

Introduction

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My past is not a memory. It's a force at my back. It pushes and steers. I may not always like where it leads me, but like any story, the past needs resolution. What's past is prologue.

—Samus, *Metroid: The Other M*

A consequence of today's videogame industry is the design of its products pointing to the future and the past simultaneously. Regarding the former, the sophisticated visual graphics of the latest game suggest cutting-edge technology and the drive among companies to develop the next great thing for consumers. The increasing technological sophistication of games allows players to immerse themselves in complex worlds, which can indicate progress and the future. Regarding the latter, anyone familiar with the vast repertoire of videogames knows they provide opportunities to reflect on and even simulate the past. Videogames can recreate visual and aural markers of historical periods, for example. To that point, videogames provide something far deeper for players, sites of nostalgic memory. Players and academics increasingly have become aware of the role nostalgia plays in videogames since at least 2008, noting that our past experiences as players shape our analyses of games.¹ Academic literature thus began to articulate what so many players and fans already knew. That is why, in 2022, it sounds like a no-brainer that videogames can provoke nostalgia. Many games from the early 2000s onward contain allusions and references to their 1980s and 1990s ancestors, suggesting those who grew up playing those earlier videogames have grown into nostalgic adults, the so-called “Nintendo Generation” of players. More importantly, however, videogames put those who engage with them in a theoretically self-conscious position. Videogames invite fans to tread into academic realms to understand more deeply the relationship

¹ Taylor and Whalen make this claim in their pioneering work, “Playing the Past: An Introduction,” in *Playing the Past*, 4, 6.

between their playing experiences and nostalgia, a crossover that potentially blurs the distinction between players and academics. Videogames thus have entered a postmodern moment in which they display their relationship to nostalgia.

Videogame music, or VGM, plays an essential role in this relationship, and the time is ripe to address it. This book consciously gives a platform for readers who see (or may wish to see) themselves as situated between the player/fan and academic separation I mentioned above. These player-academics “do” ludomusicology and have an advantageous position to consider the complex relationship between nostalgia and VGM. Such a conversation considers nostalgia as a methodological tool to understand VGM and how the former can result from the latter. Music itself already has a widely recognized ability to provoke a strong longing for the past. For instance, Svetlana Boym, perhaps *the* voice of nostalgia studies, refers to music as a memorative sign, “the permanent accompaniment of nostalgia—its ineffable charm that makes the nostalgic teary-eyed and tongue-tied and often clouds critical reflection on the subject.”² Psychologist Clay Routledge asserts music increases autobiographical recall, as well as the social and emotional connectedness among those who share music-based nostalgia, and he explains how the emotions inspired by music also influence how people perceive nostalgia.³ Moreover Sandra Garrido, Jane W. Davidson, and Lauren Istvandity all discuss the concept of “the lifetime soundtrack,” whereupon people create and curate repositories of music integrated into their memories, interpersonal relationships, and the past. Such works indicate the close, mutually informing relationship nostalgia has with music.⁴ Yet the player-academics writing for this anthology believe said relationship amplifies tenfold when examined through the lens of ludomusicology.

To initiate this conversation, this book makes two central claims. First, we believe VGM has a special relationship with nostalgia, where the former can provoke the latter more powerfully than other components of videogames. Second, we also believe nostalgia provides a necessary tool—both theoretical and practical—to understand how VGM affects those who engage with it. Anyone who has played a videogame knows the difficulty or at least the impracticality of avoiding music altogether without turning off the volume or music/sound. Players also repeatedly encounter music in a wide range of contexts. During gameplay, sometimes the music repeats on an endless loop in a wall-to-wall scenario; at other times, the music closely adapts to player interactivity. Such prevalence makes the

² Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 4.

³ Routledge, *Nostalgia: A Psychological Resource*, 40–41, 54–55.

⁴ Garrido and Davidson, *Nostalgia, Music and Memory*, 1–3, 29–43; Istvandity, *The Lifetime Soundtrack*.

music hard to forget. Some tunes lodge themselves into our memories so firmly that they demand future action, like an itch that needs scratching.⁵ Once those catchy melodies take up residence in our minds, we hum them, program them into our cell phones as ringtones, download soundtracks, search for remixes and covers on OCREmix or Spotify, attend concerts, and create or perform musical arrangements. Players and fans saturate their lives with VGM because of its high degree of emotional associativity. One or two notes can trigger deeply moving memories of the past almost immediately, and players also report having intensely personal and subjective connections to videogames and their music. But it is not just reflective. VGM also invites engagement and demands present action to scratch the itch.

In short, players, fans, and academics know quite well that VGM functions as a powerful carrier of nostalgia. For example, look up the soundtrack to an iconic game on YouTube and glance at the comment section—contributors just gush about how this or that music track cues some treasured memory of a videogame. To that end, we editors model the opening of this book with the approach many ludomusicologists take—as certainly many player-academics do throughout the following pages—the personal heuristic. Can Aksoy, Sarah Pozderac-Chenevey, and I provide brief personal histories to connect with readers who may have had analogous experiences with videogames and their music. More importantly, we do so to demonstrate that discourses about nostalgia cannot be wholly objective and necessitate subjectivity to a degree. These heuristics invite readers to use this book to help them make (better) sense of their experiences with videogames and their music, ones they may treasure or consider vital to their identities. Those experiences necessarily come to the fore when theorizing nostalgia and videogames themselves.

Can Aksoy writes how:

Videogame music was the first musical genre I felt I discovered on my own. Like many kids born in the '80s, my week orbited around Friday afternoon visits to a now extinct, yet then ubiquitous *Blockbuster* video rental store. Renting a game was my reward for finishing homework and surviving another grueling piano lesson that I never managed to practice enough for. Most games I rented featured a sound test function in the options menu where you could play all the game's music. Accordingly, every Sunday, I transformed my bedroom into a videogame recording studio. I first posted 8 × 10 flyers that said "QUIET—RECORDING IN PROCESS" with a picture of a red lightbulb, then set up set up my Casio boom box to tape game

⁵ The itch-scratch metaphor borrowed with gratitude from Alexander Nunes, whose work appears later in this volume.

themes emerging from my crusty, two-knob TV. I would then cover each tape's jacket sleeve with drawings of the game's characters. I treasured this collection. When I was not rocking out to them on my Walkman, I stored these recordings in a padded sleeve that I still have today. As an adult, I am still subsumed by nostalgic memories whenever I hear these songs. Tracks like *Sonic the Hedgehog*'s "Green Hill Zone" floor me with a bittersweet longing for a time when my days revolved around school being out and my only worry was accruing rental-store late fees.

Can's childhood description pictorializes 1990s American popular culture. Blockbuster, Casio boom boxes, knobbed/tube televisions, cassette tapes, and Sega's *Sonic the Hedgehog*—all these things amount to what Netflix, LED TVs, MP4s, and the Playstation 5 might suggest to today's (and tomorrow's) fans. Can focalizes childhood, simpler times, and the process of collecting tunes for his everyday enjoyment, as opposed to centralizing his memories around a specific game.

As for me,

my friends Andrew, Chris, Dan, Juan, Larry, Leann, and I met at my house several times a week to play *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* in 1999. The game's soundtrack quickly became crucial to my experience and memories because, as a musician, being able to "play" the Ocarina was a game changer. *Ocarina*'s music had it all—ambience, atmosphere, catchy melodies, seductive soundscapes. I regularly improvised ocarina melodies like "Serenade of Water" and "Song of Time" on the piano and used to wander in the Forest Temple just to listen to the music. We still talk about those summer days with *Zelda*.

In 2010, I introduced my nieces Emma and Ava to *Twilight Princess*. Andrew and his son AJ brought it over one day, and the five of us played what felt like all night. I rediscovered how closely *Twilight Princess* resembled *Ocarina of Time*, especially in terms of music. The music of *Twilight Princess* vividly cued all the memories I had with my friends from 1999. Thereafter, Emma, Ava, and I made *Twilight Princess* our weekly bonding experience during my winter and summer breaks from UC Santa Barbara. Just like I did in *Ocarina of Time*'s Forest Temple, Emma and Ava wandered in Ordon Village of *Twilight Princess* to listen to the music of Link's initial home. I also played that track for them on the piano. We still send each other YouTube links and text messages with *Zelda* themes and talk about how much fun we had playing *Twilight Princess* together.

At 19 years old, I encountered *Ocarina of Time* in 1999 with my best friends. At 30, I reignited my love of games with *Twilight Princess* in 2010 with my nieces. And now, at 41, part of my intellectual identity is bound to understanding how nostalgia and VGM work together, having already published a few articles about it. Even so, I never reflected on how much these experiences could help me strengthen important

relationships in my life, over that stretch of time, and at such different stages in my life. That is, until I began this book project.

I emphasize the continuity and maintenance of important relationships centered around a shared site of nostalgic and emotional significance, *Zelda* and its music. I connected the experiences of my early 20s to those in my 30s and again into my 40s. My story, I think, counters the prevailing narrative that suggests people start forming relationships with videogames much earlier in life.

Finally, Sarah Pozderac-Chenevey has

fond memories of several games, but *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* was the defining game of my childhood. In a way, it set me on the path that led to this book! My brothers and I spent summers running around the woods, wielding sticks and practicing our jump attacks as we pretended to be Link. *Twilight Princess* was released while I was an undergrad, and I spent Saturdays sitting in a folding chair (the cord for my GameCube controller didn't reach the couch) enjoying the musical references to *Ocarina of Time*. I became curious about how these potent nostalgia triggers might change how the game was perceived, so I employed my now-husband as a case study, since he had never played any other *Zelda* games. I quizzed him about his experiences in *Twilight Princess* in the hopes of figuring out if the game was somehow different if it were experienced in musical isolation.

The single most important thing about *Ocarina of Time*, though, was that it made me believe that girls could play videogames. Even as a ten-year-old child, I had absorbed the stereotype that videogames were for boys. But when I found the Kokiri sword before my brothers and gained access to the Great Deku Tree, I knew that videogames were for me, too. Every musical allusion to *Ocarina of Time* in every *Zelda* game I have played since then carries with it nostalgia for my childhood and memories of that feeling of empowerment.

Now I am a mom, and as I introduce my oldest daughter to some of my favorite game franchises, I experience a mixture of nostalgia for my own childhood and curiosity about what her nostalgia for these games will be like. When she played *Pokémon: Let's Go Pikachu!*, the music and sound effects sent me back to sixth grade and catching all 151 on my Blue version. What will the music of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* evoke in her twenty years from now?

Sarah initially struggled with what many female players have faced—typically male gatekeepers who try to restrict who qualifies as a “gamer,” thus the bitter. But she won in the end; that's pretty sweet and the source of her nostalgia. VGM played a fundamental role in the content of our memories, and it likely allowed us to recall them in more detail than if it were absent. Our stories, we hope, invite readers to

contemplate the nostalgic potential of VGM and the relationships it allows them to form. We therefore have designed the following pages to help readers perceive this potential along the way, a map of sorts for those who wish to take this journey.

The subjectivity underpinning the engagement with memories, however, points to the complexities nested in any attempts at theorizing or defining nostalgia efficiently. Contributing to such difficulties lies the notion that nostalgia is so personal that those who experience it subconsciously can assume its universality. Yet that is also why people often fumble when called to define nostalgia. Consequently, studies of nostalgia often are plagued with decentralized, diffuse methodologies and equally fuzzy neologisms. The chameleon-like elusiveness of nostalgia led Boym to deem it as not belonging to any one discipline,⁶ for it intersects with psychology, neuroscience, history, literature, economics, popular culture, art, and music to name a few. People furthermore treat nostalgia at any given time as symbol, process, act, emotion, object, state of mind, or any combination thereof (and even interchangeably). Jilly Boyce Kay, Cat Mahoney, and Caitlin Shaw put it best, suggesting nostalgia's definitions "are vast, contended, and often contradictory, and the pluralization of its potential meanings must be acknowledged when considering its relationship to mediation."⁷ There is no one correct way to describe a phenomenon paradoxically so widely felt but deeply personal. Attempting to smooth out this apparent polarity into a methodological tool can become quite messy and poses some challenges:

1. Nostalgia's conflicted past.
2. Historical ambivalence toward nostalgia and videogames in academia.
3. How many nostalgias are there? A preponderance of taxonomies and types.

This introduction presents an overview of each challenge, which the following essays address more fully. Importantly, each player-academic writing for this volume notes how nostalgia has been manifesting itself in ludomusicology since there was a term for the academic field.

Challenge no. 1: Nostalgia's conflicted past

Who are you, that do not know your history?

—Ulysses, *Fallout New Vegas*

⁶ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xvii.

⁷ Kay, Mahoney, and Shaw, "Introduction," 5.

The use of nostalgia to investigate VGM requires much conceptualization and theorizing, a symptom of a larger issue in nostalgia studies. Those who write about nostalgia, especially in the humanities, feel compelled to relay its checkered past before theorizing into the future. The discussion of this first challenge therefore presents two broad narrative themes about the history of nostalgia, which inevitably will surface and intertwine throughout this book. First, return and turning back. Johannes Hofer invented the term “nostalgia” in 1688 to define a neurological disorder of homesickness among soldiers and their desire to return to their homes.⁸ Some player-academics writing in this anthology theorize nostalgia with metaphors referring to these original contexts. Although this medical understanding lasted until the 1900s, nostalgia began a long transitional phase from pathology to cultural aesthetic in Europe and North America throughout the nineteenth century. In the early 1800s, Friedrich Schiller’s medical treatments of nostalgia included the active and free associations of ideas, therapeutic exposure to the pastoral countryside, and the reliving of childhood memories.⁹ The domains where nostalgia was understood to operate, mental turmoil and lost homeland, gradually shifted to exterior sensuous relief and memory. Videogames and their music align much more smoothly with the latter pair than they do with the former.

A similar change occurred in societal attitudes toward nostalgia. Nineteenth-century thinkers regarded nostalgia as having to do with the body and time,¹⁰ a critical theme in facilitating present-day study of videogames as enactments of returning and turning back. The growing emphasis of nostalgia’s associations with somatic triggers and memories of a past irretrievable may account for why the phenomenon became so closely associated with the work of Marcel Proust. In his 1913, “A la recherche du Temps Perdu,” Proust theorizes nostalgia by reminiscing about how the taste of a madeleine cookie transported him to childhood experiences at his aunt’s home. The conceptual pinballing of nostalgia led to its de-medicalization and consequently broadened the possibilities of understanding it as far more dynamic and widespread than previously considered: pain for some, pleasure for others—thus, the bittersweet. The historical understanding of nostalgia as rooted in bodily, sensory triggers enables readers to understand how VGM cues autobiographical memory through aural markers—somatic stimuli—amplified further by the physicality of gameplay. This narrative thread necessarily focuses on the terminological and associative conditions of nostalgia through which readers can delve more deeply into their relationships with VGM.

⁸ Anspach, “Medical Dissertation on Nostalgia by Johannes Hofer, 1688,” 376–91.

⁹ Austin, *Nostalgia in Transition*, 1–14.

¹⁰ Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, 48.

The second thread, crystallizing nostalgia through objects, deals more closely with how fans and players often regard videogames and their music as consumable materials, which emerges from nostalgia's origins. The diffuse past of nostalgia has influenced the widespread production of nostalgic objects. For example, by the 1920s and 1930s, Western society generally settled on nostalgia as something of a wistful looking back to a bygone era against the backdrop of World War I and the Great Depression. This general characteristic facilitated the application of nostalgia to almost all parameters of life, thus allowing it to function as a sort of coping mechanism against historical traumas. Connotations of nostalgia therefore became more uniform while its signifiers expanded rapidly.¹¹ This propensity has only intensified due to the American predilection to commodify and consume the past in the form of objects.¹² A contemporary example of such past attitudes occurs in the AMC series *Mad Men* (2007–15), specifically the first season finale. The titular character Don Draper begins a sales presentation by talking about the delicate potency of nostalgia and the bond it allows buyers to form with a product. He then unveils a Kodak wheel-shaped slide projector, affectionately titled “The Carousel,” and begins a slide show highlighting key moments of his life moving backward in time. Amid these images, Don calls the Carousel a time machine, something that allows us to travel like a child would and visit places “we ache to go again ... where we know we’re loved.” Sure enough, his colleagues, some misty-eyed, feel the nostalgic tug at their heart strings by the conclusion of the presentation.¹³ Although set within a fictional story, the *Mad Men* example illustrates some important characteristics of nostalgia. First, it connotes a longing for the past. Second, Don’s words point to the interrelatedness of nostalgia, treasured memories, and positive emotions. Finally, “The Carousel” projector symbolized people’s ability to localize their nostalgia into tangible objects. Almost anything could induce nostalgia—foods, trinkets, art, architecture, film, music, and recently videogames.

By the 1970s, the crystallization of nostalgia through objects had become a highly lucrative industry,¹⁴ right around the time videogames entered the popular-culture scene. Artists and capitalists positioned nostalgia as a driving force behind manufacturing and marketing products, which exploited people’s obsession with previous eras. Apropos of readers here, the recent historic crises of 9/11, the War

¹¹ Sprengler, *Screening Nostalgia*, 19–23.

¹² Sprengler, *Screening Nostalgia*, 28; Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, 32–33.

¹³ Weiner and Weith, *Mad Men*, “The Wheel.”

¹⁴ Sprengler, *Screening Nostalgia*, 28–29. See also Fenty’s regard for videogames as “objects of nostalgia,” in “Why Old School Is Cool,” 24–28.

in Iraq, the 2008 Great Recession, and COVID-19 have reified predilections for nostalgia. How many of us throughout 2020 and 2021, for example, yearned for pre-coronavirus days or projected nostalgically into the future as to what life might be like if COVID-19 no longer posed a threat? We poignantly reflected on things we took for granted: Gathering in large groups, going to performances, singing in choirs, and entering public spaces without a second thought ... or face mask. Nostalgia allows us to mitigate the anxieties of the present with the old, the authentic, the past, and even a simulated future. For these reasons, nostalgia is very “in” and has manifested itself visibly in the hot market of retro-themed merchandise.¹⁵ Developers of Nintendo since at least the 2006 debut of the Wii, for example, repackaged classic game characters and their music from the 1980s and 1990s. Although nostalgia offers a good investment, the caveat of milking of old tropes and the recycling of beloved themes can risk annoyed groans from a once rapt fan base. This frequently occurs with the excessive number of reboots, remakes, prequels, and sequels that inundate film and videogame industries. Despite such potential drawbacks, videogames and their music serve as objects by which new players can instantiate nostalgic relationships, while veteran players can look back longingly to their gaming pasts.

*Challenge no. 2: Historical ambivalence toward nostalgia and
videogames in academia*

Stay a while, and listen!

—Deckard Cain, *Diablo II*

In addition to a conflicted past marked by shifting definitions, nostalgia garnered negative connotations among the intelligentsia between the 1970s and early 2000s, which presented some comparisons and implications for videogames and their music. The intellectual consensus about nostalgia amounted to suspicion and subjected it to sharp postmodern deconstruction, owing to the apparent connection nostalgia has with reactionary politics and capitalist material production. On the one hand, academia categorized nostalgia with mechanisms to perpetuate—even glorify—racism, sexism, and other forms of historical discrimination. The rose-colored glasses of nostalgia easily could lead people to prioritize “the good old days,” which likely were neither as good as they remember nor universally good for everyone. People could manipulate nostalgia to falsify the

¹⁵ Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, 52–54.

past, exploit emotions for profit, and prevent historical continuity.¹⁶ Brent Ferguson, T. J. Laws-Nicola, Jessica Kizzire, and Sarah Pozderac-Chenevey all tackle these issues throughout their chapters. Moreover, the postmodern deconstruction of nostalgia beginning in the 1970s parallels almost all too well the shaky grounds on which games and videogames shortly thereafter entered academic discourse. The most typical studies of videogames had to do with the correlation between play and aggressive, violent behavior.¹⁷ On the other hand, nostalgia seemed to exemplify some cynical postmodern theories. For instance, nostalgia fit Jean Baudrillard's notions of simulation and the hyper-real, where everything is artificial.¹⁸ Fredric Jameson also wrote most scathingly about nostalgia as a hopeless looking backward, an unfortunate consequence of the search for meaning through pastiche and artificial euphoria. In practice, Jameson's diagnosis led to skeptical regard for nostalgia's presence in cultural and artistic media. He provides an example, the nostalgia film, which he dismisses as a "hack" genre.¹⁹ It is not difficult to see how the terms *simulation*, *hyper-real*, *pastiche*, and *artificial euphoria* can apply to videogames and their music perhaps even more apparently than they can to nostalgia, as evidenced by Justin Sextro's chapter. Perhaps the relationship these postmodern terms have to nostalgia and VGM may explain in part why the latter two seem to occupy so much social but not much academic discourse. Because of such postmodern critiques, however, academics sat ill at ease with analyzing nostalgia, as well as with its overall utility.

Case in point, the postmodern ambivalence toward nostalgia appears in music scholarship, as well, which may explain why the field has treated the topic quite thinly. Ironically, the elements for researching nostalgia's connection to music exist within the fields of musicology and music theory.²⁰ The study of affect deals with music's relationship with emotion, and research into semiotics investigates the different ways music can refer to something outside itself, which almost always requires a sense of musical memory. Even outside postmodern scholarship, fans frequently search for musical clues in their favorite media. These usually take

¹⁶ Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, 31.

¹⁷ Feshbach and Singer, *Television and Aggression*; Friedrich-Cofer and Huston, "Television and Violence," 364–71; Anderson and Bushman, "Effects of Violent Video Games," 353–59.

¹⁸ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 75–78, 121–28.

¹⁹ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 19, 279–98.

²⁰ Theodor Zwinger remarked on Swiss soldiers' susceptibility to (pathologized) nostalgia at the sound of a "certain rustic cantilena" in 1710, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau expanded on this idea in his *Complete Dictionary of Music*. Both quoted in Kangas, "Classical Style, Childhood, and Nostalgia," 222.

the form of leitmotifs—musical phrases that refer to a specific person, object, or idea—a subject Can Aksoy’s chapter treats in greater depth. The presence of leitmotifs in a new trailer for a film or game, for example, provokes almost immediate speculation about who or what might appear. Even so, postmodern scholarship of musical nostalgia has been limited, tending to focus on a specific composer or even single work, such as Ryan R. Kangas’s work on Gustav Mahler’s Fourth Symphony. Nostalgia’s characteristic slipperiness and the prestige of “absolute music,” that which (supposedly) deals with nothing outside itself, both likely have contributed to this lacuna.²¹ Music scholarship still waits for an explicitly theorized application of nostalgia, and we editors believe the subfield of ludomusicology has the strongest shot at doing so.

In fact, we believe videogames and their music have contributed to and can help explain the explosion of nostalgia studies within the last twenty years. Moreover, videogames exemplify popular culture’s unslakable appetite for nostalgia. Players co-script their virtual experiences, which chart the unfolding of a journey that encodes itself into autobiographical memories, constituting a type of lived experience. Players recollecting their experiences then can shape part of their identities. VGM in turn accompanies this process and makes those memories even more indelible and retrievable. For these reasons, videogames constitute formidable postmodern carriers for nostalgia, complex primary texts in which parts of the past are built into their design and music. This proposition has become so widespread that the academy has begun to make room for significant discourse, which likely would not have been possible without two groundbreaking works. First, Espen Aarseth recasts videogames not as entertainment programs but as texts requiring significant effort to interpret in his 1997 book *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*.²² Next comes a book any aspiring ludomusicologist should know: *Game Sound: An Introduction to the History, Theory, and Practice of Video Game Music and Sound Design* (2008) by Karen Collins, a pivotal work that theorizes game sound and music with immersion, as well as somatic and affective triggers.²³ These two works arguably provide the foundational texts for ludology and ludomusicology, respectively. They also enable videogames to share the same conceptual space as affective states, relationship-building, and emotional investment, which paved the way for studies like this one.

Academic texts since the 2010s, however, lay further groundwork for analyzing nostalgia with videogames and their music, located in the burgeoning “retro”

²¹ See Botstein, “Memory and Nostalgia.”

²² Aarseth, *Cybertext*, 13–17.

²³ Collins, *Game Sound*.

studies subfield. Works like *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past* by Simon Reynolds (2010), Mark Fisher's *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (2014), and Jean Hogarty's *Popular Music and Retro Culture in the Digital Age* (2019) observe nostalgia as a cultural motivator of aesthetic and consumable art.²⁴ And the profitability of "retro" has led scholars to adopt consumer theories in their discussions—a central theme in Sebastian Diaz-Gasca's chapter—which can explain the perception that the lucrative commercialization of nostalgia in VGM concerts may save the symphony orchestra.²⁵ Retro studies help clarify the tension between players' love of the past reflected in lasting objects amid rapid, inexorable technological advancement and the nigh-immediate obsolescence of previous technologies left in its wake. Understanding videogames and their music in this capacity might not have been possible without academia's positive recasting of nostalgia, one that attracted player-academics with a wide toolbox of methodological skills. Both nostalgia studies and ludomusicology have emerged within the past twenty-ish years; yet, at the time of this writing, they have barely crossed paths.

Challenge no. 3: How many nostalgias are there? A preponderance of taxonomies and types.

You are in a maze of twisty passages, all alike.

—Zork I: *The Great Underground Empire*

Nostalgia and VGM both presuppose intensely subjective experiences that facilitate overlap and mutual informing. Although subjectivity once presented a liability in academic circles, postmodernism has made room for the study of these two topics by categorizing the subjective experience as an epistemology. On the surface, the relationship between nostalgia and VGM relies heavily on subjective discourse, as the opening heuristics of this introduction suggest. This book readily acknowledges and accepts subjective positioning but also recognizes it requires the counterbalance of traditional, empirical methods of inquiry. An honest discussion about the fraught and delicate topic of nostalgia needs a careful balance between the subjective and objective. This is all to say that any epistemology examining nostalgia or its application to other disciplines present neither a fully accurate nor a

²⁴ Reynolds, *Retromania*; Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*; Hogarty, *Popular Music and Retro Culture*.

²⁵ Needleman, "How Videogames Are Saving the Symphony Orchestra."

completely flawed account, and no one discipline can tell the whole story. Ludomusicologist Tim Summers provides an apt parallel to the plurality of methodologies required to analyze VGM.²⁶ In short, nostalgic readings of texts demand nuanced theorizations. Many theorists accordingly chip away at this challenge through one of two general approaches, which will become apparent in the pages ahead.

Player-academics working on nostalgia and VGM often emulate the approaches other scholars have used to discuss and categorize the former. First, some strive to make the slippery concept of nostalgia graspable through strict definitions, parameters, and features. Psychologists generally regard nostalgia as an emotion that includes bitter and sweet affective states and measure it through psychometrics and personality study.²⁷ Similarly, neuroscientists like Frederick Barrett and Petr Janata refer to nostalgia as an affective state and use such measurement techniques to record the effects of music-based nostalgia.²⁸ Other social scientists theorize nostalgia by examining its role in patterns of consumption, behaviors, or present subcultures. For example, Morris Holbrook and Robert Schindler define nostalgia as a preference toward objects common to someone's past within business and marketing purviews. Such a broad application, they write, "covers any and all liking for past objects that, for whatever reason, are no longer commonly experienced."²⁹ Notably, this framework of preference expands connotations of nostalgia beyond affect to include behavior. Regarding videogames, Laurie M. Taylor and Zach Whalen define nostalgia similarly as active processes of looking back to the past, trying to bring that past into the present, and bringing knowledge of the past to bear on the present and the future.³⁰ Strict definitions of nostalgia offer some foundational understanding of the phenomenon and facilitate discourse about how people perceive, experience, and talk about it. Indeed, some authors in this book adopt one, empirically derived definition of nostalgia as a methodological frame to discuss VGM, an example being the following chapter by Michael Vitalino and me. Such an exacting approach relieves player-academics of the burden of theorizing nostalgia every time they write about it because they must get to the content of videogames and music—and all the other necessary subcategories of each requiring their attention.

²⁶ Summers, "Analysing Video Game Music: Sources, Methods and a Case Study."

²⁷ Castelnovo-Tedesco, "Reminiscence and Nostalgia"; Kaplan, "The Psychopathology of Nostalgia"; Routledge, *Nostalgia*; Werman, "Normal and Pathological Nostalgia."

²⁸ Barrett and Janata, "Neural Responses to Nostalgia-Evoking"; Frederick S. Barrett et al., "Music-Evoked Nostalgia."

²⁹ Holbrook and Schindler, "Echoes of the Dear Departed Past."

³⁰ Taylor and Whalen, "Playing the Past: An Introduction," 3.

Second, the more frequently used approach entails creating taxonomies reflected in the several nostalgia types within the literature, many of which appear in essays of this book. Multidisciplinary voices hybridize scientific, social, and personal narratives, and they often present encyclopedic lists of possible nostalgic types. Examples of some taxonomies include Fred Davis's triple-ordered nostalgia in his landmark 1979 sociological study: *simple nostalgia* considers the past as better, simpler, and more desirable than the present; *reflexive nostalgia* demands people to question the truthfulness, authenticity, and accuracy of nostalgic claims via self-examination; and *interpreted nostalgia* allows people to objectify the nostalgia they feel by "raising analytically oriented questions concerning its sources, typical character, significance, and psychological purpose."³¹ Another popular taxonomy focuses on the nostalgia people feel for their own past versus a past they never experienced, generally *personal* and *historical* nostalgias.³² Finally, Boym offers the most famous taxonomy: *restorative* and *reflective* nostalgias, respectively, the active desire to recreate the past versus the passive longing for the past.³³ This brief sampling points to but a fraction of nostalgia types scholars have advanced and the disciplines required to construct its taxonomies. That's A LOT to keep track of!

The current state of the literature appears well primed for a ludomusicological perspective. The methods player-academics bring with them can help clarify and even richly texture how nostalgia operates within videogames and their music. In fact, this volume argues that ludomusicology itself, a multidisciplinary subfield of musicology and media studies, arose partly because of nostalgia. Nostalgia tied to VGM runs rampant within online periodical literature, blogs, comment threads, and fan reception, but its structural presence in ludomusicology proper has been comparatively thin. Among the outliers, William Gibbons recognizes nostalgia as contributing to his larger arguments. His recollection of playing *Zelda II* in *Unlimited Replays: Video Games and Classical Music* relies on nostalgic memory, as does his account with Stephen Reale in the introduction to *Music in the Role-Playing Game: Heroes and Harmonies*.³⁴ Other authors have written article-length studies about nostalgia and VGM, three of whom contribute to this

³¹ Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday*, 18–24.

³² Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday*, 8, 222; Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, 4–6; Garrido and Davidson, *Nostalgia, Music and Memory*, 32–37; Tom Vanderbilt, "The Nostalgia Gap," *The Baffler*.

³³ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 41–56.

³⁴ Gibbons, *Unlimited Replays*, 1–3; Gibbons and Reale, "Prologue," 4–5.

volume: Jessica Kizzire, Sarah Pozderac-Chenevey, and myself.³⁵ Finally, Andra Ivănescu's *Popular Music in the Nostalgia Videogame: The Way It Never Sounded* has provided the first book-length study examining nostalgia and VGM. She theorizes player nostalgia for gaming's classic era through analysis of *nostalgia games*, contemporary games intentionally styled to look like those of the past,³⁶ not unlike what Jonathan Waxman and Reba Wissner discuss in their chapters. Aside from these examples, nostalgia has increasingly become an "elephant in the room" in ludomusicological circles. It stands on the precipice of becoming a term as widely adopted and theorized as, say, immersion or interactivity. But it just needs a little nudge out the door.

To that point, ludomusicologists have offered a sort of meta-cognitive reflection on the field, one that sees nostalgia as gradually moving away from the periphery and closer to central discussions. The premier issue of the *Journal of Sound and Music in Games* (Winter 2020) features a colloquy of four prominent scholars who investigate the benefits and dangers of VGM canons. That a discipline so young can address the topic of canon(s) attests to its rapid ascendancy in the academy and the high degree of self-awareness among its scholars. More importantly for this book, however, two of the four contributors suggest nostalgia informs the creation and curation of canons within ludomusicology. William Gibbons opens the colloquy by examining canon formation through live orchestral concerts of VGM. He mentions nostalgia playing an important role in which historical narratives about videogames and their music emerge as dominant.³⁷ Julianne Grasso follows by discussing how "musical practices around video games shore up the lived experiences of play," which unsurprisingly includes memory.³⁸ She examines fan-based musical arrangements of *The Legend of Zelda* themes as both processes and statements about the emotional affect of remembering play, a stone's throw away from nostalgia proper. The latter two essays by Hyeonjin Park and Karen Cook focus less on nostalgic motivations and more on the challenges posed by canon formation on inclusivity.³⁹ Moreover, the topics raised by Gibbons, Grasso, Park, and Cook also appear throughout the chapters of this book, respectively, by Elizabeth Hunt, Alexander Nunes, Brent Ferguson and T. J. Laws-Nicola, and

³⁵ Kizzire, "The Place I'll Return to Someday"; Pozderac-Cheveney, "A Direct Link to the Past"; and Rone, "Twilight and Faërie."

³⁶ Ivănescu, *Popular Music in the Nostalgia Videogame*.

³⁷ Gibbons, "Rewritable Memory," 75–77.

³⁸ Grasso, "On Canons as Music and Muse," 83.

³⁹ Park, "The Difficult, Uncomfortable, and Imperative Conversations," 87–94; Cook, "Canon Anxiety?" 95–99.

Sarah Pozderac-Chenevey. Given the overlap of ideas from differing perspectives, it becomes clear that nostalgia informs fundamental ideas within ludomusicology. We in this book wish to take this notion even further, to explode this moment by positing nostalgia itself as a fundamental idea within the discipline, not an auxiliary one. We attempt to give it that nudge.

Facing the challenges—The map and compass

It's dangerous to go alone, take this!

—Old Man, *The Legend of Zelda*

Accordingly, then, this volume acts as a primer of case studies, theories, and analyses in response to the preceding challenges. We player-academics position nostalgia centrally by attaching it to a variety of other concepts and disciplines and forging hybridized frameworks. This strategy, nonetheless, proved difficult in the making because we use frameworks from other fields not tailored to games or their music. The frameworks thus fit roughly and needed more leg work to show how one concept connects to nostalgia, which connects to videogames and their music, which connects back to the initial concept, and so on. Throughout the gestation of this book, Can, Sarah, and I quickly realized the essays demanded player-academics who can connect *several* dots. We authors did not have the luxury of drawing from tidy, definitive theoretical concepts and had to dirty our hands, stretch our minds, and play with ideas—pun intended, of course.

The plural disciplinary approaches we adopted have permitted us to synthesize voices and created unified narratives. On a global level, we have gained experiential knowledge and have formed emotional connections with games and their music, a crucial contribution of the media itself. Videogames and their music offer sites of identity and relationship forming, bonding, escapism, and confidence-building. We also have reached ages where the rigor of our intellectual training allows us to see perspective and critical distance from those necessary emotional moments. On a local level, however, we were obliged to provide more background information than might strike as standard for chapter- (and introduction-) length pieces. We typically had to describe the game, its music, components of its gameplay, and other details insofar as such information facilitates theoretical frameworks or the instantiation of nostalgia. We also had to decide from which perspectives, scholars, and definitions of nostalgia to draw. Consequently, all authors theorized nostalgia to a substantial degree before applying it to the VGM context(s) they wished to emphasize.

More importantly, the chapters throughout this anthology raise, (re)frame, and respond to epistemological questions about nostalgia and VGM. How the authors do so dictate their placement within the volume. The first part, *Articulating Nostalgia and Videogame Music*, offers foundational, overarching concepts that can apply to the rest of the anthology, as well as further study in the broader intellectual and fan communities. The first two chapters pick up where this introduction leaves off by laying the conceptual groundwork for nostalgia and VGM in greater detail. Michael Vitalino and I provide a psychological and neuroscientific reading of nostalgia. We then present examples as to how musical cues during videogame play can induce nostalgia and how it interacts with larger concepts within game studies. In other words, we attempt to track how nostalgia comes about in the brain through exposure to VGM during play. Sebastian Diaz-Gasca's chapter accounts for the other side of the coin. He theorizes nostalgia and VGM beyond gameplay, which he examines primarily through the lenses of consumption and commodification. Thus, he coins the term *paraludical consumption*, engaging with VGM "outside the game." While several authors throughout this book coin terms designed to give future scholars the tools to advance the body of knowledge within this field, these two essays offer some tools to do so.

The authors of the second part, *Objectifying Nostalgia and Videogame Music*, explain the origin of musical artifacts and entire events related to videogames and their music through nostalgia. Elizabeth Hunt takes on the commercialization of nostalgia as it relates to the wildly popular symphonic performances of VGM, namely *Video Games Live*, *The Legend of Zelda: Symphony of the Goddess*, and *Pokémon: Symphonic Evolutions*. She discusses how symphony orchestras use nostalgia to curate VGM repertoires from a body of games that have become Proustian symbols of childhood. Next, Can Aksoy examines videogame leitmotifs that provoke nostalgia. When videogames commodify nostalgic references into a form of gameplay entertainment, he argues, they expel players from fully immersing in virtual experiences. Aksoy then explains how leitmotifs reverse this antipathy between a videogame's intentional nostalgic references and immersion. By studying leitmotifs in *Final Fantasy* games, his work theorizes how a nostalgic leitmotif can act as a mnemonic device that increases gameplay immersion. This conclusion has the potential to speak to broader musicological circles. Jonathan Waxman tracks the rise of a new type of game through nostalgic artifacts in which fans remember bad cult movies fondly for their badness. In this production, fans celebrate badness in games or movies coalesced through nostalgic engagement. These essays comment most closely on the notion of crystallizing nostalgia through objects and the artistic, capitalistic implications discussed above.

In the third part, *Subjectifying Nostalgia and Videogame Music*, authors focus less on the material manifestations of nostalgia and more on its relationship to the

subjective and the abstract. This focus manifests in authors foregrounding different frameworks of nostalgia—the preponderance of taxonomies and types—and hybridize terms to arrive at new definitions of or perspectives about nostalgia. Alexander Nunes theorizes *liminal nostalgia* as emerging from moments where players gain musical literacy within *The Legend of Zelda* series. The “playing” of melodies via the controller in *Ocarina of Time* constitutes liminality, the threshold between the real and the virtual, which triggers nostalgia. He argues that covers of VGM provide the metaphorical scratch to the itch instantiated by liminal nostalgia in gameplay. Reba Wissner discusses music’s functions within point-and-click games and proffers an *inter-media nostalgia*. She argues that *The Twilight Zone: The Game* maintains the aural aesthetic of the original television show of the 1950s and 1960s. Rather than immersing players into fully constructed virtual worlds, point-and-click games facilitate immersion through repeated playthroughs and allow players to absorb musical markers of the show through osmosis. Justin Sextro’s essay investigates how *EarthBound* uses quotes, references, and samples of popular music, themselves nostalgic markers, while simultaneously parodying JRPG conventions. The soundtrack, he maintains, creates an imaginary American suburban soundscape where nostalgia shapes the game narrative and engages with the lived experiences of players. These chapters test the boundaries of existing definitions of nostalgia and focus overall on the subjectivity necessary for the nostalgia to occur.

Finally, authors in *Confronting Nostalgia and Videogame Music* theorize ways to evaluate real history and examine historically pernicious applications of nostalgia, a correlation to the historical ambivalence with which academia has regarded the topic. Brent Ferguson and T. J. Laws-Nicola focus on three types of nostalgia present in music videos within the JRPGs: *retro nostalgia* in *Rhythm Heaven Fever*, *episodic (Proustian) nostalgia* in *Yakuza 0*, and *future nostalgia* in *Omega Quintet*. Each music video promotes the commercial success of the game but also allows a look into oppressive social and gender structures within the current hyper-capitalistic Japanese society. Jessica Kizzire argues for nostalgia as a form of historical consciousness in her chapter about *Fallout 3*. Her reading of aural markers in carefully curated popular and patriotic songs within the game’s alternative timeline reveals two applications of nostalgia. On the one hand, the popular music situates players within mid-century American aesthetics. On the other hand, the patriotic songs ironically demonstrate the politicization of nostalgia to mobilize restoration, to get back to “the way things were.” Finally, Sarah Pozderac-Chenevey reveals how *BioShock Infinite* repeatedly challenges players to confront historical racism of early twentieth-century America and the nostalgia it produced. She argues that musical depictions of racism surface in the form of minstrelsy and related imagery. Such markers call to mind the historical racism of the US and the dangers inherent

to the nostalgia that often fuels dangerous ideologies. Although this book accepts nostalgia as beneficial, authors of this section warn against the very real effects of its abuse from ethical and historical standpoints.

Postscript

The ending isn't any more important than any of the moments leading to it.

—Dr. Rosalene, *To The Moon*

Throughout our compiling this book, Can, Sarah, and I have learned that most authors discuss nostalgia in relation to equally fuzzy terms within game scholarship including immersion, liminality, transmediation, interactivity, and so on. These relatively new terms possess neither the universality nor the longevity in the collective mind as nostalgia. Discerning readers of this volume will see how we authors adopt such concepts as fundamental to understanding nostalgia's relationship to VGM. Moreover, the following chapters demonstrate how those concepts, with the addition of the widely theorized leitmotif, overlap with the mechanisms by which players and fans of VGM experience music-based nostalgia. We also hope this volume balances the representation between standard, canonic titles versus cult classics, niche, and lesser-known gems. Recalling the previous section, we editors believe the qualities of this book poise it to comment meaningfully on the state of research within ludomusicology and how its scholars have moved beyond attempts to legitimize the field within academia.⁴⁰

This project also has reinforced anew what we player-academics—and most likely all manner of players—have experienced from the get-go: videogames demand commitments of time, energy, and emotion. They draw us into their worlds, which range from basic point-and-click scenes to sophisticated Tolkienesque virtual worlds. In that regard, VGM functions much like film music but with the added complexities of dynamism and responsiveness to player input. No other medium can possess or claim such a capability. For these reasons, we hope readers will regard the affective potential of VGM as perhaps the most powerful way to experience music-based nostalgia other than learning and playing an instrument. The elusive phenomenon of nostalgia can provide a fruitful, extremely rewarding (and fun!) way to understand videogames and their music more deeply. With map and compass in hand, the journey begins.

⁴⁰ Thanks to both peer-review readers who flagged this point independently of each other.

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