The Difficult, Uncomfortable, and Imperative Conversations Needed in Game Music and Sound Studies

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 four 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.

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I have half-jokingly suggested that the field of game music and sound studies exists in two spaces that are, especially for marginalized communities, known for their exclusivity and toxicity: music studies and gaming. There are more discussions on equity, inclusivity, and diversity now in these spaces, and demographic shifts challenge narratives centered on those who are cisgender, able-bodied, heterosexual, white, and male.1 Unsurprisingly, there are those in both spaces who do not welcome such discourses, especially when they close the distance that they created from the “real” world. Some remain silent while others take it to the public realm—specifically online—to display varying levels of anger ranging from ranting to public

1. In February 2017, American Musicological Society (AMS) statisticians John McKay and Evan Cortens released their demographics report with an analysis of the surveyed categories, finding that a noticeable shift took place. Younger members at the time were more likely to be female-identifying, have higher numbers identifying as nonwhite and/or Hispanic, and were more likely to identify as queer than older members. Demographics in gaming are harder to trace. It is not as clear how to define a gamer, as there are disagreements on who can identify as one. See Zek Valkyrie, “Gamer Masculinity,” in Game Worlds Get Real: How Who We Are Online Became Who We Are Offline (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2017), 187–210.
shaming, or even doxxing. #GamerGate is a notable online culture war that still makes blips across the Internet, the aftermath causing ripples across multiple communities beyond gaming. Music academia has its own form of #GamerGate, albeit a less overt one, with the primary battleground being the academic pipeline.

As we continue to expand the field of game music and sound studies, it is an auspicious time for us to keep in mind how we approach the multitude of subjects and ideas that are available to us, in addition to the existing problems that we bring from our various and differing disciplines. This is not necessarily a bad thing; in fact, it offers a rare opportunity to maintain a borderless and accessible field. We must proceed with some caution, however, as this field is rooted in two particularly problematic spaces, making it susceptible to slipping into similar, fraught discourses on intersectionality.

Intersectionality is the theme of this essay, and I explore this topic through the complex relationship that this field and its scholars have with music studies (particularly musicology and music theory) and gaming. I contemplate this relationship by asking three general questions that I derive from Naomi André’s 2018 book, Black Opera. I first ask, who is the subject in our scholarship? As I stated, the newness of our field means that we have numerous, multifaceted topics available to explore, play with, and analyze. Based on existing scholarship in the discipline, this question is also meant to tackle who has not been the subject and why not. The second question asks who the speaker is. I make no attempt to hide that this question addresses ongoing arguments about identity politics taking place in academia with the academic pipeline, as well as within gaming communities angered by the pervasiveness of “PC culture” silencing them. The third question is one that is often placed as an afterthought, at best: Who engages with the music and sound? Throughout this essay, it is essential that readers—particularly those who have more privilege than others in certain (if not all) spaces—come to terms with the discomfort that they may feel. This essay covers topics that cause as much tension as they do because of generalizations, which inevitably come off as an attack on the individual. However, generalizations—while imperfect—can be valuable when they bring patterns to our attention.

Where else to start but with the first question: Who are the subjects of interest? Despite the newness of this field, we are already aware of the potential canonization of certain

2. To dox someone is to publish private information about them online without their permission, such as their full name and their home address. Cases range from prank calls to death threats against the victim and/or their loved ones.
3. As I worked on this essay, a rather timely event took place on the Music Theory/Composition Jobs Wiki when a frustrated scholar left a 600-word post lamenting that he was rejected from a job position because of his gender and, more broadly, identity politics. See Megan Lavengood, “Gender and Hiring in Music Theory,” July 9, 2019, https://meganlavengood.com/2019/07/09/gender-and-hiring-in-music-theory/. It is also important to mention Project Spectrum, a “coalition of graduate students and faculty members committed to the issue of diversity in music theory, musicology, and ethnomusicology” and aspects of the academic pipeline. Project Spectrum had its inaugural symposium at AMS/SMT (Society for Music Theory) 2018 in San Antonio, Texas. See https://projectspectrummusic.com.
5. The Society for the Study of Sound and Music in Games (SSSMG) has been compiling a bibliography of written scholarship in the field that is regularly updated. This bibliography is available at https://www.sssmg.org/wp/bibliography/.
composers and games, further discussed in this colloquy by William Gibbons and Julianne Grasso. There is nothing inherently wrong with studying music of “canonic” game composers. In fact, we should continue to analyze and perform the music of composers such as Koji Kondo or Nobuo Uematsu, considering the vastness of their respective oeuvres and the numerous ways to approach them. I draw attention to these two composers because it would take little effort to have our field orbit around them. We should not get lost in the dozens of hours of music that these two composers wrote, especially knowing that the power structures of the gaming world focus on cisgender, white and Japanese, heterosexual, and male narratives. There is a relative lack of music and analyses by women, queer folx, and other racial/ethnic minorities as a result of gaming and academic spaces’ reluctance to welcome them. So what measures, if any, will our discipline take to avoid such marginalization? A notable example is the featured keynote speakers at the North American Conference on Video Game Music, many of whom are practicing composers of marginalized identities, including Winifred Phillips, Penka Kouneva, and Wilbert Roget II. In addition, scholars have paid heightened attention to the works of numerous Japanese women practitioners who contributed to game music and sound.⁶

We then enter the uncomfortable territory that is money. In both music studies and gaming, there is little critical engagement with socioeconomics, something that is especially needed for spheres that require significant time and money.⁷ It is here that I want to bring up indie game composers, who stretch their imaginations to create music and sounds that work within financial constraints. The indie gaming scene enables practitioners to have more freedom to experiment and explore unconventional ideas, and the scene often provides a more nuanced perspective on diversity within games. Consider: Gris (2018), which explores trauma; Butterfly Soup (2017), which celebrates queer Asian American girls; 2064: Read Only Memories (2015), which allows the player-character to specify their personal pronouns; and more.

One particular indie game to highlight is Depression Quest (2013) with two nonbinary practitioners, Zoë Quinn (developer) and Isaac Schankler (composer), and a narrative that raises awareness of depression. I also draw attention to this game because of its role as the trigger that led to #GamerGate. #GamerGate revealed that even the indie gaming scene faces similar problems as the sphere of mainstream games: an underrepresentation and/or misrepresentation of marginalized voices, especially those who are not cisgender men.⁸ The reactions to Depression Quest depict the particular backlash that developers of marginalized voices faced.

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⁸. The International Game Developers Association (IGDA) is currently collecting data for a demographics report of 2019. The most recent and complete survey is from 2017, which reported that respondents were predominantly cisgender men (74 percent). IGDA’s survey also shows that the majority of developers are cisgender, able-bodied, heterosexual, white, and male. Ironically, 81 percent of all respondents stated that diversity was “very important” or “somewhat important” in the industry. See Johanna Weststar, Victoria O’Meara, and Marie-José Legault, “Developer Satisfaction Survey - 2017,” IDGA, January 8, 2018, https://www.igda.org/page/dss2017.
voices may face for their refusal to follow typical gameplays and formats, or supposedly because they have a political agenda. These negative reactions reflect a need to challenge hegemonic structures and departures from the status quo of gaming narratives. In other words, we need new voices to share equally important and distinct stories. Scholars will miss opportunities to engage with these works if they continue to focus on narratives from the same few games and practitioners. Drawing attention to lesser-known composers and games—especially lesser-known practitioners underrepresented in gaming—only enriches our scholarship and thinking.

My second question asked who the speaker is. More specifically, which scholars’ voices do we place at the center of this field, and what problems arise when we do so? This second question will be an uncomfortable topic, and I say this because it is about the power dynamics and hegemonic structure that exist in both academia and gaming. In this case, I examine the groups of people who speak the most, the subjects getting the most attention (which I briefly touched on), and the intersections of these two majorities that force one narrative (and a dangerous one) to be the status quo.

The pattern in game music and sound studies at this moment is that white scholars are overwhelmingly represented. Unfortunately, this is the pipeline that reflects the academic roots of this field that results in this dominant voice. I am not pointing fingers or accusing anyone for this disparity. The age and size of this field makes it so that we only have so much available to us, and I prefer that the existing scholarship be there than not. With that said, I ask that white scholars of this field make concerted efforts to avoid complacency and instead welcome new voices—especially ones different from their own—to foster a space that showcases available opportunities for everyone.

I focus on race/ethnicity for this question because much of our research places significance on games and composers from Japan, often viewed through the lens of white scholars and gamers. Whether intentional or not, it is imperative to realize that there will be a Western (and primarily white) gaze, in addition to a sense of Othering. Japan’s position in video games, however, further complicates this situation. The influences of American pop culture and ideology on Japan after World War II were powerful, shaping

9. Online harassment in gaming communities is not new. Websites such as Reddit or 4chan created spaces for gamers to complain about “social justice warriors” and “snowflakes” who were accused of being too politically correct (see in particular r/KotakuInAction on Reddit). #GamerGate merely revealed the severity of the hateful content that exists. Quinn was accused of using their sexuality to gain positive reviews for Depression Quest. Anita Sarkeesian, who stood up for Quinn, also faced threats and a game with mechanics based on “beating” an image of Sarkeesian (Beat Up Anita Sarkeesian). For a personal account and further discourse, see Zoe Quinn, Crash Override: How Gamergate (Nearly) Destroyed My Life, and How We Can Win the Fight Against Online Hate (New York: PublicAffairs, 2017).

10. Most active scholars in this field come from music studies, where white-centric narratives and voices are most prevalent. Demographic reports for AMS, Society for Music Theory (SMT), and Society for Ethnomusicology (SEM) all confirm this. Musicology and music theory in particular suffer from a lack of racial/ethnic diversity: in 2018, 84.2 percent of SMT respondents and 89.7 percent of AMS respondents identified as white. Further information can be found in SMT’s demographic reports, released in October 2018 by Jenine Brown.

much of Japan’s own.\textsuperscript{12} Japan goes on to enforce similar levels of cultural imperialism on the United States and other countries; the island country’s co-optation of Western (specifically American) culture hybridized with their own.

In a musical context, Japanese game composers follow styles that are typical of Western film and television music. They are so close in style that Bruno Nettl argued that as a result of Western music’s significance in countries like Japan, it makes sense to regard the country’s “urban centers [where these composers are based and educated] as members of the Western cultural system.”\textsuperscript{13} In other words, this field truly centers Western narratives in music, and frankly, I do not see any signs of this changing in the future.

One reason to problematize Japan’s cultural power emerges from the country’s brutal history of colonizing East and Southeast Asia during the first half of the twentieth century, trauma that lingers due to resistance to offer full reparations and acknowledgement of these violent acts. Additionally, the Americanization of Japanese culture signals subtle but ever-present Western dominance. In Asian contexts, there remains conflict and wariness around the dissemination of Japanese pop culture (less so in younger generations, however). Unfortunately, these narratives are as absent as the realities of Western imperialism in Western education. It makes the fetishization of, infantilization of, and obsession with Japan (behaviors that trace back to the days of European imperialism) all the more jarring when juxtaposed to the country’s past. When this juxtaposition happens, how are Western and/or white scholars supposed to approach it?\textsuperscript{14}

I have only scratched the surface with race/ethnicity as an example, one of the many complex pieces of intersectionality. Power dynamics exist everywhere with roots that go back centuries. Whether as scholars or gamers, we must remain sensitive to our privileges and positions, especially when we approach media that is as widespread, globalized, and ever-changing as video games. This does not mean we have to overwhelm ourselves by learning the history of the world to stay aware of all injustices or to stop researching what we do because of its problems. What I mean by sensitivity is to accept our limited perspectives on certain matters that are the result of our privileges. Make efforts to solve the absence of marginalized voices and narratives who can provide nuances that would stop the creation of echo chambers.

Welcoming marginalized folx is beneficial for everyone, and not just for diversity’s sake. It is a unified approach to slowly untangle the thousands of knots found on every surface with human footprints, all of which have their own difficult, uncomfortable, and complicated aspects. When we invite more people to take part, we have the chance to listen to their suggestions, lessening the number of slips and delays in this process. There will still be failures, as is inevitable when we try something new. But if we refuse to try, how can we call ourselves scholars or gamers?


\textsuperscript{14} In situations like these, even nonwhite scholars with Western upbringings may be unaware.
My thoughts for the final question are brief, because they overlap with the thoughts from the previous two questions. I asked who engages with the musics and sounds in games, and for some reason, those voices and narratives are largely centered on us scholars (which inevitably circles back to the scholars’ voices and narratives we centered). Why are there so few scholars engaging with how those outside of this field hear and listen to the musics and sounds in games, and why they interpret them the way they do? And if we do listen, why are we only paying attention to the loudest voices? Much of our scholarship employs methodologies from musicology and music theory but not ethnomusicology, which would address such questions.\(^\text{15}\) We want myriad impressions that stem from different experiences, understandings, and ideas of the musical and sonic worlds, yet again reminding us of how important social, historical, and cultural contexts are in defining musics and sounds. If we focus on our scholarly voices and narratives, we inevitably isolate ourselves from reality. This is how the seeds of elitism, exclusivity, and, ultimately, toxicity grow, and how they could inadvertently be planted in this field.

I want to make clear that I should not be the one giving answers to these questions, or rather, I should not be the only person to provide them. We each approach this field from our distinct perspectives that collectively contribute to diversity. No voice is more important than another. The adamant pushes to draw attention to voices and narratives that are not from cisgender, able-bodied, heterosexual, white men are \textit{not} because those voices and narratives are considered more important. These are made to disrupt the status quo, to display the potential full spectrum of ideas and perspectives that only serves to benefit our understanding of one another and our interactions with this world. For this to happen, we need to step outside of our comfort zones, and for many in this field that step will be quite far. We must struggle with our own identities and privileges though, if we are to make any progress at all.

As this field continues moving forward, I celebrate what we have accomplished. Karen Cook points out in her contribution to this colloquy that the field benefits from having hindsight, which is in part why we have accomplished as much as we have. Hindsight makes it possible for us to break patterns and decenter certain voices and narratives. I remain optimistic that active game music and sound scholars are capable of change, having already displayed an openness and desire to be inclusive, as well as sharing resources and opportunities. I see this especially in the relationships that established scholars have with emerging ones, providing guidance, encouragement, and support.

With that said, there is still more work that must be done. This field needs significant work in decentering the content of our research, as well as increasing the diversity of the scholars involved, our approaches, and our methodologies. We need to think about contexts that affect who and what we have centered or discarded from our narratives. Finally, we

have to keep an eye on the activities happening within and around our field that can \textit{and will} affect it. These are all difficult tasks, but not impossible. The very nature of studying games and musics \textit{is} difficult, enormously so, because of the time and patience required to accomplish anything. Many gamers, musicians, and scholars alike \textit{deliberately} choose to challenge themselves and set the task to hard mode, knowing full well that it will be frustrating. It is well within our capabilities to make concerted efforts to tackle these as well. We already started; why stop?

The “too long; didn’t read” of this essay is that true diversity, equity, and inclusivity are intersectional and have no “main” voice or narrative. To get there, we have to reframe this not as “How am I or are others oppressed?” but rather “How am I privileged, and what can I do with that to help those who are not?” Diversity allows voices from all lived experiences to speak, meaning we have to establish equity (distinct from equality). We need to give everyone the necessary tools to be on the same playing ground, and historically there are groups that have never received fair treatment in spaces like academia and gaming.

This is one of many reasons behind the persistence to break hegemonic patterns, because it then makes those narratives and voices equal to the ones that were previously centered. It is essential to make space for and provide resources to marginalized, disadvantaged voices and \textit{listen} with patience, because we have not done enough to listen to the voices and narratives of Indigenous and Black scholars, the voices of non-cisgender men, first-generation scholars, among so many others. Within these spaces, intersections still exist where some people will have more privilege over others. We need to be mindful and inclusive of all of these voices, and that means to continue welcoming them and doing what we can to help.

\section*{BIBLIOGRAPHY}


See esp. chap. 1, “Engaged Opera.”


