

Thomas B. Yee

Author of *Gender, Race and Religion in Video Game Music*

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Thomas B. Yee is an assistant professor of instruction in theory and composition at the University of Texas at San Antonio School of Music, where he teaches music theory, aural skills and electronic composition. His research analyses the representation of gender, race and religion in video game music and the compositional innovations of Japanese 8-bit-era video game composers.

*What inspired you to write *Gender, Race and Religion in Video Game Music*?*

I discovered my love of music from the beeps and boops of the family Super Nintendo, and video game music has been a constant soundtrack to my life. I know firsthand how the narratives and social messages of video games may play a powerful role in shaping a person's life and identity. As both a music theorist and composer, I wanted to explore video game music's ability to communicate important narrative and sociocultural meanings about some of the most central facets of human identity.

It is tempting to look at video game music as little more than 'sonic wallpaper' – something that sounds appealing or engaging while players primarily look to a game's text and visuals for information. But that perspective overlooks the multiple ways players actively interpret gameplay – and story-relevant meanings – from a game's music and sound design. Analysing and interpreting a video game's music in dialogue with its story, characters and social context offers clues to uncover deeper meanings that speak to the core of who we are as humans.

I wanted to demonstrate that video game music has much more to say than it is often given credit for. I also wanted to advocate for critical listening and a socially engaged approach to interpreting video game music, showing that no game or soundtrack exists in a vacuum.

Can you give us a brief overview of the main arguments or themes in the book?

The book is organized into four major parts. First, I introduce a theory of 'interpretative interactivity' as an approach for analysing and listening to video game music, applying it to the fascinating examples of *Chrono Cross* (1999) and *Gris* (2018), that blur the boundaries between narrative and gameplay. The takeaway here is that players are an active interpretative force shaping the game's soundscape by their gameplay actions, and that they do so in dialogue with their real-world identities and social context.

Then, the next three sections explore the title topics of the book – gender, race/culture and religion respectively – analysing multiple case studies for each topic in dialogue with relevant sociocultural factors surrounding the games' release and reception. In each section, I describe what musical factors forge meaningful connections to facets of human identity, empowering video game music to speak to important real-world social factors like gender, race/culture and religion. Through each of these sections, a common thread is that video games both reflect the social and cultural conditions in which they are produced as well as actively participate in shaping and redefining that culture. This makes video games' relationship with relevant cultural issues as interactive as the gameplay itself.

What gap in existing literature or discourse were you hoping to address with this work?

There really was no scholarship quite like *Gender, Race and Religion in Video Game Music* when I conceived the book. In my market research, I found books exploring gender, race/culture and religion in video games generally, but with little to no discussion of the games' music. In ludomusicology, articles and conference papers on gender, racial/cultural or, more rarely, religious representations have always been present, but without collecting them into a single book-length treatment. Between the time of proposing the book and its appearance on the market, two or three edited volumes related to gender or cultural representation in video game music have appeared or are in production, but this book remains the first focused, single-author exploration on these topics.

It is my hope that other ludomusicology scholars – as well as non-music scholars writing on video games – will build on the concepts offered by this book and extend the analysis of gender, race/culture and religion in video game music into other game examples and social contexts. I frame each of the three sections' main concepts as tools to be taken up and used by others. In this way, I see my work in this book not as a statement with a full stop, but rather as a question mark for others to answer in their own voice.

How does video game music reflect or reinforce gender stereotypes?

Video game music joins a long history of classical music traditions that communicate conventional gender stereotypes. For example, did you know that the music theorist A. B. Marx labelled musical themes in the classical sonata form as 'masculine' or 'feminine,' classifying the so-called 'masculine' theme as the 'primary' theme? Codes for communicating conventional masculinity or femininity persisted through classical music into Hollywood film scores and into present-day popular music and video game soundtracks. To be sure, there is no necessary connection between these musical characteristics and our social construction of gender identity – there is nothing inherent about a flute that represents a woman more than a man. Even so, because we have been socialized into centuries-long traditions of hearing and understanding these conventionally-gendered musical codes, it is important to analyse their impact on gendered meanings within video games.

For example, the *Final Fantasy* series offers nearly forty years of examples of how musical gendering may be approached in video game soundtracks, as well as how it has evolved over the decades. My research found that the first character-specific musical themes in the franchise, heard in *Final Fantasy II* (1988) and *Final Fantasy III* (1990), were themes for women characters, marking their femininity as either virtuous or dangerous through conventional musical strategies. As technological capabilities improved in *Final Fantasy IV* (1991) through *Final Fantasy XII* (2006), most playable characters received individual character themes. With a few notable exceptions (Terra, Ashe), the majority of *Final Fantasy* main character themes reinforce conventional gender stereotypes. The musical themes of *Lightning* in *Final Fantasy XIII* (2009) and *Noctis* in *Final Fantasy XV* (2016) are significant exceptions to this pattern, communicating alternative femininity and alternative masculinity in accordance with changing social trends in Japan

Can you share an example of a game where the music effectively challenges traditional gender roles?

One fascinating game example featuring music that challenges conventional gender stereotypes is *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017). *Horizon Zero Dawn* subverts the 'damsel-in-distress' trope common in early video games by focusing on Aloy, an empowered woman character in the role of an action hero. Though women action heroes like Lara Croft and Samus Aran had previously been seen, Aloy more clearly overcomes the video game industry's historical reliance on the damsel-in-distress trope. Aloy is musically represented by a vocal register and melodic instruments that occupy a 'third gender' space situated between the tenor and soprano registers typically used to portray heroic men and women characters, respectively. Seen through opera traditions such as the castrati and travesti that also musically communicate this 'third gender' concept, Aloy's music encodes her subversion of conventional gender roles as a narratively centred woman.

How do composers navigate the line between cultural inspiration and cultural appropriation in game music?

Video game composers – like composers in film, classical music or popular music – often do not navigate musical cultural representation well. But I would like to reframe the question somewhat, away from what I call the three ‘a-words’ – ‘appreciation’, ‘appropriation’ and ‘authenticity’ – and towards focusing on how cultural representation is done rather than who is doing the representing. My research found that the three ‘a-words’ often fail to capture the dynamics of how a culture’s musical resources are being used or the meanings that are communicated about that culture. This was especially true of ‘authenticity,’ used to describe music that sounds true to the culture it represents. For example, the ‘world music’ genre claims inclusivity by presenting ‘authentic’ music from non-western regions, but it is systematically exclusive by marking and packaging non-western music as the ‘other’. In contrast, inauthenticity can empower artists pigeonholed narrowly into music perceived as ‘authentic’ to their cultural heritage, articulating a migratory lived experience by hybridising music of their ancestral and current cultures.

Rather than focusing on who is making the music, I turn the spotlight to how culture is musically represented in four fascinating game examples: *Super Mario Odyssey* (2017), *Raji: An Ancient Epic* (2020), *Civilization VI* (2016) and *Overwatch* (2016). A theme that emerges is the importance of avoiding ‘stereotype’, which reduces the vibrant musical diversity of a culture to a convenient aural calling card. Video game music that communicates meaningful messages about the culture – especially ones that resonate with the game’s narrative – are much more likely to avoid falling into stereotyping. This is why I advise game composers and developers to combine elements internal and external to the culture being represented to advance a broader narrative argument.

What are the most common ways religion is musically represented in video games?

The musical traditions of the world’s many religions are as distinct as the times and cultures that produced them. However, in video games – especially in Japanese-developed games – the most common sacred music tradition drawn on is Christian liturgical music, such as in the Catholic or Anglican denominations. The sounds of choir, organ and plainchant are commonly used in video game music to signify churches, temples or other sacred locations. Game composers may invoke sacred music traditions not to create an analogy to religion per se, but rather sacred, mythological or magisterial contexts within the game’s narrative. Ancientness is also typically associated with occurrences of these sacred music traditions. For example, the halo rings in the *Halo* franchise are often underscored by sacred plainchant, and a deity, dragon or other ancient creature may be musically represented by choir to signify their majesty.

Have you observed patterns in how sacred or spiritual sounds are used to cue certain emotions or narratives in gameplay?

In addition to the above, the Protestant Christian hymn tradition may be used to indicate a pastoral setting, such as the starting town location or a village nestled in the countryside. Associations between hymnic music and pastoral settings come to us through centuries of classical music traditions, maintained through ballets, films and now video games. Another strategy that doesn't connect to real-world liturgical music traditions is the use of synthesizer pads – especially ones with soft attack and plentiful reverb – to suggest the numinous, profound or spiritual. These ethereal soundscapes cue players to feel contemplative, free-floating and disconnected from an ordinary sense of materiality or temporality.

One of the most fascinating narrative strategies especially common in Japanese-developed video games is the 'god-slayer' trope, where players battle against and even kill a gameworld's god. The music of god-slayer scenes combines rock-influenced battle music with elements of sacred liturgical music, such as choir, organ or church bells. Even though rock and sacred music may at first seem incompatible, this strategy produces a surprising play of opposites that allows game composers to communicate nuanced messages about deity and humanity in the scene. For example, whether the rock or sacred elements dominate in the music may indicate whether the players or deity have the advantage. The degree of conflict or harmony between the rock and sacred elements may indicate that the player characters have harnessed an element of divine power themselves to combat the deity on equal footing. These sacred music-inflected battle tracks provide some of the most interestingly and narratively rewarding religious representation in video game music.

What role can players or fans play in pushing for more equitable and thoughtful music in games?

One of the book's biggest themes is the two-way cultural dialogue between video games and the audiences who play and interpret them. Just as player feedback is crucial to improving video games' gameplay, character designs and narrative choices, audiences should give voice to the effect and meanings they experience from a video game's music. Although game music usually doesn't receive as much attention or comment as, say, the game's graphics, it is part of the overall aesthetic package that players often pick up on subconsciously. Even without any musical training, players may experience *Super Mario Odyssey*'s Tostarena level as significantly lower in cultural resolution than Bowser's Castle from the same game – and, as Chapter 5 shows, music is a major driver of those intuitions.

How aware do you think game developers and composers are of the cultural implications of their musical choices?

Echoing an earlier answer, video game developers and composers often do not show as much awareness of the cultural meanings communicated by their musical choices as they should. Occasionally, interview remarks from game composers or developers reveal more intentionality in communicating progressive social messages – for example, Shimomura Yōko (*Final Fantasy XV*, 2016), Linos Tzelos (*Raji: An Ancient Epic*, 2020) or Jeff Kaplan (*Overwatch*, 2016).

One of my biggest hopes for the book and my research in musical identity representation is to empower and encourage video game developers and composers to become more aware and intentional in shaping the musical messages of their games' soundtracks. Too often, problematic stereotypes become the default that composers reach for when on a time crunch or when asked to compose for a perspective or community they know little about – especially along the lines of gender, culture and race. The practical examples and recommendations in the book are intended to prepare game composers to approach musical identity representation more productively.

Do you think the landscape of video game music is becoming more inclusive and self-aware?

Yes. Across multiple case studies, the book shows a general trajectory from problematic to positive examples of musical identity representation, whether in specific franchises like *Final Fantasy* or *Civilization*, or across the industry. This is especially true when considering gender and racial/cultural representation – the most egregious examples tended to be from earlier examples, while recent games showed more inclination towards nuance and inclusion.

That doesn't mean that trajectory is inevitable or automatic. Unfortunately, backsliding fuelled by cultural grievance is always possible, as shown by Gamergate and the review bombing of *The Last of Us 2*, to name a couple of examples. Political movements or nationalist policies send ripples into our media environment, and the values of diversity, equity, inclusion and social justice are under fire in multiple arenas. It is more important than ever to remain vigilant, and to lobby continually for positive social change through our media discourse.

What do you hope readers – especially gamers and composers – take away from your book?

First, returning to an earlier theme – video game music is never merely ‘sonic wallpaper’, but contributes actively to the game’s cultural discourse across a range of relevant demographic identities. This is what allows video game music to resonate with the core of who we are as humans. To players, this means listening with open ears for the social meanings that game music communicates, actively interpreting the soundtrack in dialogue with a player’s own real-world perspective and lived experience. To composers and developers, this means becoming informed and intentional in shaping their game’s musical messages to be productive, not problematic.

Second, one of the guiding principles of the book, and of studying the musical representation of identity, is fostering diversity. Diversity is the embrace of difference, rather than the erasure or exclusion of difference, and is the opposite of discrimination in all its forms. The book closes on a powerful statement of the importance of diversity to combat sexism, racism and religious discrimination. Representational diversity aims to tell a greater range of stories than only the most normative or privileged ones. The musical messages of video games may either facilitate or frustrate representational diversity, shaping players’ attitudes towards others who are different.



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