

Ludomusicology: Approaches to Video Game Music

Michiel Kamp, Tim Summers and Mark Sweeney

Bristol: Equinox, 2016

ISBN: 9781781791981 (PB)

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Having found preliminary articulation through the work of Zach Whalen (2004; 2007), Karen Collins (2008) and Mark Grimshaw (2011), the study of video game music has fast become a busy and vibrant sphere of intellectual activity. As the editors of this collection are keen to point out in their introduction, the last few years in particular have seen a period of accelerated accomplishment: research papers fill the pages of music and media journals and library shelves alike, and the scholarly community which orbits events such as the annual Ludomusicology Research Group conference has continued to grow. But arguably, this sub-discipline now finds itself at rather a nervy crossroads. It is, the authors acknowledge, “still tackling fundamental questions concerning how video game music can be investigated” (1), and one would assume that some degree of consensus about the answers to such questions is utterly necessary to the discipline’s long-term sustainability. The risk is that a book such as *Ludomusicology* might serve simply to highlight, not dispel, any insecurities. Each of these ten essays is, after all, highly (self-)reflective about the field that it emerges from. But rather than appearing a product of shaky adolescence, *Ludomusicology* reads more like a flag planted in the scholarly landscape, cogently contesting disciplinary boundaries, carefully ruminating on methodological protocols, and smartly debating the relative merit of theoretical tenets.

A lion’s share of this collection is dedicated to the contestation of the very boundaries of the discipline itself, offering a prismatic set of perspectives on its scope and remit. Anahid Kassabian and Freya Jarman, for instance, warn of the limitations of a narrow definition of ‘video game music,’ attempting to diminish any sense that the term refers simply to incidental soundtracks by instead investigating in-game representations of practices that would otherwise be considered ‘musical.’ This includes consideration of titles such as *Guitar Hero* (2005), but the strength of their contribution emerges from a readiness to get right down to theoretical brass tacks, dealing head-on with the conceptual quagmire that lies between ill-defined notions of ‘game,’ ‘music,’ and ‘play.’ Similarly, in her chapter on Björk’s interactive *Biophilia* app, Samantha Blickhan considers not how musical activity

pervades the gaming sphere, but how notions of play and interactivity might be seen to be encroaching on otherwise 'musical' territory. Elsewhere, the ontological status of video game music as an object of study becomes point of consideration: video game music, argues Melanie Fritsch, is more than simply a self-referential, closed text; any semantic meaning is dependent on a set of culturally inscribed and culturally learned literacies. What emerges through both the contributions above, as well as others in the collection, is a sense of disciplinary breadth. There is a clear understanding that the study of 'video game music' might variously refer to the study of a musical text, a video game, cultural processes, embodied interactivity, sociological relationships, and so on. It is a pliability subtly implied by the title of the book itself: as the editors are quick to concede, while the collection "suggests a variety of new approaches to video game music... collectively we are more concerned with the relationship between music and play – a domain of research that is now commonly referred to as 'ludomusicology'" (1).

Of course, if video game music studies is to find its disciplinary sea legs, it will require more than critical or theoretical reflexivity, and to that end *Ludomusicology* puts forward a number of methodological tools, models, and approaches. Into this category falls Tim Summers' chapter, which comprises a pragmatic survey of the "materials available to the analyst, and how these might be used and interrogated" (8). Although Summers paints with rather broad, sometimes didactic brush strokes (the notion that musical transcriptions, self-reflective play, and reviews are all valid analytical fodder is perhaps not the most groundbreaking observation), it does serve to further acknowledge the diversity of scholarly approaches encompassed by the sub-discipline. Elsewhere, Isabella van Elferen presents the ALI model, itself derived from Laura Ermi and Frans Mäyrä's SCI model, a mode of "multi-dimensional analysis of video game immersion" (32). Elferen's project is to repurpose the older model with a more specific focus toward music, thereby providing a clear method by which to investigate the way musical affect, literacy, and immersion combine in gameplay. The book also finds a certain authoritative depth through the inclusion of an industry-oriented chapter from Stephen Baysted, who documents his experiences working on the score for a game in the *Need for Speed* series (Baysted is both academic and professional practitioner).

As already mentioned, scholars such as Collins and Grimshaw represent a looming presence, and their influence provides a cohesive thread that runs throughout. More broadly, however, there emerges a sense of the sub-discipline as one which is becoming ever more comfortable as an orphan of musicology on the one hand, and media and cultural studies on the other. References to canonised composers are plenty, whether in Elizabeth Medina-Gray's considerations of the modularity of video game music, which finds its insights through comparisons with work by the likes of John Cage and Pierre Boulez, or Mark Sweeney's investigation of the influence of the Polish avant-garde (Krzysztof Penderecki, Witold Lutosławski, Henryck Gorecki) upon Jason Graves' score for *Dead Space*. On the other hand, topics such as the participatory potentials of the Internet (as in Fritsch's

chapter) and casual appeals to film and other visual media (as in Michael Kamp's) are also threaded throughout. But despite this, there is a sense of the sub-discipline beginning to crystallise as an autonomous field of study in its own right. By underlining key issues, grappling with pertinent terms, outlining specific methodological tools, and contemplating core critical issues, *Ludomusicology* represents an admirable attempt to highlight not just the necessity of video game music studies as a field of scholarly enquiry, but so too the surprising level of maturity that it has already achieved in its relatively short lifetime.

References

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