

Understanding Video Game Music

Understanding Video Game Music develops a musicology of video game music by providing methods and concepts for understanding music in this medium. From the practicalities of investigating the video game as a musical source to the critical perspectives on game music – using examples including *Final Fantasy VII*, *Monkey Island 2*, *SSX Tricky* and *Silent Hill* – these explorations not only illuminate aspects of game music, but also provide conceptual ideas valuable for future analysis. Music is not a redundant echo of other textual levels of the game, but central to the experience of interacting with video games. As the author likes to describe it, this book is about music for racing a rally car, music for evading zombies, music for dancing, music for solving puzzles, music for saving the Earth from aliens, music for managing a city, music for being a hero; in short, it is about music for playing.

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TIM SUMMERS

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Foreword by JAMES HANNIGAN



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For Adam.

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Foreword

JAMES HANNIGAN

My first encounter with Tim Summers dates back to *Ludomusicology* in 2013, to which composer and University of Chichester academic Dr Stephen Baysted had invited me as a speaker. During my session, which took the form of a relaxed conversation, I was afforded an opportunity to discuss my work on a wide variety of game types and projects ranging from simulations and strategy titles such as *Theme Park World*, *Freelancer* and *Command and Conquer: Red Alert 3* through to (at the time) recently completed projects such as *Dead Space 3*, and film tie-ins including the *Harry Potter* series.

For someone who had spent a large part of his waking life sitting in a darkened studio scrambling to meet deadlines – finding occasional respite in the creation of fun themes such as *Soviet March*, jazzy ditties for games like *Evil Genius* and high-octane electronica for EA Sports titles – attending *Ludomusicology* and encountering so many academics with an avid interest in games music I found to be enjoyable and validating in equal measure. At the very least, getting out to discuss the relationship between sound and music in games and some of the philosophical issues I care most about – such as the varying roles music can take in filmic, first- and third-person games – sure beats ‘slaving over a hot stove’, as my good friend the conductor Allan Wilson often quips when under the cosh.

Several conferences on games music I had attended before *Ludomusicology* I had found to be technically informative but rather inward-looking, industry-focused affairs devoted mostly to ‘how to’ presentations on integrating music in games, business arrangements, or the ‘novelty value’ of recording orchestras and musicians in ways that are, frankly, pretty familiar to any composers worth their salt or to practitioners peering in from other industries. Such a focus on production, tools and technology, rather than on the function and aesthetic details of music and what motivates it beyond simple visual cues and one-dimensional ‘game states’, is a long-term games industry bugbear for me. I can only explain this tendency away by pointing to gaming’s initial emergence from Silicon Valley several decades ago, which must have entailed, I imagine, the carrying over of software industry values and computer terminology into the realm of

entertainment as we now think of it. (As far as I know, no other creative industry uses terms such as ‘implementation’ for the task of editing and applying music.)

Ludomusicology signified a couple of important things for me: first, that it was facilitating a meaningful dialogue on the aesthetics of games music between industry and academia and, second, that the mere existence of the conference, with its global network of ardent academics, reaffirmed for me something I’ve always believed to be true: games music can be unique and is eminently worthy of study and analysis. This in itself may not have much bearing on the day-to-day operation of the games industry – yet – but such serious investigation by *Ludomusicology* and, indeed, within the pages of *Understanding Video Game Music*, I believe to be important for future generations seeking to evaluate and make sense of games music during its first forty years. It helps also to establish more widely the idea that games *in general* are a distinct art form – and that’s something all humanity can surely benefit from.

During my time working in music, the mainstream media has shown increasing interest in games, offering some form of external validation for composers. Yet, as far as I am able to tell, for these pundits the most interesting aspect of games music currently appears to be its similarity to everything else out there. Games music, it seems, is only granted legitimacy as ‘real music’ when it succeeds in resembling (and functioning as, mostly for narrative support) music existing for other forms such as film and television, or when it is presented as a linear, radio-ready soundtrack. Everything else from games, I can only assume, continues to be thought of as a series of meaningless bleeps and bloops. Such increasingly widespread recognition is, however, most welcome, if a little one-sided, but I look forward to the day when the music of games, in all its splendour and diversity, is more widely understood in its original ‘interactive’ context by the public, gamers and industry alike. *Understanding Video Game Music* I firmly believe will become an important work in helping to bring about this kind of awareness and appreciation.

When Tim asked me to pen a foreword for *Understanding Video Game Music*, I felt not only honoured at being asked but also thrilled at the mere prospect of his book’s existence. Having thoroughly enjoyed reading it, I was especially delighted to see that even I had a mention in it. (Way to go, Tim – your cheque is in the post.)

Acknowledgements

The story of this book begins with three people whom I had the great fortune to meet in 2005 as undergraduates at St Catherine's College, Oxford: Nicholas Cowle, Chris Greening and Rob Piggott. Each of them passionate about video game music in very different ways, these friends challenged me to bring game music into my academic life. They asked me, 'If you study film music, why not game music?' Indeed. Many fruitful conversations and arguments with Nick, Chris and Rob about game music helped to formulate my ideas and develop my appetite and subsequent advocacy for the study of game music.

Much of the research presented here has its origins in my PhD research. This was conducted at Bristol University and would not have been possible without the generosity of the University of Bristol Centenary Campaign which funded the project. My supervisor at Bristol was Guido Heldt. Far more than simply a 'supervisor', Guido's complete dedication to this research was coupled with unfaltering enthusiasm, great humour, insightful advice and limitless patience. Both guide and collaborator, working with Guido made the foundational research for this project a happy and exciting experience.

When Justin Williams arrived at Bristol, he never expected to become my academic 'agony uncle', nevertheless, I have mercilessly pestered him for guidance and he has proved to be an unfailing source of sage advice. As a wonderful friend and guru, I shan't be leaving him alone any time soon. At Bristol, thanks are also due to Emma Hornby and John Pickard, who read early drafts of my ideas and offered helpful comments, and to Cecilia Quintrell for always looking out for me.

I must thank my dear colleagues and friends at the Ludomusicology video game music research group, Michiel Kamp and Mark Sweeney. The influence of both Michiel and Mark's thinking is everywhere in this volume. Working with Mark and Michiel on the Ludo conferences and projects has been one of the great joys of my academic life and I am extraordinarily privileged to share a platform with these kind and brilliant scholars whom I respect immensely. Thank you for your help, friendship, support and always being available to offer an honest, considered opinion. And yes, Mark, I even discuss games made after 1999.

Many others in the Ludomusicology circle have also inspired this book. In particular, I have had exceptionally valuable conversations with Melanie Fritsch and James Barnaby about how they understand music in games and this volume would be much poorer without their input. I hope that I have done you both, and the wider European Ludomusicology cluster, proud.

Peter Franklin deserves extra special thanks. Peter has not only provided enthusiasm for game music studies, he is also the model of a compassionate, joyful musicologist. Thanks go to Peter for being both a mentor and close friend. At Oxford, I also wish to express my gratitude to the late Stephen Jordan, formerly of the Oxford Music Faculty Library (you will be sorely missed), and my students at Oxford, especially Alice Angliss, Dan Baboulene, Josh Hagley, Nathan Klein, Makoto Nakata, Tomos Nicholls, Chloë Scott, Hannah Scott, Dan Shao, Sophie Strudwick and Heather Young. At ThinkSpace in Chichester, I want to thank Guy Micheltore, Blake Troise and Tim Johnson for allowing me the opportunity to be part of their continuing work of media music education. Chris Greening and Brian Conrad helped considerably with helping to track down composers of certain pieces of game music.

In the course of my work, I have been fortunate to meet many great scholars with whom I have had the opportunity to share ideas. I would specifically like to thank Isabella van Elferen, William Gibbons, Stephen Baysted, Anahid Kassabian and Kevin Donnelly. These individuals, with their enthusiasm for game music, dazzling ideas and exceptionally generous spirits, remind me how lucky I am to be studying game music, and to do so within their company is a privilege.

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I owe a great debt to my family – to my ‘in-laws’ Sarah and Andy (thank you for the MIDI wisdom), Sophie and Chris, and my parents Anne and Huw, and grandmother Mary. It was my wonderful father, Huw, who first introduced me to computers and the technology and artistry within them. My fondest, earliest childhood memories are ‘playing computers’ with my Dad. Thank you for the sense of wonder about technology that you gave me. You will always be my ultimate computer genius.

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