On Canons as Music and Muse

ABSTRACT Canons—of music, video games, or people—can provide a shared pool of resources for scholars, practitioners, and fans; but the formation of canons can also lead to an obscuring or devaluing of materials and people outside of a canon. The authors in this colloquy interrogate issues of canons relating to video game music and sound from a variety of perspectives. Each author considers an aspect of canonization and argues for a wider purview. In “Rewritable Memory: Concerts, Canons, and Game Music History,” William Gibbons examines the ways in which concerts of video game music may create canons and reinforce particular historical narratives. In “On Canons as Music and Muse,” Julianne Grasso views the music originally presented in a video game as itself a type of canon and argues that official and fan arrangements of original game music may provide windows into lived experiences of play. In “The Difficult, Uncomfortable, and Imperative Conversations Needed in Game Music and Sound Studies,” Hyeonjin Park highlights issues of diversity and representation in the field of video game music and sound studies, with respect to the people and music that make up the subjects of the field, the people who produce scholarship in the field, and the people who engage with game music and sound. In “Canon Anxiety?” Karen Cook pulls together various issues of academic canons to question the scope, focus, and diversity of the growing field in which the Journal of Sound and Music in Games exists. KEYWORDS canons, concerts, remix, fandom, The Legend of Zelda

There’s something sacred about canons. A canon of works is the “real deal,” a cut above the rest, the great that sets the standard from which all else is measured. Perhaps canons are divinely inspired—the Biblical canons, for instance, are the definitive lists of books included in the Christian Bibles. But I’m not a biblical scholar. In my Sunday School workbook, I would rather sacrilegiously doodle video game characters; I charted out stories—fan fiction—in which the characters of Final Fantasy met those of Super Mario. (It turned out somewhat like a stage in Super Smash Bros.) Like many other enthusiasts, I engaged in creative explorations of my favorite fictional universes, using video games as source material, the “canon” from which I drew inspiration.

This more textual notion of canonicity differs from our typical definition of a “great works” historical canon, but the two conceptions share a commitment to some idea of value, or a standard to abide. In this sense, the word “canon” can refer to the “authentic” materials—the characters, worlds, stories—that these fictional worlds present, and this usage has become commonplace in the digital age, now that fans can both engage with and share creations more easily. (Thankfully, my Mario/Final Fantasy stories never made it to the Internet.) Such fan creations stand in a contrasting relationship to the “authentic” canon of the stories as intended by its creators, but nuances abound. A fan
can decide that some non-canonical aspect (often in the form of a relationship between two characters) could exist as “head-canon,” deciding that their interpretative license probably should be canon, even if it isn’t. (The internet also has facilitated fans to pressure creators of ongoing fictions, and included canonical material is sometimes perceived as “fan service.”)

Music, considered an affective or simply aesthetic feature of games, is not typically thought to constitute the stuff of narrative canons; a musical score does not directly contribute to the characters and events of a story, as it is mostly “background” to the action. Nevertheless, fandom communities thrive on music, through sharing arrangements, remixes, and performances based from original musical source material. It is worth considering how this fan music might serve a similar outlet as fan fiction, at least to explore how fans negotiate a personal musical subjectivity in relation to a sense of the “authentic” in narrative media like video games.

Here, I’d like to take up this notion of “canon” as a starting point for exploring how musical practices around video games shore up the lived experiences of play. William Gibbons’s contribution to this colloquy reveals how symphonic video game concerts might misrepresent a history of the video game industry through choices in programming and staging. We might further ask: How does music tell the stories of the games themselves? And how might we understand arrangements, performances, remixes, covers, etc. in relation to their source material? If video games are inherently interactive, music is a part of that interaction, even if it is in the “background.” Musical fan creations are typically quite different from officially sanctioned concerts of video game music, but both are nonetheless interpretations of canonical source material—and these interpretations tell the stories of play.

Let’s consider, for instance, Nintendo’s wildly popular Legend of Zelda franchise, which began in 1986 with its first release on the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES). The music of its games, principally composed by Koji Kondo (who also created the iconic Super Mario Bros. theme), has enjoyed a vibrant life beyond the games themselves. In 2011, the 25th anniversary of the series, Nintendo released an album of orchestral arrangements bundled with the latest franchise title, Skyward Sword. “The Legend of Zelda 25th Anniversary Symphony – Orchestra Concert Special CD,” covered in red and gold Zelda iconography, features eight medleys of familiar Zelda tunes arranged by Chad Seiter and Kosuke Yamashita and performed by Orchestra Nova San Diego, conducted by Eímear Noone. The title medley on this album includes five tracks from four different games (two from 1991’s Super Nintendo entry, A Link to the Past) along with three variations of the franchise’s overarching main theme. The medley’s basic structure appears in Table 1.

I asked the arranger, Chad Seiter, how he chose the themes and their order. He told me that his goal was to tell a story with the music—one that reflected the stories of the games. What story does this medley tell? We could note that this medley skews heavily toward themes that originated early in the series. Of course, the Overworld/Main theme is found in almost every game of the franchise since it first appeared in 1986, but on the other end of the spectrum, “Steam Train Field” likely remains exclusive to Spirit Tracks, a game

Nintendo was still actively marketing in 2011. But despite the inclusion of one relatively recent title, the rest of the medley sounds like a more distant retrospective that favors the third game of the series: *A Link to the Past*.

In this medley, an extended form of “The Dark World” from *A Link to the Past* marks a particular kind of musical-narrative arrangement. By repeating the theme’s introduction several times over a drawn-out crescendo before finally landing on the main melody, the music transforms from music designed for gameplay into music designed to remember gameplay: the crescendoing build creates anticipation for that expectation of a melody that originally was rather unremarkable, in the background of regular gameplay. Nonetheless, that theme was commonplace in the game, and would have been heard many times over the course of play. As a result, this arrangement of “The Dark World” is not as much a translation of 16-bit music to the symphony orchestra, but rather it maximizes the affects surrounding the memory of play—the melodic materials simply act as a signifier for *A Link to the Past* (A “link to the past” indeed!) And more to Gibbons’s points, positioning a game for the Super Nintendo as the climax of the 25th Anniversary Medley reinforces a notion of a Super Nintendo “golden age.” (*Ocarina of Time*, the best-selling Nintendo 64 Zelda title, be damned!)

A concert series based on the music of *The Legend of Zelda*, titled *Symphony of the Goddesses*, launched in 2012 and ran through 2018. The series promised on its website that “fans will relive all of their favorite moments from a fully developed and thoughtfully structured program including memorable, beloved melodies.”2 “Relive” is a term that seems to suggest that the music will allow the listener more than recall: an access to an embodied memory that perhaps enact something about experiences of play—not dissimilar to the kind of affective arrangement I described above.

*Symphony of the Goddesses* is “official” by Nintendo’s seal of approval—Koji Kondo himself even sometimes makes an appearance. In one way, we could interpret these

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**TABLE 1.** List of themes as they appear in “The Legend of Zelda 25th Anniversary Medley” (2011)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Originating Legend of Zelda Game</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0:00–0:22</td>
<td>“The Triforce Room”</td>
<td><em>A Link to the Past</em> (1991)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0:22–1:39</td>
<td>“Steam Train Field”</td>
<td><em>Spirit Tracks</em> (2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5:08–6:31</td>
<td>“The Triforce Room” reprise (4:25–4:50)</td>
<td><em>A Link to the Past</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6:31–7:10</td>
<td>Overworld/Main theme</td>
<td><em>The Legend of Zelda</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:10–7:22</td>
<td>Princess Zelda’s lullaby</td>
<td><em>A Link to the Past</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:22-end</td>
<td>Overworld/Main theme</td>
<td><em>The Legend of Zelda</em></td>
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concerts as extensions of the game’s musical-narrative canon—perhaps, in full orchestral arrangement, this is the way these tracks ought to have sounded, without being hampered by the constraints of game audio technology. Indeed, by dressing up in classical symphonic appearance (and using the term “Symphony”), stripping away the original sound, materiality, and form of video games as a medium, the concert series aligns itself closer to the classical music canon than with video games at all.

A more difficult question, but a worthwhile one, would be to consider what kinds of musical stories these official arrangements don’t tell. We might return to fan creations for some answers. In a chapter in the recent edited collection Woke Gaming: Digital Challenges to Oppression and Social Injustice, Kathryn Hemmann explores several narrative works from fans that reinterpret aspects of The Legend of Zelda in ways that reveal how those fans relate with the series (and seek to critique it). Hemmann points to the character of Zelda, who despite being the titular character has little agency or dimension throughout the franchise. In response, several fans have created stories and comics that give Zelda an agential protagonist role (particularly over the character Link, the male protagonist in every Zelda game). Hemmann argues that these creations are processes by which fans “deconstruct and reconfigure dominant narratives to better reflect social and political concerns and their own personal identities.” It is worthwhile for music scholars to jump in here, to consider how musical fan creations might also contribute to such reinterpretation and personal reflections.

Lyrical remixes of video game music, for instance, allow for the remaking of character and story through vocal narrative. For example, a big-band arrangement of Zelda’s lullaby by Jorik Bergman (aka Bowlerhat), titled “To See Like Me,” includes lyrics from a first-person perspective that can be interpreted as Zelda’s voice, or perhaps the arranger herself; we could further consider this voice a moment of “non-canonical” enacted agency similar to the examples that Hemmann describes. Remixes also allow for new musical affects and contexts to take hold of the original meaning of the themes. For example, the album Zelda & Chill (2018) by beat-maker Mikel and Dj CUTMAN takes tracks from several Zelda games and remixes them with laid-back tempos and smooth synths—a nearly opposite affect from the adventurous epic sound of the source material. Rather than enabling fans to remember their experiences of play, these remixes allow listeners to engage with the music anew, redefining their contextual bounds.

There are thousands more examples I could describe, but the point is not so much to describe them, but rather to remark that yes, there are thousands of examples. Musical fan creations are vastly understudied and yet readily available online. (Do I need to say “Go!”?)

While I’ve focused mostly on musical details, Hyeonjin Park’s essay reminds us to consider the various who and whoms that populate the circle of scholars, players, and makers of video games and their music. To engage with these questions, musicologists have much to gain from interacting with fan studies, and vice versa, and my essay here attempts such an intersection. But I’ve only made a glancing touch, and much remains to be unearthed here. Consider that the Symphony of the Goddesses concert series tours primarily in the United States despite originating from a Japanese franchise. Consider that this tour has primarily featured women conductors, a role almost never occupied by women in more standard professional orchestra settings. Consider that, even if The Legend of Zelda is popular and perhaps already well studied, the fans of Zelda are diverse and have their own stories to tell that we haven’t yet heard.

Let’s continue to heed Karen Cook’s advice in her essay: “Read, play, and listen widely.” Canons, in whatever formulation we examine, are essentially relational and dynamic; they are instantiated, persisted, and resisted by people. When we write about music, whose stories are we telling, and whose remain unheard?

BIBLIOGRAPHY