each in the final synopsis). Likewise, statements such as ‘semiotics is not hard’ in the chapter on semiotics (237) and ‘video game music is amazing’ in a chapter on interactivity (93) suggest that the book is primarily geared to less experienced readers.

A number of chapters nevertheless stand out as valuable contributions to the field. Michiel Kamp uses a segment of the game *Bastion* to argue persuasively that ‘we need to have an understanding of what it is like to play a video game, rather than analyse it in terms of its audiovisual presentation’ (161). Video games, as many of the chapters illustrate, are not as close to other screen media as we tend to imagine: they create spaces of virtual encounter, play, and exploration that are more like impromptu performances in themselves. In a word, video games are indeterminate. To address this issue, Kamp maps out an ingenious spiral whereby a particular hermeneutic window can spark autoethnographic reflection, which can then open up phenomenological questions, which in turn can be treated hermeneutically. It is an intriguing idea and one that seeks to sketch out what a methodology specifically tailored to video game music might look like. This method could incorporate what Dana Plank calls a ‘cognitive-emotional approach’ to game sound (284). Composers, she points out, have the ability to influence a player’s affective experience and physiological state while playing, with the result that music can become a crucial tool of ‘incorporation’, that is ‘joining the material body of the player to those in the game’ (301). Indeed, Kamp’s and Plank’s ideas are linked by game avatars acting as surrogates or proxies for the player—an equivocal process that raises a host of questions surrounding agency, ethics, representation, and identity.

Such issues are broached in the book’s penultimate section ‘Game music, contexts and identities’. Chris Tonelli provides a useful introduction to theories of self, group, and otherness, encouraging us to hear ‘the ways game music fuels identificatory processes’ (330). One of the examples he gives is from Sid Meier’s long-running *Civilization* series, a turn-based strategy game that allows players to construct their own empires. Anyone with a rudimentary knowledge of

postcolonial theory will be able to guess the metanarrative at work: progress, development, and modernity (with its familiar antitheses of primitivism, stasis, and difference). Unsurprisingly, the music reinforces this colonialist historiography, contributing ‘to a broader process of *naturalization* of these associations’ (330). What we have, in essence, is something like Hubert Parry’s *The Evolution of the Art of Music* brought to life. Tonelli is wise to stress that what is at stake is not some inherent meaning embedded in the soundtrack, but the ways in which music affords meaning in a given context. Readers looking to explore this idea in greater depth can turn to James Cook’s illuminating chapter on game music and history. Music harbours a unique capacity, as Cook puts it, to ‘historicize in the popular imagination in a manner not always indebted to temporal reality’ (353). This is a polite way of saying that music is a determining factor in the historical chimeras that games bring to life. By doing so, they reveal a great deal about the making of history as such—that our views of the past are unavoidably conditioned by imagination, narrative, and artifice. I never had the chance to listen to the radio while driving a taxi in Miami in 1986 (I was still in utero), but my views of that era and city will forever be shaped by *Scarface* and *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*. We could say similar things about Ancient Greece or the Middle Ages, and the ways in which *Age of Empires* could open up impossible worlds through play.

Despite this emphasis on local or historical colour within certain games, the games themselves often appear free of geographical markers. William Gibbons addresses this quandary directly in a perceptive chapter on the global video game industry. Identifying a unique set of challenges for game music scholars, he draws attention to the fact that through a process known as localization ‘aspects of a game are adapted to fit the perceived cultural norms and preferences of a target market’ (359). This work can involve not only the translation of text into different languages, but also more substantial changes to the original game. Ultimately, Gibbons notes, localization amounts to ‘an erasure of cultural difference’ driven by the economic imperatives of a highly competitive international marketplace (360). Most significantly, it is Japan that has been forced to wrestle with this question of how to adapt and promote its games for a global audience. We only need a cursory glance at the titans of the industry to realise just how central Japan has been to video game aesthetics: Taito, Konami, Capcom, Namco, Nintendo, Sega, Sony. And yet characters from Mario and Sonic the Hedgehog to Pikachu, Pac-Man, and Link exist in an enigmatic and strangely ambiguous world somehow both distinctively Japanese and entirely unplaceable.

The book could have gone further in redressing this covert erasure of Japanese culture. In the index, there is no entry for Japan, though 25 references for the 2005 game *Guitar Hero*, developed in the US. To give the editors due credit, they have included a chapter on the neglected (and, perhaps not coincidentally, mostly female) Capcom sound team as well as a transcribed interview with composer Junko Ozawa. For an authoritative *Companion to Video Game Music*, however, we might have expected more information on the early development of electronic music by key figures such as Hirokazu Tanaka, Yoko Shimomura, Hiroshi Kawaguchi, Yuzo Koshiro, and Junichi Masuda, as well as more substantial explorations of waveforms, hardware, FM synthesis, and sampling. As the editors confess, European and North American voices dominate the field (325). What we have, then, is closer to *The Cambridge Companion to Studying Video Game Music in the West* than a global history of game music composition, reception,

and aesthetics (the latter oddly absent from the index). A more effective structure might have echoed *The Cambridge Companion to Film Music* rather than an exhaustive report from the latest ludomusicology conference.

Perhaps it is this very sense of scholarly community that has created the book's most notable omission: discussion of the darker aspects of gaming culture in the 21st century. It is something alluded to very briefly by the editors in the Preface, then disregarded. Aside from a fleeting mention of 'technomascularity' (379), the book does not delve into areas such as the virulently misogynistic 'gamergate' movement, nor does it critique the overlaps between far-right extremism and gaming. The 4chan NPC meme is just one of the many instances of this affiliation. According to the headline definition in Urban Dictionary, gamers self-identify (with typical Internet irony) as 'the most oppressed group in the world', recalling the way incels often define their plight. In the first episode of *Louis Theroux's Forbidden America* on the changing face of white nationalism, an enthusiast by the name of Beardson simply claims to be 'a gamer, dude'. We need look no further than Cook's chapter to find traces of a kindred trope that he describes as 'an animating tension' in fantasy narratives: 'modernity vs premodernity, rationalism vs irrationality, pre-industrial vs industrial' (347). As Adorno and others have long recognised, this habit of thought has a sinister and ominous history—it is one of the tell-tale insignia of fascism. This is not to say that all gaming culture harbours such undercurrents, of course, but rather that it would be a mistake not to bring them to light.

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