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Tim Summers, *Understanding Video Game Music*

Scholarship about video game music is finally coming of age. Ludomusicology, or the study of video game music, is a burgeoning academic field of research that seeks to move video game music from the margins of game studies and its perception as a peripheral accompaniment to gameplay to its place as a central element of the game-playing experience. With very few exceptions, almost all academic journal articles or scholarly books on the topic have been published after 2000, and the majority of this research has been published within the last ten years. Early work in this area has dutifully served its purpose to establish video game music as a field that is worthy of critical attention, and helped to validate the work of *ludomusicologists* within musicology.

Interest in video game music is also evidenced by the growing number of academic conferences on video game music in Europe and North America, special interest groups in established academic societies, and the ever-growing body of published scholarship in this area.

Tim Summers takes this work a considerable step further. A Teaching Fellow at Royal Holloway, University of London, he is a co-founder of the UK Ludomusicology Research Group, which convenes an annual academic conference on video game music. Blending his expertise as a lecturer and scholar of music and games, Summers is usefully didactic (without being at all patronizing or condescending) and teaches readers about video game music and the ways it can be analyzed.

Understanding Video Game Music is among an only handful of monographs specifically dedicated to music in video games, and it is one of the very few to be written by a musicologist for a primarily academic audience.

After a short introduction, Summers devotes Chapter 1 to the discussion of the video game as a musical source. Although musicologists and music theorists often rely heavily on a physical musical score for their analytical work, ludomusicologists rarely see the music they study engraved on musical staves. And as Summers explains, the music of a particular video game can vary widely

depending upon the action of the player, the console the game is played on, and the version of the video game being played. Here, Summers also describes the types of music one is likely to find within video games, making sure to draw attention to the music of menus, loading screens, and session pauses, which is often overshadowed by the game's overworld music.

Chapter 2 outlines methods of analysis for video game music. Summers points out that actually playing the game is an important part of analyzing game music; watching online play-through videos only does not afford scholars the opportunity to hear the music that results from their interaction with the game. Summers then points to various analytical techniques already familiar to music scholars, such as the mapping of themes and motives, harmonic analysis, topics theory, music psychology, hermeneutics, formal analysis, ethnomusicological approaches, and performance studies, providing explanations and examples for each. He also points to sources outside of the game, such as production documents, trade magazines, interviews with creators and composers, patents, and player reviews as important satellite sources for analytical information. While Chapters 1 and 2 constitute the book's first part, dedicated to the techniques and materials of video game music analysis, the second part of the book offers critical perspectives and case studies.

In Chapter 3, Summers first introduces his concept of musical texturing, or the ways in which game designers rely on the pre-conceived references, cultural significance, and other "baggage" that comes with the music they use in a game to fill in some of the gaps left by deficiencies in the visual material, which "has the result of creating depth, implied detail and rounded context to the surface level of gameplay activity, elaborating beyond the basic frames of the gameplay mechanism" (60). He also goes on to introduce *epic texturing* in *first-person shooters*, or the ways in which music can change the perspective of the player from being solely focused on gameplay and instead connect "the player both to the subjectivity of the avatar and to the higher-level background narrative in which the avatar is placed" (83). For example, Summers refers to the music in *GoldenEye 007* (Rare Ltd., 1997) as an example of how the James Bond Theme (or an approximation of it) that plays throughout the game connects the player to the narrative of James Bond films they may have seen and to the franchise as a whole.

Addressing the notion of virtuality in game music, Chapter 4 outlines musical styles and compositional conventions used in various genres of racing games and how the music is employed to create an illusion of realism for the game's player. Summers also points out that music can create historical context for a game, either by using music from the concrete, "real" world, as with *Civilization IV* (2K Games, 2005), or by using music written by a contemporary composer using cinematic tropes and other musical signifiers that anachronistically allude to music of a different time period, as with *Age of Empires III* (Microsoft, 2005). In the chapter that follows, Summers uses speech act theory to discuss

the power of music to communicate information within games, whether it alerts the player of the presences of a nearby enemy, conveys emotional material to the player, or directs them in the correct path to complete an in-game task.

Summers begins Chapter 6 by highlighting the strong connection between game music and its cinematic antecedents. As he recounts, not only are themes and other musical material in video games often directly borrowed from film and TV, the style and tropes from film music are used to give video game scores a cinematic quality. A thorough analysis of *Final Fantasy VII* (Square, 1997) demonstrates the value of a cinematic soundtrack and repetitive *leitmotifs* in depicting characters and their location, and in communicating emotional information to the game's player. Summers argues that music "routinely has a greater aesthetic priority, descriptive power and significant informational content in games than in film, primarily because of the graphical and sonic limitations of the rest of the media components, resulting in a proportionally larger role for the music" (p. 175).

Finally, Summers underlines in Chapter 7 the importance of interaction in the analysis and overall understanding of video game music. Examples of ways in which players interact with the game musically include *Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo, 1998), wherein players use the buttons on their Nintendo 64 controllers to "play" an ocarina within the game. Likewise, karaoke games, dance games, and other music games, such as those in the *Guitar Hero* series (Harmonix 2005–2015), demand a type of interaction that is both performative and intrinsically musical (or at least rhythmic). He also describes in detail games, such as *Super Mario Galaxy* (Nintendo, 2007), that are played almost as instruments, mixing the pre-recorded music of the game with quasi-musical sound effects added by player action and interaction with the game. Summers also recounts instances wherein interaction with video game music is less "musical", but still interacts and is synchronized with the ludic action, as with the snowboarding games in the *SXX* series (EA Sports, 2000–2012). Summers ends with an epilogue that further explores the connection between playing games and playing music, and discusses the value of fun in both music-making and game-playing contexts.

Chapters 3–7 end with a valuable "Conceptual Toolkit" that highlights key points from the case studies presented in each chapter. In addition to its eight constituent chapters, *Understanding Video Games* includes an insightful Foreword by video game music composer James Hannigan on the value of both theory and praxis for video game music and its recognition as a legitimate form of aesthetic expression. This publication offers an additional game index, while its most useful extra feature is a seven-page appendix titled "How to Hear a Video Game: An Outline", which serves as a step-by-step guide to both listening to and analyzing the origins, genre, form, function, and extra-musical connotations of video game music.

Summers is able to present numerous musical examples and offers several options for analysis in each chapter. He asks important ontological questions about the source of video game music “texts” and their various versions and iterations—for example, which is the one “true” version of a video game’s music?.

Although there are several video game audio and music books that are written primarily for practitioners hoping to break into the video game industry currently on the market, *Understanding Video Game Music* is among an only handful of monographs specifically dedicated to music in video games, and it is one of the very few to be written by a musicologist for a primarily academic audience. In my estimation, this book serves two vital functions for the field of ludomusicology. First, it offers a great introduction to the field of ludomusicology. But, despite the fact that this book was written primarily for budding ludomusicologists, Summers does a great job of defining gaming and musical jargon and explaining disciplinary assumptions in easy-to-understand terms for non-practitioners. Moreover, this book may be especially valuable to historical musicologists, as well as to media studies and game studies scholars, because of the way Summers builds his arguments from the ground up, describing the experience of gameplay (and in situ analysis) in great detail, and clearly laying out the foundation each analytical technique he introduces. Composers and industry professionals would also find this volume useful for broadening and deepening their understanding of the form and function of video game music across a wide range of styles and genres. In addition, each chapter of the book’s second section presents aspiring ludomusicologists with many exemplary models of game music analyses to emulate. The book includes a range of useful tables and figures that present theoretical and analytical information in a wide variety of formats, and it features excellent musical examples and transcriptions of game music.

Secondly, this book serves as a much-needed overview of the various ways in which video game music can be approached and analyzed by ludomusicologists. When writing single book chapters or journal articles, ludomusicologists have little print space to expand their analysis of a musical example from a video game beyond one or two analytical techniques. Through this single-authored monograph, Summers is able to present numerous musical examples and offers several options for analysis in each chapter. He asks important ontological questions about the source of video game music “texts” and their various versions and iterations (for example, which is the one “true” version of a video game’s music?). Of the recently published monographs on video game music, Summers’ is perhaps the least esoteric. But despite its utilitarian design, it raises important questions and introduces valuable new theories and analytical techniques, while simultaneously clarifying, refashioning and championing tools already used by ludomusicologists. Most importantly, it helps to further ground the study of video game music in preceding musicological, philosophical, and media studies traditions.

REVIEWER'S INFO

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