
Book Review

Review of *Music in the Role-Playing Game: Heroes and Harmonies*, edited by William Gibbons and Steven Reale (Routledge, 2020, 224 pp, \$49.95)

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Before countenancing the work at hand in earnest, it is worth contemplating the significance of its publication within ludomusicology. It was only four years ago that the stipulation was made, and accurately so, that “this significant sub-discipline is still tackling fundamental questions concerning how video game music should be approached.”¹ The following year, Roger Moseley considered the significance of stories, how they may be parsed, how they might coincide with and recall one another, and the nature of “changing representations of audiovisual narrativity.”² Both of these propositions resonate strongly with me, and so I cannot help but conceive of *Music in the Role-Playing Game: Heroes and Harmonies* as a response, either directly or indirectly, to their implied *cri de cœur*.

My primary thought prior to reading this volume was how the myriad methodological approaches to studying RPG music might be distilled into a single tome comfortably. I will touch on this again later, but it is important to note that the essays in this volume were designed to “begin constructing a network of studies devoted to exploring the roles of music in this rich and diverse genre” (5), and chapter 1 sets this tone.

Gibbons’s anecdotal prologue leads to a signature discussion of developing video game audio (synthesized voices, CD-ROM technology, and song in archetypical JRPGs) mirroring the early onset of sound in cinema (*The Jazz Singer* [1927] and “talkies”). Gibbons uses the assertion that *acousmètre*—the unseen voice—is invested with (perceived)

1. Michiel Kamp, Tim Summers, and Mark Sweeney, “Introduction,” in *Ludomusicology: Approaches to Video Game Music*, ed. Michiel Kamp, Tim Summers, and Mark Sweeney (Sheffield, UK: Equinox, 2016), cover copy.

2. Roger Moseley, “Roundtable: Current Perspectives in Music, Sound, and Narrative in Screen Media,” in *The Routledge Companion to Screen Music and Sound*, ed. Miguel Mera, Ronald Sadoff, and Ben Winters (New York: Routledge, 2017), 112.

magical power to demonstrate audiovisual parallels that transcend media, as found in the character Elena’s mysterious unseen voice (12) in the part-talkie *Grandia II* (2000). Such “musical moments” have become almost idiosyncratic to a subset of JRPGs (17). To me, Gibbons’s most arresting point is how the “magical” experience of nascent film sound is evinced in the conceit of wielding psychological and magical energy through song in the *Lunar* and *Tales* series games and in *Final Fantasy X*. The chapter is an excellent commentary on temporally distanced yet phenomenologically connected audio development in early cinema and in JRPGs.

This is followed by Karen Cook’s insightful (and genuinely humorous) analysis of that most dryly sardonic game, *The Bard’s Tale* (inXile, 2004). Cook sets up the parameters of aural geo- and chronolocation (a sense of time and also of place) and fantasy RPG design tropes. She comprehensively contextualizes the game’s rather special combination of anachronistic musical representations and antihero rhetoric, and she analyzes the Bard character in terms of the lore and traditions of games, films, literature, and history. One line in “The Things I Do for Lust . . .” summarizes Cook’s characterization of rock and roll music undermining the game’s high-fantasy-cum-Elizabethan setting perfectly: “The Bard would be happier playing *Guitar Hero* than actually being a hero” (31).

Following this, Tim Summers’s evaluation of the “naïve aesthetic” in *Mother/Earth-Bound Zero* more consciously runs with the “Magical Melodies” theme. Here Ben Winters’s concept of shared musical experience for characters and audiences³ is harnessed as a means to challenge the non-diegetic categorization of music in *Mother* (Ape, 1989). In addition to examining cultural manifestations of the soundtrack, Summers shows how the shared audiovisual aesthetic of clarity and simplicity are (magically) brought together in an intentional design scheme rather than an imposed one; summarily, instead of “aspiring to complex textures and topoi established in symphonic or instrumental music . . . *Mother* appears to embrace its technological limitations” (47).

Part II of this volume, “Mystical Metaphors,” sees Kevin Burke critique music and sound within an 8-bit RPG framework and their ability to symbolize the narrative of *Lagrange Point* (Konami, 1991). Burke merges theories of agency, the “interface,” and determinism with circuit-based componentry of the Konami VRC7 memory management controller and the manipulation of synthesized low-frequency oscillator effects. Elucidating a discussion concerning this kind of subject material should not be taken lightly. The potentially esoteric technical language and sound/audio processing measurements canvassed are so conspicuous that this almost feels like the “odd one out” of all of the chapters. Burke’s mastery of the nomenclature and expertise in the synthesized audio production sphere, however, mean that the mapping of the synthesized instrument that provides the game’s audio onto in-game characters, locations, and weapon modifications is approachable, and the contribution clearly belongs in the “metaphor” section of this volume.

What follows could hardly be more distanced in its premise. Dana Plank focuses on the relatively *recherché* Uematsu-scored *Cleopatra no Ma Takara* (Square, 1987) to

3. Ben Winters, *Music, Performance and the Realities of Film* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 66.

explore the paradigm of cultural exoticism. Transcribed passages of its score are highlighted, such as an unstable 7/4 meter, Arabic *hijāz* mode-esque melodic figures, and sinuous chromaticism, to situate the game “within established tropes of ‘Egyptianness’” (83). Indeed it is shown that while similar motivic material is used to add interest and color in the music of its contemporary *Dragon Quest* and *Final Fantasy* series titles, *Cleopatra*’s music uses exoticist compositional language “as a bedrock for the entire score” (91). Most captivating is the thematic incorporation of Japanese exoticism and nineteenth-century Egyptomania in the West to substantiate this position, and Plank excels at portraying *Cleopatra*’s soundtrack as one engaging entry in a long-reaching cultural dialectic of discovering, appropriating, and musically reifying the “other.”

Julianne Grasso takes the stimulating premise that “music offers structures of temporal perception” (101) and uses *Final Fantasy IV* (Square, 1991) to describe a “guide for the conscious perception of passing time as it relates to the narrative of play” (101). An extended plot description, “thick” (98) opening vignette of gameplay sequences, and prolix evaluations (and rejections) of other critical perspectives⁴ tend to clutter the author’s otherwise insightful application of Jesper Juul’s play time and event time framework.⁵ Nevertheless, it is right that Grasso rules out alternative, conflicting, and extraneous theoretical premises in order to validate this nuanced musical-narrative-time approach. A series of in-game events such as navigation, transitions, and battles are mapped onto Juul’s framework via a visual structure that also echoes Summers’s diagrammatic representation published elsewhere.⁶ The crux of Grasso’s thesis—music’s role in temporal mediation during gameplay—is explored successfully, and I would be eager to see its application to other game titles in the future.

To address the significant complexity within the claim that *Final Fantasy VII*’s (Square, 1994) plot “broadly mirrors the structure of the in-game opera” (117), Ryan Thompson draws on corroborative in-game plot structures and salient musical elements. For instance, the game’s epilogue uses character image and text combinations that imitate the front matter of opera scores. The player-chosen custom appellations are followed by “as” and an official game name (i.e., “Ryan as” (etc.) fades into “Locke Cole”), recalling a “cast role” listing, here constructed for a player’s “own unique staging (that is, playthrough)” (119). I would be jejune in seeking to add to Thompson’s exhaustive thematic analysis of the pervasive “leitmotivic—melodic fragments” (120) that are introduced and recontextualized throughout *FF VII*’s score. An outlining of the character Celes’s poignant musical identity ascribed through her theme is particularly assiduous, and traces manifold “general-turned-opera singer” (122) storylines across a game in three acts (another operatic hint) that requires between forty and sixty hours to complete (121).

4. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s *flow* theory (111) is mentioned so briefly and so late in the chapter that its inclusion seems unnecessary.

5. Jesper Juul, “Introduction to Game Time,” in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 131–142.

6. Tim Summers, “Analysing Video Game Music: Sources, Methods and a Case Study,” in *Ludomusicology: Approaches to Video Game Music*, ed. Michiel Kamp, Tim Summers, and Mark Sweeney (Sheffield, UK: Equinox, 2016), 25.

Based on Thompson's indited logic, I can associate the game's *mise-en-scène* composition, design scheme, and narrative format with operatic conventions, staging methods, and concertgoer paraphernalia. However, there is a residual impression of the author's contribution being inhibited by the confines that a single chapter imposes. In offering an "opera playbill that might accompany a critical playthrough of *Final Fantasy VI*" (127) Thompson succeeds entirely, and as the complexities of this proposed musical metaphor translate into meaning for me, I begin to envisage the benefits of a lengthier conduit for their transmission.

It is not surprising that the majority of video games discussed in Parts I and II of this volume are JRPGs, but the transition to a Western RPG focus in Part III is certainly a welcome one.

Michiel Kamp demonstrates in "Ludomusical Dissonance in *Diablo III*" that so much of the audio players experience in the act of gameplay bears signification accepted so axiomatically that it is only rendered subconsciously. Kamp discusses a portentous *sforzando tutti* chords stinger in *Diablo III* (Blizzard, 2012) via a compelling scribed journey akin to a meandering RPG plot. "Ludic" and "narrative" contracts and their operations within gameplay/narrative junctions establish the relevance of "ludonarrative dissonance"; music's ludonarrative involvement is considered regarding Isabella van Elferen's ALI (affect-literacy-interaction) model,⁷ which in turn refers to José Zagal's "ludoliteracy";⁸ and "the importance of genre in musical ludoliteracy" (137) sees Collins's and Summers's delineations of game and music genre laced with Kamp's own harmonic analysis. It is only then that the author fully draws together the ludoliteracy components of narrative and gameplay, arguing that "music's double allegiance to both these poles means it will remain an important signpost of ludonarrative dissonance" (142). Throughout this chapter, Kamp extracts semiotic meaning from an ostensibly innocuous stinger with an anfractuous style that highlights the analytical benefits of exposing recorded gameplay to theories of narrativity, literacy, and semiology.

In the following chapter, Meghan Naxer suggests a fundamental (but not onerous) restructuring of undergraduate music theory programs to form a curriculum framework that is based on multiple RPG-style plot- and choice-based structures. What I find most refreshing about this proposed scheme is that it does not seek to "gamify" individual music theory learning activities by injecting them with Caillois's *agôn* in a hope to increase their superficial competitive appeal.⁹ Naxer's resulting didactic blueprint is grounded solidly in self-determination, autonomy, and volitional engagement concepts and aims to harness the potential cognitive benefits afforded by its design while still teaching the *sine qua non* of music theory. Some of the diverse grading and feedback suggestions within the author's inspired scheme appear quixotic, if not unfeasible, in their

7. Isabella van Elferen, "Analysing Game Musical Immersion: The ALI Model," in *Ludomusicology: Approaches to Video Game Music*, ed. Michiel Kamp, Tim Summers, and Mark Sweeney (Sheffield, UK: Equinox, 2016), 32–52.

8. José P. Zagal, *Ludoliteracy: Defining, Understanding, and Supporting Games Education* (Pittsburgh, PA: ETC Press, 2010).

9. Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (1961; repr., Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 13.

aspiration (150), although the assessment guide templates provided serve to attenuate this. Overall, Naxer offers an innovative alternative syllabus, and she convincingly answers the chapter’s critical question of what makes “RPGs a good role model for music theory pedagogy” (146).

Kate Galloway then describes the employment of auto-ethnographic research methods in “Soundwalking and the Aurality of *Stardew Valley*.” Therein, *Stardew Valley*’s (ConcernedApe, 2016) two distinct environmental moieties are depicted, with the oppressive mega-corporation Joja interior featuring manufactured, metronomic sounds of urban modernity, and the idyllic Stardew Valley with its farmland and forests offering organic, sporadic sounds belonging to the natural world. Some descriptive contradictions seem confusing; the claim that “it’s not the player’s goal to master or overcome the environment” (165) is followed by recounting (colonizing) in-game actions such as chopping trees down (168), scything grass, and crushing stone (173). This notwithstanding, it is the author’s *modus operandi* of embracing apposite observational methods that is enlightening. These include utilizing the avatar’s unavoidably slow movement pace for ambulatory exploration, dissecting the game’s omission of audible in-game speech, and navigating the inexorable storytelling quandary of diegetic and non-diegetic sound by signposting sonic indicators. In operating with a malleable conceptual toolset, Galloway demonstrates with ingenuity where the next steps in virtual ethnography research may be taken.

In Chapter 11 Michiel Kamp and Mark Sweeney reveal that instantiated within the score for *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda, 2011) are significant elements of Carl Dahlhaus’s conception of *Naturklang* and *Klangfläche*,¹⁰ a “sense of stasis paradoxically reliant on an inner drive” (182) and the “outwardly static but inwardly in constant motion” (182) sound-sheet, respectively. Several specific score cues with “unresolved nonharmonic tones” (193), “long-held chord clusters” (185), and meandering (if not washy) rhythmic activity of several score cues are convincingly shown to exhibit Dalhaus’s crucial notion of stasis. This is employed to describe *Skyrim*’s musical aesthetic, which is “well suited to the phenomenological experience of exploring the virtual world” (193). The proposition is stabilized via interwoven transcribed score passages, a gameplay screenshot and a spectrogram figure, along with a discourse encompassing an illuminating plethora of artistic expressions and compositions (Grieg, Friedrich, Sibelius, and Beethoven), and framed (literally) through evaluations of actual world and gameworld exploration temporalities. Great pains are taken to substantiate the epistemological foundations of this endeavor, and I believe that this chapter is one of the most cogent arguments for ludomusicology’s substantive position in academe.

Steven Reale’s final “Barriers to Listening in *World of Warcraft*” chapter begins by reviewing the instability of textual authority, an appraisal of the “systemic flux” (198) that characterizes the MMORPG genre, and the interactive indeterminacy that players encounter in *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*, Blizzard, 2004–).¹¹ Reale’s theoretical framework thence

10. Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, trans. J. Bradford Robinson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

11. This includes *WoW*’s *Cataclysm*, *The Burning Crusade*, *Battle for Azeroth*, and *Wrath of the Lich King* expansions and eras.

determines the barriers that prevent players from listening in *WoW* and other MMORPGs, and lists their *synchronic* or *diachronic* categorization. Reale posits that “anything that prevents a player from experiencing content” (200) may be a synchronic barrier, from insufficient computer componentry, to player skill ineptitude, through to mere limitations of time constraints and disinterest. Largely based on expansion packs, game updates, and their gameworld consequences, diachronic barriers are a “quintessential feature of MMORPGs like [*WoW*]” (201). These changes manifest in an “ever-changing synchronic game state” (202), which Reale explains through a combination of descriptive passages, notated gameplay experiences, score excerpts, and gameplay screenshot figures. As many of the “barriers” listed here have been discussed elsewhere, the longevity of this chapter belongs to the stratification of such observations, the experiences that precipitate them, and their specific relevance to music. The theoretical framework offered here not only undergoes a thorough employment in this chapter, but it also promises many more effective applications to other MMORPGs, other game genres, and actual world activities.

The optimism of future application promises can be said of this volume as a whole. With savants Gibbons and Reale at the helm, and a series of respected field proponents contributing chapters, the richness and authority of the volume’s scholarship were all but assured. Its purview is broad—almost dizzyingly so—for which it is unapologetic. As an exploration in “applying a range of methodological approaches to the study of a single game genre” (1), *Music in the Role-Playing Game* announces the teleological construct by which it operates. Therefore, my initial point of curiosity regarding the comfortable distillation of so many rich and diverse methodologies is in fact responded to through the unique quiddity imbued within each chapter. The volume breaks new ground as the first scholarly book focusing solely on RPG music and should be recommended to game theorists, music scholars, and fans of the genre. In my estimation, it also offers a significant and valuable contribution to the field of ludomusicology and will likely become an indispensable tool kit in future studies of audiovisual narrativity. ■

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