

## ↻ | Introduction

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Video game music has been permeating popular culture for over forty years, at least since the titular aliens of *Space Invaders* arrived in 1978, accompanied by an ever-accelerating musical ostinato. Now, reaching hundreds of millions of listeners, game music has grown to encompass a diverse spectrum of musical materials and practices. Its instrumentation ranges from orchestras to rock bands, its contexts from bedroom televisions to concert halls, its materials from ‘art music’ to Top-40 pop, and its systems from generative music technologies to carefully handcrafted idiosyncratic musical structures.

No longer a novelty within electronic music technology, nor a poor relation of film music, game music engages huge audiences and large budgets, and is the site of innovative scholarship. As well as being a crucial component of the audiovisual interactive experience of video gaming, game music has also had a marked impact on broader popular culture. Simply put, video game music is an important aspect of the musical life of the late-twentieth and twenty-first centuries in the Western world, and has cross-fertilized with many musical genres. At the same time, game music highlights a long tradition of music and play that can be traced back to antiquity.

This volume is specifically concerned with game music. Nevertheless, in video games, it is often unhelpful to imply a hard-and-fast separation between music and other aspects of the audio output of games. Especially in earlier games, the same technology would be responsible for musical content as for other sonic elements. Even in modern examples, audio icons and musicalized sound effects are interstitially both sound effect and yet distinctly musical. Rather than using a restrictive definition of what qualifies as ‘music’, the book instead explores the diverse and multifaceted musicality of games. The discussions engage the whole range of musical materials, from long cues and fully fledged music games to sonic fragments that constitute only one or two pitches. In this way, we might better appreciate the full significance of music to the experience of playing video games.

## Video Game Music Studies

Though video game music has long been the subject of (sometimes heated) discussion in college dorms, playgrounds, internet forums, conventions and anywhere gamers gather, academic studies of video game music primarily date from the mid-2000s. Despite some notable predecessors,<sup>1</sup> 2004–2008 saw a flurry of publications that would be foundational to the study of game music. Understandably, many initial studies engaged with games that trumpeted their engagement with music, like *Dance Dance Revolution* (1998–2019),<sup>2</sup> *Grand Theft Auto*'s extensive use of licensed music from 2001 onwards<sup>3</sup> and music games including *Guitar Hero* (2005–2015).<sup>4</sup> Another early area of interest included the compositional challenges presented by early video game hardware.<sup>5</sup> Broader conceptual issues in game music were initially couched in terms of the relationship with film,<sup>6</sup> functionality<sup>7</sup> and ideas of immersion.<sup>8</sup> In 2008, Karen Collins published her landmark book *Game Sound: An Introduction to the History, Theory, and Practice of Video Game Music and Sound Design*, which continues to serve as

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Matthew Belinkie, 'Video Game Music: Not Just Kid Stuff', *VGMusic.com*, 1999, accessed 8 April 2020, [www.vgmusic.com/information/vgpaper.html](http://www.vgmusic.com/information/vgpaper.html).

<sup>2</sup> Joanna Demers, 'Dancing Machines: "Dance Dance Revolution", Cybernetic Dance, and Musical Taste', *Popular Music* 25, no. 3 (2006): 401–14; Jacob Smith, 'I Can See Tomorrow in Your Dance: A Study of Dance Dance Revolution and Music Video Games', *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 16, no. 1 (2004): 58–84.

<sup>3</sup> Kiri Miller, 'Jacking the Dial: Radio, Race, and Place in "Grand Theft Auto"', *Ethnomusicology* 51, no. 3 (2007): 402–38; Kiri Miller, 'Grove Street Grimm: Grand Theft Auto and Digital Folklore', *Journal of American Folklore* 121, no. 481 (2008): 255–85; and Kiri Miller, 'The Accidental Carjack: Ethnography, Gameworld Tourism, and Grand Theft Auto', *Game Studies* 8, no. 1 (2008).

<sup>4</sup> Dominic Arsenaault, 'Guitar Hero: "Not Like Playing Guitar at All"?'', *Loading . . . 2*, no. 2 (2008); Fares Kayali, 'Playing Music: Design, Theory, and Practice of Music-based Games' (PhD dissertation, Vienna University of Technology, 2008); Henry Adam Svec, 'Becoming Machinic Virtuosos: Guitar Hero, Rez, and Multitudinous Aesthetics', *Loading . . . 2*, no. 2 (2008).

<sup>5</sup> Karen Collins, 'Loops and Bloops: Music on the Commodore 64', *Soundscape: Journal of Media Culture* 8, no. 1 (2006); Karen Collins, 'Flat Twos and the Musical Aesthetic of the Atari VCS', *Popular Musicology Online*, 1 (2006); and Karen Collins, 'In the Loop: Confinements and Creativity in 8-bit Games', *Twentieth-Century Music* 4, no. 2 (2007), 209–27.

<sup>6</sup> Zach Whalen, 'Play Along – An Approach to Videogame Music', *Game Studies* 4, no. 1 (2004) and Zach Whalen, 'Case Study: Film Music vs. Video-Game Music: The Case of Silent Hill', in *Music, Sound and Multimedia: From the Live to the Virtual*, ed. Jamie Sexton (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 68–81.

<sup>7</sup> Kristine Jørgensen, "'What Are These Grunts and Growls Over There?' Computer Game Audio and Player Action' (PhD dissertation, Copenhagen University, 2007) and Kristine Jørgensen, 'Left in the Dark: Playing Computer Games with the Sound Turned Off', in *From Pac-Man to Pop Music: Interactive Audio in Games and New Media*, ed. Karen Collins (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 163–76.

<sup>8</sup> Rod Munday, 'Music in Video Games', in *Music, Sound and Multimedia: From the Live to the Virtual*, ed. Jamie Sexton (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 51–67.

a cornerstone of game music studies.<sup>9</sup> This volume introduces key terminology and touches upon a huge variety of foundational ideas in game music studies. There is no better starting point for the reader new to this topic than *Game Sound*.

Since *Game Sound*, the field has continued to develop rapidly in a multitude of different directions. It is not uncommon to find university classes on video game music, while conferences, PhD dissertations and books on the topic are not unusual. The field has even grown to include an academic journal dedicated to the subject, the *Journal of Sound and Music in Games*. This companion aims to guide the reader through some of the main topics and ways of approaching game music, both in games, and the engagement with it beyond the games themselves.

Some discussions of game music have opted to use the term ‘ludomusicology’, a word originating in the work of Guillaume Laroche, Nicholas Tam and Roger Moseley.<sup>10</sup> The word is used to describe studies that engage with music and play, especially, though certainly not exclusively, through the lens of video games. While some game music scholars find the word problematic, with exclusionary and elitist overtones, it has served as a handy identifier to help with the visibility of research.

Beyond academics, game music practitioners have also revealingly written about their own experiences creating music for games. Prolific game composer George ‘The Fat Man’ Sanger wrote a book that defies easy categorization.<sup>11</sup> Encompassing autobiography, history, business advice, composition treatise and personal philosophy, the book is a revealing holistic insight into the life of a game composer. Other practitioners have written volumes that aim to pass

<sup>9</sup> Karen Collins, *Game Sound: An Introduction to the History, Theory and Practice of Video Game Music and Sound Design* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> On Guillaume Laroche and Nicholas Tam’s use of the term see Tasneem Karbani, ‘Music to a Gamer’s Ears’, *University of Alberta Faculty of Arts News* (22 August 2007), accessed 10 April 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20070915071528/http://www.uofaweb.ualberta.ca/arts/news.cfm?story=63769> and Nicholas Tam, ‘Ludomorphballogy’, *Ntuple Indemnity* (7 September 2007), accessed 10 April 2020, [www.nicholastam.ca/2007/09/07/ludomorphballogy/](http://www.nicholastam.ca/2007/09/07/ludomorphballogy/); Roger Moseley, ‘Playing Games with Music, and Vice Versa: Performance and Recreation in Guitar Hero and Rock Band’, in *Taking It to the Bridge: Music as Performance*, ed. Nicholas Cook and Richard Pettengill (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 279–318. Moseley used the term in 2008 for a paper, ‘Rock Band and the Birth of Ludomusicology’ delivered at the Annual Meeting of the SEM at Wesleyan University (28 October 2008) and at Music and the Moving Image, New York University (1 June 2008).

<sup>11</sup> George Sanger, *The Fat Man on Game Audio* (Indianapolis, IN: New Riders, 2003).

on their knowledge to aspiring composers,<sup>12</sup> or as part of the activity of reflecting on their own processes.<sup>13</sup>

Of course, published discourse about game music works alongside, and in tandem with the conversations about game music that occur in all kinds of other media. YouTube is a goldmine of excellent discussions and video essays about game music, forums like Discord and Twitch provide the opportunity for interactive conversations about game music, and journalists continually interview composers and report on popular opinion about the genre. We can also consider documentaries such as the Karen-Collins-directed *Beep* (2016), and *Diggin' in the Carts* (2014) by Nick Dwyer and Tu Neill. Academic game music studies exist as part of a broader ecosystem of discussions about video game music, each of which draws on, and contributes to, the others.

Video game music studies is a diverse area, and this book does not claim to represent all of the voices in the field. We have sought to balance summarizing existing knowledge with presenting some new perspectives, and to showcase conceptual thinking alongside more practical discussion. More than anything, we hope that this book will provide readers with a broad overview of the subject, and useful knowledge and tools for better understanding video game music, no matter how they engage with music – whether that be as listeners, composers, analysts or perhaps most importantly, as players.

### Introductory Reading

- Collins, Karen. *Game Sound: An Introduction to the History, Theory and Practice of Video Game Music and Sound Design*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008.
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- Jørgensen, Kristine. 'Left in the Dark: Playing Computer Games with the Sound Turned Off', in *From Pac-Man to Pop Music: Interactive Audio in Games and New Media*, ed. Karen Collins. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008, 163–76.
- Whalen, Zach. 'Play Along – An Approach to Videogame Music.' *Game Studies* 4, no. 1 (2004).

<sup>12</sup> Winifred Phillips, *A Composer's Guide to Game Music* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2014); Michael Sweet, *Writing Interactive Music for Video Games* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Addison-Wesley, 2015); Chance Thomas, *Composing Music for Games* (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2016).

<sup>13</sup> Rob Bridgett, *From the Shadows of Film Sound. Cinematic Production & Creative Process in Video Game Audio*. (N.p.: Rob Bridgett, 2010).