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GENDER, RACE AND RELIGION IN VIDEO GAME MUSIC



Introduction: Enter the Virtual

‘New Game?’ – Playing with Identity

Allow me to set the scene. I sit in a broadcast studio transfigured into a cutting-edge classroom merged with an interview space that could have emerged straight from Johnny Carson’s *Tonight Show*. Livestreaming to the devices of over 700 university students, the course’s format exemplifies its subject matter: the intersections of art and technology, focusing on new, emergent art forms enabled by technology. Utilizing a pedagogy that fittingly prioritizes interactivity, this day’s session features a hands-on demonstration, aesthetic analysis and social contextualization of contemporary video games. From a couple dozen studio audience members, a few select volunteers play the game examples while the professor and I interview them about their experience.¹ Avery (fictional name) is chosen to showcase *Ori and the Blind Forest* (2015). ‘I knew I had to share my story today’, Avery speaks with vulnerability and conviction, ‘because playing *Ori and the Blind Forest* literally saved my life’.

As a lifelong video game nerd, I resonate with Avery’s words, aware that they may strike others as hyperbole. But I see in the student’s eyes and hear in the weight of their voice that their statement is true. Avery praises *Ori*’s lovingly crafted visual aesthetics and lush orchestral soundtrack that perfectly echoes every emotional inflection of the story – both elements intensifying immersion and engagement. Interacting with the virtual gameworld as Ori, Avery says, facilitates personal identification with Ori’s journey. But first and foremost is the story’s human connection, evoked by the game’s narrative themes of empathy, grief and companionship. When Avery encountered the game in the midst of isolation, despair and suicidal ideation, *Ori*’s message of hope and portrayal of unconditional caring illuminated a path forward. ‘People need people’, Avery concludes through tears, ‘that has become my life mantra now – and it was a video game that taught me that lesson’.

Transformative. Uplifting. Life-changing. What bestows video games with such incredible power?

Gender, Race and Religion in Video Game Music explores the powerful, meaningful and culturally relevant contribution of music to video games’ narrative and thematic meanings. In doing so, it connects the virtual worlds and

stories of video games to real-life people and cultures. Researching demographic representation – how recognizable traits, identities or communities are portrayed in a work – is critical, as media shapes audience attitudes and beliefs about others who are different. Each player is a nexus between virtual and real worlds, interpreting a game’s messages as relevant to their unique sociocultural context. Far from being cordoned off from the real world, video games speak to crucial and contentious issues of identity in contemporary society. This book explores gender, race and religion as three demographic master categories that affect multiple aspects of an individual’s identity and experience. Though video games address countless more salient identities, these three demonstrate video game music’s potential to speak to the core of human identity and experience. For each demographic category, video game history presents a rich body of examples of musical representation – from problematic to progressive – worthy of rigorous scholarly study, analysing and revealing the semiotic logic undergirding each case study. By understanding musical representation in video games, we will become more critical players, listeners, interpreters – and more compassionate members of an increasingly diverse world.

This book is ostensibly about analysing musical representation in video games – and it is that. Yet it is equally about meaning-making processes, intersections between art and culture, semiotic politics, the importance of diversity, empathy for the Other and how human beings choose to treat one another. That is to say, it sets out one robust answer to the question: why do video games matter?

Tutorial – Video Games and the Permeable Magic Circle

To begin, what can be learned about video game music from game studies more broadly? What relation do games have to the people who play them and to the real world? These questions require an examination of the relationship of video games to play. Despite their ubiquity in contemporary culture, video games are deceptively difficult to theorize, prompting ample debate among scholars. A good starting point is Johan Huizinga’s five characteristics of play listed in ‘Introduction: Enter the Virtual’ of Huizinga’s seminal work *Homo Ludens*, for play is closely intertwined with the nature of games:

1. Play is voluntary;
2. Play is not ordinary life;
3. Play is circumscribed within specific limits of time and place;
4. Play creates order (rules);
5. Play forms social groupings that express identification with the play context as distinct from the common world (Huizinga 1949, 7–13).

Criteria 2, 3 and 5 entail that play generates a conceptual domain different from ordinary life, discussed among game scholars as a ‘magic circle’. Though the concept is frequently credited to Huizinga, ‘magic circle’ only appears a handful of times in *Homo Ludens*, without much fanfare – it is found most prominently in a list of possible play settings (e.g. card table, stage, sports arena) that demarcate play activities from ordinary life (Huizinga 1949, 10). Building on Huizinga’s work, game designers Eric Zimmerman and Katie Salen adapted the evocative term ‘magic circle’ to denote the conceptual domain games create (Zimmerman 2012). In *Rules of Play*, Salen and Zimmerman describe the magic circle as ‘enclosed and separate from the real world’, accruing special meanings to objects and behaviours (2004, 95–96). For Zimmerman (2012), the magic circle is a discrete context from which new meanings emerge, combining elements intrinsic and extrinsic to the game. Within a magic circle, the rules of ordinary life are temporarily suspended so that mundane actions are imbued with newfound significance in the gameworld. Notably, Salen and Zimmerman consider the interrelation of the gameworld and real world; while the game’s rules are bounded by the magic circle, the act of play can be considered an open system in which players ‘bring a great deal in from the outside world [...] and] a reflection of the players who play them’ (2004, 96–97). Paradoxically, depending on one’s frame of analysis, a game is both a closed and open system – simultaneously ‘powerful’ and ‘remarkably fragile’ as it makes possible the unique affordances of play (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 98).

A few points are worth emphasizing here. First, a game’s magic circle is not impenetrable – it is distinct from ordinary life, but not hermetically sealed off from it. The criticism that a game’s magic circle is ‘completely divorced from ordinary life’ mischaracterizes Zimmerman’s (2012) view, as Zimmerman agrees the two are ‘inexorably intertwined’.² Indeed, one passage from *Rules of Play* sounds remarkably like the porousness advocated by the magic circle’s detractors: ‘the way has been paved for our entrance into the magic circle. Passing through its open and closed boundaries, we find ourselves in its center’ (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 98). Jesper Juul cites T. L. Taylor (2007), Marinka Copier (2005), Thomas Malaby (2007), and Pargman and Jakobsson (2008) as game scholars understanding Salen’s and Zimmerman’s magic circle as requiring a strict separation (Juul 2008, 58–59). Huizinga’s description of play as ‘an activity connected with no material interest’ nor motivation for productive outcome is also misinterpreted as requiring strict separation from life, though a majority of *Homo Ludens* explores cases of play embedded within life and society (1949, 13). Juul (2008, 65) proposes a puzzle piece as an alternative metaphor making visible a game’s embeddedness within a surrounding social context – however, this updated imagery has not been widely adopted. Edward Castronova describes the boundary between gameworld and

ordinary life as a porous cellular membrane, traversed by players who routinely bridge the two domains – a metaphor more likely to ward off mischaracterizations of over-rigidity (Castronova 2005, 145). As a second observation, the discreteness and integrity of the gameworld enable immersion. Because play stands in contrast to ordinary life, it is capable of ‘absorbing the player intensely and utterly’ into another context or world (Huizinga 1949, 13). Entering a magic circle requires suspension of disbelief and agreement to its rules, no matter how fantastical or supposedly unrealistic (Castronova 2005, 147). Finally, this concept need not be applied only to play or games, but yields productive results in other fields and media – any differentiated context for meaning-making constitutes a magic circle (Zimmerman 2012). Janet Murray writes that stories and games share in common their ‘insularity from the real world’ – a parallel suggesting that game and narrative are not intrinsically opposed (Murray 2004, 3). Contrary to its critics, the magic circle as set forth by Huizinga, Zimmerman and Salen is remarkably flexible, adaptable and permeable.

What sets the magic circle of video games apart from other games or media? In game studies scholarship, ‘virtuality’ – along with ‘immersion’ and ‘interactivity’ – is frequently credited as a characteristic property of video games, often contrasted with ‘reality’ or the ‘real world’.³ For example: video game players explore virtual worlds, an avatar in *Second Life* (2003) presents a virtual self and Oculus headsets enable virtual reality experiences. In each case, ‘virtual’ delineates the video game context from the real world in some way. Marie-Laure Ryan observes three definitions of ‘virtual’ simultaneously active in video game play: (1) illusory or imaginary, not real; (2) potential, not (yet) actual; and (3) digital, mediated by and dependent upon computers (Ryan 2015, 8). Other games and art forms are often virtual in senses (1) and (2) – e.g. literature as illusory and potential in Aristotle’s *Poetics* – but (3) is uniquely characteristic of video games. Though ‘virtual’ is a specific technical term in computing, in popular culture it has become synonymous with ‘the accelerating flight of technology into the unknown’ (Ryan 2015, 18). When coupled with influential science-fiction works like *Neuromancer* (Gibson 1984) or *The Matrix* (1999), ‘virtual’ describes a fictional world – possibly indistinguishable from reality – experienced in an immersive fashion through digital technology. Like the magic circle, virtual and real worlds may affect one another through the players who traverse the permeable boundary between them, since one domain of human life is not cordoned off from all others (Castronova 2005, 7). Because of this, the virtual worlds of video games are rapidly becoming one of the most powerful catalysts for personal meaning-making in the contemporary world, increasingly blurring the boundaries between the virtual and real. Chapter 1 will further explore ‘immersion’ and ‘interactivity’, which together with virtuality generates a permeable magic circle – a virtual domain both affected by and affecting its players.

‘Level Up’ – Video Game Music Between Ludology and Narratology

Vigorous debates between schools of thought aiming to articulate the conceptual and methodological landscape of a field are commonplace in scholarship. Most academic disciplines have been shaped by such discussions, including video game studies. Described by one participant as a ‘blood feud’ between two entrenched camps, the debate between ludology and narratology probes foundational questions about what video games are and how they should best be understood (Jenkins 2004, 118). Broadly speaking, ludologists hold that video games should be analysed primarily, first or only as games, while narratologists believe examining them as a storytelling medium is also appropriate and productive. Largely occurring in academic conferences and publications from the late 1990s to mid 2000s, the quarrel is somewhat of a historical relic – by 2009, some video game scholars already described it as ‘passé’ (Crawford and Gosling 2009, 54). However, revisiting this fundamental discourse clarifies the stakes within game studies; are video games’ ludic and narrative components complementary, or are they ‘different structures that are in effect doing opposite things’ (Aarseth 2004, 45)? And how do game and story each relate to music?

Ludological perspectives emphasize gameplay-related components of a video game, including computer programming and implementation, rule mechanics and quantitative parameters, optimal strategies and user play experience. Prominent ludologists include Espen Aarseth, Markku Eskelinen, Jesper Juul and Gonzalo Frasca. Ludologists’ main concerns may be summarized as follows (Table I.1):

TABLE I.1: Table summarizing ludology and narratology perspectives in game studies.

	Ludology	Narratology
Values	Video games should be analysed primarily, first or only as games.	Analysing video games as a storytelling medium is productive.
Emphasis	Computer programming, rules, gameplay strategy, nature of play.	Narrative, immersion, relationship between ludic and narrative agency.
Major Figures	Espen Aarseth, Markku Eskelinen, Jesper Juul, Gonzalo Frasca.	Janet Murray, Henry Jenkins, Marie-Laure Ryan, Nick Monfort, and others.
Main Points	1) A distinct academic field of ludology is necessary.	1) Most video games are narratives, though not reducible to narrative only.
	2) Video games’ unique characteristics relate to gameplay, not narrative.	2) Ludologists critique too narrow a conception of narrative.
	3) Theories from other disciplines are a poor fit for analysing video games.	3) Narrative is a major driver of players’ interest in video games.

1. A distinct academic field of ludology is necessary. In 1999, Gonzalo Frasca proposed ‘ludology’ (from Latin *ludus*, ‘game’) to name the not-yet-existent academic study of games and play (Frasca 1999). Maintaining a conceptual distinction between ludology and narratology is analytically useful, ludologists argue, to recognize the unique contributions of play to games (Aarseth 2004, 54). Ludologists aimed to correct a perceived deficiency in scholarship by analysing gameplay-relevant factors, instead of approaching games like any other storytelling medium (Frasca 1999). Additionally, ludologists were wary of academic imperialism from other disciplines, including literature and film studies. Aarseth excoriates narratological analysis as humanities scholars’ attempts to feel important and relevant by ‘[reforming] games into a more acceptable form of art’ (Aarseth 2004, 49). In this context, ludologists asserted the need for a distinct field studying games as games rather than merely being absorbed into other disciplines.
2. Video games’ most unique characteristics relate to gameplay, not narrative. Video games consist of rules, gameplay and a semiotic context (narrative or gameworld); ludologists claim the context is incidental to the ‘game itself’ (Aarseth 2004, 48). Narratives are ubiquitous – in literature, film, drama and beyond – but what makes video games a unique medium is the interactive gameplay afforded by computing technology. Interactivity is key – unlike other art forms, a video game requires active player participation to access (or even create) its content (Frasca 2004, 86). This interaction is enabled by the game’s rules which ground player enjoyment, ingenuity and agency (Juul 2005, 55). Though fictional context is important, ‘[the] fiction depends on rules’ (Juul 2005, 121). For this reason, Frasca prefers to describe video games as simulations rather than narratives, stressing their ability to explore possible outcomes of players’ choices and guide them through multiple, alternate perspectives (Frasca 2004, 86, 93). Any narrative reading of video games must account for interactivity and the gameplay that affords it.
3. Theoretical frameworks imported wholesale from other disciplines are a poor fit for analysing games. Ludologists disdained applying narrative theories directly to video games without modification – akin to shoving square pegs into round holes. Aarseth writes that traditional narrative concepts ‘are not well-suited to the problems of a simulational hermeneutic’ and require adaptation to the particularities of games (2004, 54). Additionally, the term narrative is ill-defined: multiple definitions exist, and narratologists imported overly broad meanings to early video games (Eskelinen 2004, 37; Juul 2005, 156–57). The resulting readings struck ludologists as forced acts of ‘interpretative violence’ born from narratologists’ dogged belief in the relevance of their academic training (Eskelinen 2001). Developers are not immune to this tendency, resulting in ‘cinema envy’

from attempts to recreate filmic storytelling in video games (Zimmerman 2004, 157). If scholars, developers and players are to discern narrative in video games, they must tailor their methods to the medium – not approach video games the same as they would a movie or novel.

On the other hand, narratologists affirm that, while gameplay is essential to video games, games may also convey narrative. As a label for a diverse group of interdisciplinary scholars interested in video games, it is more difficult to list narratologists than ludologists; however, Janet Murray, Henry Jenkins, Marie-Laure Ryan and Nick Montfort warrant particular mention. As with ludologists, narratologists' arguments may be grouped into three main concerns (see Table I.1):

1. Although video games are not reducible to narrative, most do constitute narratives. Narratologists never claimed that video games were solely stories – only that they do communicate narratives. 'Games are always stories', writes Janet Murray, 'even abstract games [...] about winning and losing, casting the player as the opponent-battling or environment-battling hero' (Murray 2004, 2). In other words, the player's foregrounded agency, desired goal and opponents/obstacles produce a narrative constructed and fuelled by gameplay actions. Henry Jenkins terms this 'emergent narrative', empowering game players to enact their own stories within a gameworld 'rich with narrative potential' (Jenkins 2004, 129). Because humans are inherently story-constructing, meaning-making creatures, players typically recount their gaming experiences in narrative form – regardless of whether the game is story-driven (Ryan 2015, 164). Rather than replace attention to gameplay, narratology augments it by considering how narrative emerges from ludic agency. Contrary to ludologists' claims, narratologists do not seek to assimilate video games to paradigms of print literature or cinema (Murray 2004, 10). 'We must ... be attentive to the particularity of games as a medium', writes Jenkins, 'specifically what distinguishes them from other narrative traditions' (2004, 120). To analyse video games as stories does not mean they are not also games.
2. Ludologists' critiques operate on too narrow a conception of narrative. Aarseth, Frasca, Juul and Eskelinen each stressed allegedly intractable differences between games and narratives (understood as print literature). Yet their objections presuppose 'too narrow a model of narrative, one preoccupied with the rules and conventions of classical linear storytelling', ignoring twentieth- and twenty-first-century hypertexts and non-linear narratives (Jenkins 2004, 120–21). For example, Juul argues that because the full plot of the *Star Wars* film cannot be deduced by playing the *Star Wars* video game, the game cannot be considered narrative; this is a far too myopic view of transmedial adaptation

(Jenkins 2004, 124). Contrary to Eskelinen's objection that narrative requires one or more identifiable narrators, which video games often lack, Marie-Laure Ryan describes games as simultaneous narratives in which the player 'lives the story as she writes it through her actions in the real time of a continuously moving present' (Ryan 2015, 49). Game narratives transcend the game's rules, connecting from the virtual world into the real one – for 'it is the reader who gives a text meaning and life' (Crawford and Gosling 2009, 56). Instead of a narrow definition of narrative, Celia Pearce outlines six narrative modes that manifest particularly well in video games: experiential, performative, augmentary, descriptive, metastory and story system (Pearce 2004, 145). To narratologists, ludologists discard narrative analysis at their own loss, overlooking immense gains from 'meaningful comparisons with other storytelling media' (Jenkins 2004, 119). Narratologists insist that narrative is much more than ludologists assume.

3. Narrative is a major driver of interest in video games. Ludologist writings often dismiss narrative aspirations in video games as irrelevant or worse, a dangerous distraction – Eskelinen (2001) labelled game stories as mere 'marketing tools' and 'a waste of time and energy' to study. Yet for players, narrative engagement is a major motivator for seeking out, enjoying and cherishing video game experiences. It is doubtful that video games would have risen to such mainstream prominence if their narrative contexts never advanced beyond that of *Tennis for Two* (1958) or *Spacewar!* (1962). Immersion within compelling, intricate gameworlds has made video games one of the 'most powerful [sources] of personal meaning in the contemporary world' (Castronova 2007, 207). Ludologists' central error is attempting to completely isolate gameplay from everyday life. However, as with the magic circle, virtual worlds are porous and permeable as their boundaries are traversed by meaning-making players, allowing game narratives to extend beyond the boundaries of the screen (Crawford and Gosling 2009, 62). Murray proposes the label 'cyberdrama' to describe new media forms like video games that blend elements of gameplay and narrative (Murray 2004, 5). The result is an art form that increasingly enmeshes players' real and virtual lives and identities. 'Storytelling and gaming have always been overlapping experiences and will continue to be so', writes Murray, '[human] experience demands every modality of narration that we can bring to it' (2004, 8). To deny the narrative potential of video games is to rebuff the multifarious meaning-making processes that players reify in and through games.

The ludology-versus-narratology debate effectively outlines the ideological landscape within academic game studies. Roughly a decade younger,

‘ludomusicology’ – the scholarly study of sound and music in games, including video games – owes much to its older cousin, including echoes of ludological–narratological debate. Despite not often invoking the ludology–narratology divide explicitly, ludomusicologists often emphasize on one side of the ludology–narratology spectrum.⁴ The following literature review is admittedly abbreviated, selective and somewhat artificial, as I am certain my colleagues would each claim a middle ground between ludological and narratological poles. Additionally, due to the protracted nature of the publication process, it may already be somewhat outdated by this book’s publication. Nevertheless, it is useful to observe how prior video game music scholarship parallels existing game studies discourse in its priorities, concepts and methodologies.

Ludology-leaning Ludomusicologists:

Karen Collins: As the first scholarly book published on video game music, Collins’s *Game Sound* (Collins 2008) is a landmark that has been described as ‘the true establishment of the field’ of ludomusicology (Vinzant 2020). *Game Sound* and its spiritual successor, *Playing with Sound* (Collins 2013) theorize interactivity between the player and soundtrack as augmenting a plethora of gameplay functions. Collins argues that two-way interactivity distinguishes game audio from sound in film – actively triggering sound events rather than passively receiving them (2008, 3; 2013, 22). Sound contributes to gameplay in various ways: binding sound to action via kinesonic synchresis, spatializing sound to indicate enemy positions, assisting players in learning gameplay, signifying success or failure at gameplay tasks, guiding player choices through emotional affect and maintaining immersion in the gameworld (2008, 101, 130–133, 134, 148–49; 2013, 32).⁵ Of particular interest is interactive non-diegetic music – cues triggered by gameplay choices and therefore manipulatable by players (2008, 126). This interactivity strengthens identification and empathy with virtual characters (2013, 37–38, 58). Interactive audio firmly centres the place of players – for without a player, game audio is merely ‘code, lying in wait’ (2013, 2).

William Cheng: *Sound Play* (Cheng 2014) is a stimulating phenomenological exploration of how players engage with video game music through gameplay, examining social dynamics that emerge through virtual music-making. Whether synchronizing a nuclear warhead detonation to the Perfect Authentic Cadence of the march ‘Stars and Stripes Forever’ or watching a gradual in-game sunrise while listening to the world’s last Stradivarius violin,

Cheng demonstrates that video game music is far from irrelevant to gameplay decisions. Especially noteworthy is Cheng's analysis of horror game sound in *Silent Hill* (1999), which obfuscates distinctions between diegetic, non-diegetic and real-world sounds – simultaneously intensifying anxiety and undermining player confidence in the reliability of their 'visual, aural, and cognitive faculties' (98–99). In the MMORPG *Lord of the Rings Online* (2007), players weaponized built-in music-making gameplay actions ('bagpipe spam', 'griefing') to pester fellow players into leaving certain areas (135–37).⁶ In a more semiotic interpretation of the famous opera scene of *Final Fantasy VI* (1994), Cheng reads Celes's foregrounded aria and synthesized voice as encoding early video games' aspirations to the cultural prestige of classical art forms like opera (89). Julianne Grasso: Like Collins's work, 'Video Game Music, Meaning, and the Possibilities of Play' (Grasso 2020) focuses on analysing music's influence on gameplay actions – and vice versa. Grasso theorizes affective zones as music that creates affordances for a particular range of gameplay actions by priming players for certain responses (60). A striking example is the disruptive 'hurry-up' music in *Super Mario World* (1990), which interrupts leisurely exploration with a dissonant fanfare followed by a double-time version of the level's music, spurring players to quicken their pace (80). Other examples include the syncopated rhythms and 'blue-note' chromaticisms of *Super Mario Bros.* (1985) – mapping musical instability onto the dangers of an unstable level – or contrasting music affording combat and safety in *The Legend of Zelda* (1986) (57, 163). In the latter, 'Hyrule Field' affords quick, persistent exploration because its rhythms are quick and persistent; 'the sharp musical attacks are Link's attacks, the motion is Link's motion' (89–90). A second gameplay-relevant contribution is habituation, especially well-suited to the looping nature of much game music (148). In *Bejeweled 3* (2010), total habituation to repetitive puzzle-solving music allows players to perceive the dissonant glockenspiel and bass notes signalling impending failure as a marked contrast (168–70). Contrasting tonal relationships in the soundtrack of *Journey* (2012) gently nudge players to seek the next objective, promising a euphoric sonic payoff upon arrival (133). Finally, demonstrating that none of these scholars is wholly ludological or narratological, Grasso proposes a reconciliation between the two camps through 'ludomusical narrativity' (110). Chapter 1 dialogues further with Grasso's work.

While ludological perspectives relate music directly to gameplay actions, narratological ones broaden their scope to narrative, thematic, sociocultural and historical meanings. Representational topics – the focus of this book – typically align more with the interests, questions and methods of narratology.

Narratology-leaning Ludomusicologists:

Tim Summers: Chapter 5 of *Understanding Game Music* (Summers 2016) boldly claims that video game music ‘routinely has a greater aesthetic priority, narrative agency and informational content in games than in film’ (175). Summers attributes this to interactivity, which incentivizes active engagement with game music and heightens player investment through participating in its discovery and unfolding (2016, 50; 2020, 41). Games encourage players to adopt a hermeneutic orientation, actively seeking to interpret and understand its music as a meaningful entity (2016, 41, 206). Summers’ analysis of leitmotif in *Final Fantasy VII* (1997) demonstrates that musical themes do not simply reflect or comment upon the gameplay, but actively shape the perception of character, setting and plot – music is a ‘creative, rather than simply descriptive, force’ (164). Tiered battle themes blend narrative and ludic function, as ‘One-Winged Angel’ encodes the battle against Sephiroth as both ‘narrative apex and highest point of ludic challenge’ (167). Concerning representational matters, Summers observes that video game music is not sealed off from the real world, but rather incorporates ‘actual world musical meanings to generate context for a virtual world’ – typically cultural or national musical traditions and styles (40, 114). Much of the present book’s analyses build on this observation and Summers’s overall approach to understanding game music.

Isabella van Elferen: Conceptualizing video game music as a prime opportunity to develop a ‘New Drastic Musicology’ that centres meaning-making processes grounded in players’ actions and experiences, van Elferen proposes ‘supra-diegetic’ to describe how the act of listening inevitably blends game-specific musical meanings with real-world connotations (van Elferen 2020, 104, 109). van Elferen’s ALI model (affect-literacy-interaction) has gained traction in the field as a framework articulating game music’s contribution to player immersion (2016, 34, 49). The interplay of these parameters invites players to ascribe ‘personal and collective meanings’ to game music grounded in their unique phenomenological experience (2016, 35). Literacy – how cultural conventions and discourses shape interpretation – poses special narrative significance, as listeners familiar with musical traditions in film, television and video games will understand a track differently than one hearing a strategy for the first time (2016, 36). In other words, players become sites of intertextual meaning-making, connecting game music to unique sets of previously heard pieces. ‘More than any other music’, writes van Elferen, ‘game music is an event, not a work; its performance is playful, immediate, and interactive’ (2020, 106). As a result, musical meaning in video games is

not reducible to internal rules and gameplay but presupposes exposure to larger bodies of works.

William Gibbons: It is tempting to think that the genres of classical and video game music have little to no relation; *Unlimited Replays* (Gibbons 2018) shows this could not be further from the truth, as classical music makes appearances in ‘even the most unexpected of video games’ (114). Intersections of classical music and video games are striking hermeneutic opportunities, a ‘transgression [...] that begs for explanation and interpretation’ (4). In a video game soundtrack, classical music imports a wealth of ‘ready-made perceptions and associations’, including pastness, high class, irony or artistic value (22, 81, 114). Games may incorporate pieces for their specific meanings, such as Mozart’s ‘Requiem Mass’ in *BioShock Infinite* (2013) or Chopin’s ‘Funeral March’ and ‘Revolutionary Étude’ in *Catherine* (2011), producing an intertextually enriched narrative statement (45–49, 105–09). Classical music in games acts as a destabilizing force that challenges cultural boundaries, ‘exposing the art in the game, and the game in the art’ (138, 157). The unexpected, fruitful combination gestures to ‘a future where the artificial distinctions between highbrow and lowbrow are erased’ (174).

Sean Atkinson: Musical topics group constellations of musical characteristics into patterns that invoke consistent cultural associations when they appear. Atkinson traces the ‘soaring’ musical topic from its origins in film to its frequent usage in video games, exploring how its semiotic meanings impact their narrative interpretation (2019, 2). Adopting David Neumeyer’s topic-trope continuum, in which topics are conventional and normative while tropes are novel and strategic, Atkinson identifies the soaring topic as an erstwhile trope of martial, transcendent, mechanical and supernatural topics that has since become a standalone topic (4, 18). Melodic ascents (especially ascending leaps), ascending sequences, upward arpeggios or harp glissandi and Lydian-mode inflection are hallmarks of the soaring topic (10, 13, 14, 17). In video games, the soaring topic is nearly always paired with flight-based levels or gameplay – in Grasso’s terms, it creates an affective zone affording flight. However, Atkinson connects the soaring topic to robust narrative readings of *The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword* (2011) and *Final Fantasy IV* (1991) that foreshadow future narrative events and subvert conventional expectations (23–25). Nonetheless, the narrative is never far from gameplay significance, as Atkinson concludes that musical topics and tropes guide player actions towards particular story outcomes; ‘[interactivity] adds an additional layer of complexity to narratives that are often already as complex as [...] in film, television, and opera’ (29).

In *A Composer’s Guide to Game Music* (2014), Winifred Phillips considers both ludological and narratological concerns as essential to successful game music

composition. Ludologically, a sudden striking musical motif can draw a player's attention to a location or object coming into view, or silence can subconsciously prompt the player to move elsewhere (41, 180). An understated defeat stinger can psychologically assuage players' sense of failure, encouraging them to try again (179). Narratologically, music can differentiate plot-significant characters and focus emotional engagement on those for whom players are meant to feel empathy (54, 68). Music that is emotionally and stylistically syncretic with a game's visual components enhances players' holistic aesthetic experience and contributes significantly to worldbuilding and immersion (46, 103). From a game composer's standpoint, the relationship between game and story is not 'either/or', but 'both/and'. In the same way, the field of ludomusicology benefits most from incorporating ludology-leaning and narratology-leaning perspectives, avoiding the overly binary feuds of game studies' past.

'Mission Start!' – Semiotics Harmonizing Ludology and Narratology

In game studies history, ludology and narratology tended to monopolize discussion as their entrenched camps vied for conceptual territory. In actuality, the ludology-narratology binary is unacceptably myopic, presuming that gameplay and narrative are the only interesting or meaningful parameters of video games (Montfort 2004, 310). Adopting a semiotic approach prioritizing meaning-making processes of all kinds harmonizes the ludological and narratological traditions, incorporating a diverse range of other topics of interest. Reflecting on the ludology-narratology debate nearly a decade later, Michalis Kokonis proposes semiotics as an umbrella concept encompassing the study of gameplay and narrative, as well as visual aesthetics, sound/music and interactivity (Kokonis 2014, 176). Presenting players with multiple simultaneous streams of visual, aural, verbal, haptic and cognitive information to decode, playing a video game is one of the most complex multimodal semiotic feats available. As semiotician Gunther Kress writes, a multimodal approach 'assumes that all *modes of representation* are, in principle, of equal significance in representation and communication, as all *modes have potentials for meaning*' (2009, 104, emphasis original). In other words, video game music constructs and communicates meaning comparable to its story, graphics or gameplay. A multimodal, semiotic approach leads beyond a reductionist spectrum of game and narrative into a rich kaleidoscope of multimodal meaning (Figure I.1).

Semiotics equips players and scholars with the tools necessary to analyse the interconnectedness of virtual and real worlds via the permeable membrane of the magic circle. In the process of play, players' demographic identities, social values and interpretative agency are entangled inextricably in the reification of

Semiotics as a Multimodal Umbrella

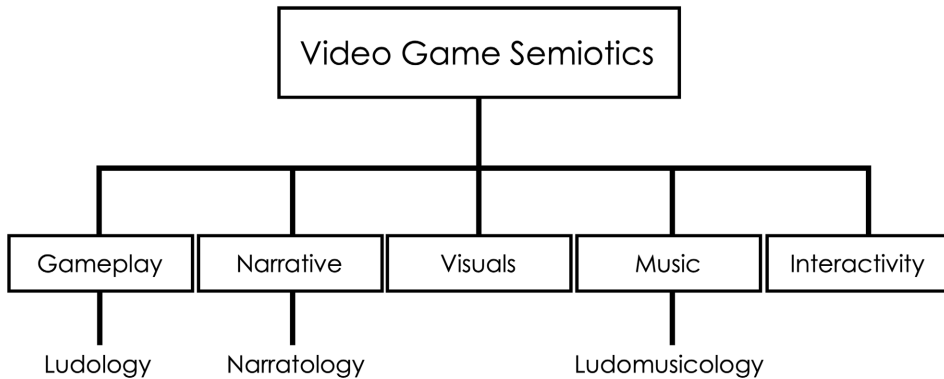


FIGURE I.1: Diagram conceptualizing semiotics as an umbrella concept encompassing various modes of communication in video games (Kokonis 2014, 176–77).

the gameworld. More than any other art form, video games explore interactive play, within which ‘the distinction between belief and make-believe breaks down’ (Huizinga 1949, 25). Today, our lives are increasingly interwoven with virtuality, as we are entrained to ‘live, work, and play’ through digitally mediated platforms (Ryan 2015, 28). As we enter the virtual worlds of video games, we discover no realm of pure rules and play, sealed off from our humanity and individual identity. Instead, ‘we find human society on either side of the membrane’ of the magic circle – for it is we who created it, and we for whom it was created (Castronova 2005, 147–148). This crucial point applies equally to video game music, which is ‘no more confinable to virtual worlds than the players are’ (Cheng 2014, 14). To listen to game music with semiotic ears is to hear our own aural reflection – entangling our identities, values, cultures, histories and politics within the magic circle.

Gender, Race and Religion in Video Game Music explores the intersection of cultural identity, narrative interpretation and musical meaning. Methodologically, I adopt a thoroughly semiotic approach throughout, which carries certain implications for the present project’s scope and execution:

1. Centring interpretation: I explore video games as multimodal, meaningful, communicative artworks that reward interpretative engagement. A semiotic perspective approaches the aesthetic surface of a work with a view towards

its significant design properties which serve as hermeneutic keys to decode its meanings. My primary enterprise in this work is analysis – not history, ethnography, cognition or game development. Each of these is a crucially important domain to examine in its own right, but not this project’s focus. For example, a chapter analysing *Super Mario Odyssey* (2017) would prioritize music-theoretical description and interpretation of its soundtrack over a historical survey of a technique’s usage in the *Super Mario* franchise or ethnographic interviews with the game’s players. Creator intention and audience reception are important sources of corroborating evidence where available, but interpretation is not dependent upon or delimited by knowledge of these. As interpreting, meaning-seeking listeners, players regularly apprehend semiotic significance in game music beyond known developer intention or widespread intersubjective agreement (cf. Barthes 1977). The readings this book presents are exactly that – readings. My readings – or better yet, hearings – of this music may not fully agree with others’, nor is my claim that all listeners do or should interpret it as I do. Instead, I model the process of semiotic interpretation so that readers may reach their own conclusions, placing my hearings in dialogue with their own in an ongoing semiotic spiral. As Robert Hatten writes, ‘I find merits in each interpretation, and I can hear the piece convincingly in [multiple, seemingly-competing] ways’ (2018, 214). This is precisely the advantage of polysemous, interpretative semiotics, such as this book undertakes.

2. Work-focused: My analyses generally prioritize understanding individual works as texts rather than painting broad patterns or trends (Chapter 2 and the corpus study in Chapter 7 are exceptions to this). In the words of Michael Klein echoing Kofi Agawu: ‘analyzing comes more easily to me than theorizing’ (Klein 2005, ix). As a scholar blending the roles of music composer and theorist, my expertise is explicating how individual works communicate their unique musical meanings. By examining each work in its particularity, I am primarily concerned with the question ‘how does this work represent X?’ rather than ‘how is X represented in video games?’ more broadly. No medium speaks univocally between its works, and I make no pretence that these analyses capture the state of the entire video game industry on any topic. My aim is not constructing a theoretical framework of identity representation in video games, but rather analysing significant case studies that illustrate the multitudinous ways that video game music plays with personal identities.
3. Multimodality: As stated at this section’s outset, video games are a remarkably multimodal art form, combining aural, narrative, visual, ludic, tactile and social dimensions, to name a few. As the book’s title indicates, my analytical focus is on video game music and sound, in dialogue with narrative, ludic and

visual features. The majority of the book is devoted to a detailed analysis of video games' music and sound design. I do not undertake to determine the degree of attention a hypothetical 'average player' devotes to sound relative to other aesthetic and gameplay factors – though it would be a valuable project. My commitment to multimodality entails constant contextualization of audio within a game's narrative, ludic and visual landscape. A game's narrative influences how its music is understood, and vice versa; gameplay actions and sonic events contextualize one another. Severing any of these undercuts the work's holistic aesthetic unity – interpreting game music in constant dialogue with other factors resonates with the work as a multimodal semiotic entity.

4. Social relevance: Each video game soundtrack contributes its meaningful voice in the sociocultural milieu of its developers and players. Rather than divorcing gameworlds from the real world as 'mere entertainment', I read video games as artworks of enormous significance speaking to many of today's most relevant issues. Demographic diversity, mental health, gender identity, racial justice and religious faith – all these topics and more – are encoded in semiotically interesting ways within a game's musical discourse. Each chapter frames its musical analyses with public events and social or historical scholarship situating the game examples within their cultural context. I do this not to reduce a game's meanings to social or political movements, but rather to bring them into dialogue with broader societal factors, which players already relate to their interpretation of the game. The public anecdotes mentioned tend to reflect my own geographic and cultural context in the United States – however, I believe most are widely known or have available parallels in other contexts. In discussing socially relevant topics, my intention is not to be a political provocateur – though the topics covered in this book have often become politicized. As stated above, I do not expect all readers to be convinced of my interpretations; my goal is demonstrating that game music is relevant to a plethora of sociocultural factors, inviting other interpreters to dialogue with my hearings wherever their understandings may differ.

In addition to these commitments, the reader may notice a certain predilection for video games produced by Japanese developers among the book's case studies. This is a result of my specialization as a scholar, the influence certain Japanese-produced games and franchises continue to hold across the video game industry and my personal preferences as a player. I resonate strongly with the narrative, cultural, musical and aesthetic characteristics presented in many Japanese-produced video games, as the book's analyses will demonstrate (particularly Chapters 3, 5, 7 and 8). I do not take this focus to diminish the importance of works produced in other nations but rather to foreground the unique

interpretative opportunities and challenges afforded by approaching this repertoire. Certainly, this complicates the semiosis of these works – speaking their meanings first to a Japanese audience and cultural context, which is refracted into other markets – but it also serves to illustrate the interconnectedness of cultures worldwide. For example, a video game, anime or manga carrying Japanese ideas of gender, culture or religion may encounter a considerably different context in Europe or the United States, dialoguing with their perspectives and influencing those factors’ subsequent development in the receiving nations. This, too, is a prime example of the ongoing, porous, polysemous nature of meaning-making and interpretation.

Part I explores foundational concepts from game studies scholarship, as this chapter’s discussion of the magic circle and ludology-narratology debate has done. Chapter 1 builds on the first chapter’s content by considering ‘immersion’ and ‘interactivity’, two concepts often discussed in game studies literature as characteristic of video games. Karen Collins applies interactivity to video game sound, theorizing interactive game audio as the sonification of human action, bidirectional between player and game system. The discussion then turns once more to ludology and narratology in video game music, considering Julianne Grasso’s proposed harmonization, ‘ludomusical narrativity’ or ‘ludonarrative’. While Grasso’s account has much to commend it, the chapter furthers Grasso’s insights by proposing ‘interpretative interactivity’ as a framework that includes a robust role for players’ semiotic agency, in dynamic dialogue with their ludic agency. The chapter then analyses the music of *Chrono Cross* (1999) and *Gris* (2018) as case studies exemplifying interpretative interactivity. The final level and boss of *Chrono Cross* leads players to hear pitches as tones, using interactive sound prompted by in-game abilities to reconstruct a previously heard melody. At multiple points, the narrative establishes an analogy between music and nature to foreshadow the need to think musically about game sound and bring together narrative and ludic elements. *Gris* presents an evocative, artistic representation of the protagonist’s inner world, depicting Elizabeth Kübler-Ross’ ‘five stages of grief’ as a visual and musical journey to self-acceptance and mental flourishing. Story and gameplay flow together into a playable parable emerging from the player’s interpretative interactivity.

Part II explores gender representation in video game narrative and music, presenting a tripartite trajectory across three chapters. Broadly speaking, Chapter 2 presents musical conventions of gender signification as they have been through video games’ history from 1987 to 2006, Chapter 3 analyses significant subversions of binary gender conventions in games from 2009 and 2016 and Chapter 4 gestures towards non-binary representational possibilities by carving out a third space transcending conventional femininity and masculinity. Chapter 2 examines gendered musical conventions in the 30-year *Final Fantasy* series, revealing

problematic musical patterns throughout its history. Though a few significant outliers subvert conventionally gendered expectations, the character themes of *Final Fantasy* largely present an uncannily consistent pattern of conventionally feminine and conventionally masculine musical characteristics. Chapter 3 explores alternative femininities and masculinities that meaningfully subvert gendered conventions, illustrating that there can be as many femininities and masculinities as there are individuals. *Final Fantasy XIII* (2009) features a female protagonist embodying the *arafō*, a Japanese alternative femininity that is professionally successful and not defined by marriage or romance; *Final Fantasy XV* (2016) presents its male protagonist as a *sōshokudanshi* who subverts hegemonic *bushidō* and salaryman masculinities, characterized by gentleness, emotional awareness and egalitarianism. Chapter 4 analyses the music of *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017) and *Horizon Forbidden West* (2022), placing the series' protagonist in a 'third gender' space transcending conventional femininity or masculinity. Using low-register mezzo-soprano voice and melodic cello writing to connect historically to the lost sound of Italian opera's castrati, this approach gestures towards a possible non-binary representation that is aurally present as neither conventionally feminine nor masculine.

Part III turns to the musical representation of nationality, culture and race in video game music – three concepts that blur together in games' musical and narrative discourse, as they frequently do in public discussion. Chapter 5 introduces 'racialised fantasy' – designing a fictional culture with traits associated with a particular real-world culture – to explore racial representation in video game music, and Chapter 6 applies Ibram X. Kendi's segregation-assimilation-antiracism spectrum to musical cultural representation (Kendi 2019). Both chapters closely analyse two case studies, identifying problematic and productive representational features in each. Chapter 5 contrasts the pan-Latin caricature of Tostarena's music in *Super Mario Odyssey* (2017) with the nuanced, hybridity-driven discourse of the score for Bowser's Castle, proposing 'stereotype' as a better litmus test for musical cultural representation than 'authenticity'. Next, the invitational approach of *Raji: An Ancient Epic* (2020) presents a work that invites players to participate in its ongoing cultural practices – not existing for outsiders nor catering to their preferences. Chapter 6 highlights antiracist musical storytelling in *Civilization VI* (2016) and *Overwatch* (2015), two video game scores exemplifying musical racial diversity. Both case studies largely avoid musically segregating or assimilating its characters of colour, charting a third, antiracist course that acknowledges cultural diversity without erasure or exoticism.

Part IV examines religion, introducing the concept of 'sonic iconography' to describe the importation of theological meanings through the use of sacred music in video game soundtracks. Although any religious tradition's music may be invoked in this way, Chapters 7 and 8 focus on the multifaceted interactions between Japanese

culture and sonic iconography of Catholic Christianity. Chapter 7 presents a broad narrative and musical analysis of the god-slayer trope frequently featured in video games, followed by a historical account of anti-Christian policy and rhetoric in Japan during the Tokugawa shogunate and Meiji Restoration. In dialogue with the theology of Jürgen Moltmann, *Lightning Returns* (2013) critiques the Christian classical theist doctrine of impassibility as a parallel to the Japanese philosophy of *sonnō jōi* – worship of a transcendent, inaccessible god-Emperor. Chapter 8 considers the god-slayer trope in *Xenoblade Chronicles* (2010, remake 2020) through a cultural-historical lens, tracing its narrative to the descent of post-war Japan’s god-Emperor from divine to human status. *Xenoblade*’s musical troping of sacred- and rock-topic music encodes both the considerable struggle necessary to displace *sonnō jōi* and the egalitarian, populist philosophy modelled by Emperor Hirohito to his subjects after the Second World War.

Chapters 1–8, taken together, envision and develop a theory that situates players as interactive interpreters whose real-world attitudes are influenced by virtual representations of gender, race and religion. Conclusion: Enter the Real concludes with a brief recapitulation of the importance of diversity as a catalyst for engendering ‘radical compassion’ (Bollmer 2017). As an art form, video games excel at presenting immersive, interactive experiences embodying various narratives and identities that may differ from players’ own. Audiences are then confronted with a choice: to consume the other into the player’s own subjectivity or embrace their difference as fully human and deserving of dignity. Promoting representational diversity facilitates the latter goal, constituting an ethical vision for encoding gender, race and religion in video game music.

NOTES

1. Foundations of Art and Entertainment Technologies, Professor Jack Stamps, The University of Texas at Austin, Fall 2015–Spring 2019.
2. Zimmerman provides anecdotal accounts of being characterized this way in academic conferences (such as the ‘Breaking the Magic Circle’ seminar at the University of Tampere’s Games Research Lab) as well as in private email correspondence and an invited lecture to a university game studies class.
3. A cross-section of examples include *Exodus to the Virtual World* (Castronova 2007), *Half-Real* (Juul 2005), *Narrative as Virtual Reality* and *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2* (Ryan 2001, 2015), *Reality is Broken* (2010) and *Synthetic Worlds* (Castronova 2005).
4. The most explicit treatment of the ludology-narratology debate in ludomusicological scholarship is Julianne Grasso, ‘Video Game Music, Meaning, and the Possibilities of Play’ (2020, Ph.D. diss.), Chapter 3, ‘Playful Stories: Toward a Ludomusical Narrativity of Video Games’. Grasso proposes to reconcile ludic and narrative perspectives through a ludonarrative account

of music in video games, providing intriguing case studies from *Final Fantasy III* (1990) and *Journey* (2012). Perhaps ludomusicologists' reticence on the topic seeks to avoid reviving – and subsequently, beating – a proverbial dead horse, lest doing so reinscribe the embittered entrenchments present in academic game studies circa 1995–2005. Nonetheless, there is much conceptual clarity to be gained from a historical retrospective on the debate and its impact, considering how its ripples continue to influence the field's perspectives on video game music.

5. Although Collins' interest primarily lies in how audio affects gameplay and vice versa, she mentions musical techniques to enhance narrative structure such as linking related scenes with similar music (2008, 131).
6. Massively multiplayer online role-playing game.