

# Music Video Games

# **APPROACHES TO DIGITAL GAME STUDIES**

Volume 4

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# Music Video Games

Performance, Politics, and Play

**EDITED BY**  
**MICHAEL AUSTIN**

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# Afterword—Toadofsky’s Music Lessons

*William Cheng*

I devoured this entire volume in a single, nearly uninterrupted sitting. *Clicks* and *bloops* rang in my ears, while colors and patterns popped into my mind’s eye. Vivid writing sucks you into a sensorial vortex; or, to use game-related vocabulary, such prose warps you (à la Mario’s magic whistle or Link’s ocarina) to other lands, other times. Striking essays in these pages abound with efforts to capture the sights, sounds, and feelings of music video games—an umbrella genre distinguished by a vital emphasis on rhythmic engagement and audiovisual coordination. Authors tackle broad themes, everything from agency and accessibility to community and pedagogy. Inquiries revolve around play’s musicality and music’s playfulness. In historical, technological, and cultural perspectives, much of ludomusicology’s literature to date upholds music and play as a match made in heaven, insofar as both activities echo with creativity, virtuosity, and the making and breaking of rules.

In this brief afterword, I offer some modest musings on the ethical possibilities of music video games. By lending an ear to the affective affordances of this genre, I tease out the larger social stakes at work in day-to-day debates about artistry and recreation. With reference to a musical moment in the game *Super Mario RPG: Legend of the Seven Stars* (Square 1996), I use the metaphor of the safety net to weave together insights about what musicality entails, how it feels, and why anyone would seek to deny such feelings either to themselves or to others.



Midway through *Super Mario RPG*, the player arrives at Melody Bay and encounters an angsty composer named Toadofsky (plausibly related to Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky). Wearing a flashy ushanka, Toadofsky wishes to write a symphony, but he lacks inspiration. To invigorate Toadofsky, the player must collect a trio of melodies across the gameworld and sound them out for the composer by jumping on musical tadpoles (Figure A.1).

Each melody consists of eight notes. Upon successful reproduction of the three phrases, the player receives the privilege of composing a final phrase—a tune comprising *any* eight pitches—to round out the symphony. The quest culminates in a cutscene that replays all four melodies in succession, replete with swelling harmonies pumped out by the audio capacities of the 16-bit Super Nintendo (Figure A.2).

Playing this game at the age of eleven, I was fascinated by the numerous compositional possibilities in the fourth phrase (a musical afterword, if you will). Here was an opportunity to personalize the end of the symphony with any eight notes I wished; the fact that these final notes marched in double-time (half the rhythmic value of the notes in the previous three phrases) made the cadential push all the more exciting. My brother and I played the Toadofsky sequence over and over again, each time inputting different pitches. A magical realization dawned on us: We began to notice that, no matter what melody we composed for the fourth phrase (Figure A.3), it always came out... eh, not too bad. With only minimal knowledge of music theory, we couldn't figure out how the game kept managing to make



**FIGURE A.1** (Left) Tadpole tablature at Melody Bay and (right) endless opportunities to recompose final melody.

The musical score for Figure A.2 is written in 2/4 time. It features three systems of music. The first system, labeled 'Toadofsky's first melody', shows a treble clef staff with a simple melody and a bass clef staff with piano accompaniment marked 'sim.'. The second system, labeled 'Second melody', continues the treble clef melody and piano accompaniment, marked 'rit.'. The third system, labeled 'Third melody', shows a more complex treble clef melody and piano accompaniment, marked '(addition of snares)' and 'rit.'.

FIGURE A.2 Toadofsky's symphony, mm. 1–6 (my transcription).

The musical score for Figure A.3 is written in 2/4 time and shows three examples of how players might complete the melody of mm. 7-8. Each example consists of a treble clef staff with a melody and a bass clef staff with piano accompaniment. The first example is marked 'riten.' and 'fixed'. The second example is marked 'riten.' and 'fixed'. The third example is marked 'riten.' and 'fixed'.

FIGURE A.3 Three examples of how players might complete the melody of mm. 7–8.

even our deliberately crude pitch sequences (such as E-E-E-E-E-E-E-E) sound *good enough*.

In retrospect, the musical magic was child's play. Using a harmonic sleight of hand, the game imposes a ii–IV–V<sup>7</sup> (perhaps oddly, instead of the more typical IV–ii–V<sup>7</sup>) chord progression in the fourth phrase, rounded out by a perfect authentic cadence (ending on a root-position tonic chord with a tonic in the highest voice). With this fixed–bass line *qua* cadential anchor, any superimposed melody of a player's devising can't run terribly afoul. At the worst

(read: straying farthest from tonal conventions), the player-created melody may sound like an overabundance of non-chord tones, a fleeting compositional lapse. By the end of the piece, however, the tonic resounds clearly, and all is forgiven, maybe even forgotten. The predetermined harmonies and capstone chord rein in the player's musical invention, preventing it from going too far adrift, aesthetically speaking. The result is that players will tend to *feel* fairly musical upon hearing the symphony's playback, regardless of whether they know why this is the case.

With eight little notes, Toadofsky's quest elicits the sort of wonder and performative delight granted by music video games. As with classical pieces based on theme and variations, harmony is the principal control, the foundational element that undergirds melodic, rhythmic, and textural variegation. In the case of Toadofsky, the preprogrammed harmonic progression in the fourth phrase serves as an artistic safety net. It is there to catch players even when they fall—that is, when they fail to compose a tonally sensible melody. Such uplifting and corroborative design informs gaming experiences more generally: Sometimes we feel like we're fighting against a game (when glitches and lag take hold in survival-horror, or when an outrageously challenging *Dark Souls* boss keeps knocking us down); other times, we feel like a game is carrying us, offering leeway and enabling virtual gains even when our timing is a little delayed or when our aim is slightly off (via generous enemy hitboxes or activated aim-assist).

Granted, gamers malign auto-aim for the same reasons people deride musical aides such as Auto-Tune. The argument is that we should succeed based on abilities alone (digital reflexes and singing capabilities) without the crutches of ludic or pitch quantization. In an online first-person shooter, someone using Aimbot claims a foul advantage and upsets the playing field. In the music industry, someone who relies sneakily on Auto-Tune or lip-synching likewise makes off with supposedly unmerited earnings and praise. With both examples, critics harp on people who, by employing such assistive devices, do better—and also presumably feel better—than they deserve. This concern jibes with the moral panic that has shrouded *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band*, as detractors fussed over how players of these games shouldn't be entitled to call themselves real musicians.

No, cheating isn't cool: Using Aimbot to nab twenty headshots in an online first-person shooter is unfair to other players. But does jamming on plastic guitar peripherals with friends hurt anyone? Nothing in the *Guitar Hero* literature has reported adverse effects on the music or gaming industries, on youths' artistic proclivities, or on social mores. Virtual musicianship in *The Lord of the Rings Online* (Turbine, Inc. 2007) has not endangered conventional musicianship, just as gay marriage has not destroyed traditional marriage. If this analogy sounds like a stretch, think of it in these terms: Why would anyone deny virtual musicians the feelings of musicality? Do we really believe we live in a zero-sum society, in which someone's fantasies and love's labors must come at the cost of others' sense of accomplishment? Are dreams and happiness in short supply? Should people have the inalienable right to *feel* musical, even if such musicality falls outside accepted norms and rubrics?

Concepts and vocabularies of authenticity take us only so far. In debates about whether Guitar Heroes do or do not deserve the badge of musicianship, the primary affect, I reckon, is not resentment or self-righteousness or pride. It's envy. We envy stargazers, people who cling easily to reveries and walk just a couple of inches above the hard earth. Popping these fantasies yields the same kind of sharp emotion as popping a balloon: There's the gratified exhilaration of the *pow!* and the instantaneous deflation of the once-airy object (or allegedly air-headed person); but hesitation and regret respectively precede and follow such gratification—the cringe of... *should I?* and the glum reflection of... *should I have?* Put another way: Although one can derive powerful satisfaction from prompting others' rude awakenings, I think we know deep down that it's not always the *right* thing to do, so long as these imaginations don't injure us or make our own lives any less pleasant. If players of *Mario Paint* or *Ocarina of Time* or *Rock Band* tell you that they feel musical in certain moments, why not just let them be and extend congratulations? Finding musical pleasures in these games is unlikely to deter a player from pursuing training on traditional instruments; if anything, the opposite holds true. Surely sales of physical ocarinas (once frequently advertised in the magazine *Nintendo Power*) shot up after the *Zelda* namesake, and surely iOS music-making apps have inspired some players to learn instruments and take composition lessons.

Video games, at large, can provide veritable lifelines when life gets hard. They offer a temporary means of escaping bullies at school, squabbling parents at home, and internal angst. The way I hear it, music video games grant a similar kind of sanctuary. If you're getting low grades, receiving rejections from job applications, or having an overall bad day, a music game can turn things around, making you feel adequate and even stellar. At the risk of sounding cheesy, my point is that we all need a win sometimes—even if the win is just colorful scores on a screen and animated fans cheering us on. We depend on safety nets, whether it's health insurance or a rainy-day fund or a reliable friend. If you've taken music lessons, perhaps you can recall how you felt cradled in the moments when your piano teacher played along with you (some octaves higher or lower, or on a separate piano)—the sense that even if you fumbled a few keys, there was someone else to keep the music going. Maybe these uplifting memories can inspire us to do well (and do good) by ensuring that others land safely too. Instead of policing musicality and musicianly identifications, what if we emphasized celebratory modes of imaginative play, even at the risk of sounding naïve, touchy-feely, or uncritical?

In teaching courses on music video games, I find that students tend to ask the same sets of questions on a loop. Is *Guitar Hero* musical? Can the music be considered authentic and live? Are the skills transferable? Are the players delusional? Are they trying to *pass* as musicians (and failing to do so)? An inquiry that rarely gets air-time has to do with why any of these questions matter, and what might be gained by a momentary suspension of judgment (not judgment as in scholarly faculties, but judgment as in our habituated impulse to evaluate others according to their overt abilities or deficiencies). If real life is precarious and safety nets are scarce, we could do worse than to permit feelings of musicality to percolate, diversify, and transform with the times. Trolls and flame wars aside, strife won't break out from an overabundance of musicians in the world. Concert halls won't shut down. Given that affect has become trendy in academia, the first order of business is to rethink our priorities. Affectively and effectively, perhaps this means pushing past our instincts to invalidate and patrol others' senses of artistry, and to refocus our energies on issues of care and support. In our race to sound better

than one another (rhetorically, musically), we may leave too much in the dust—the values that make us good, if not great.

Even when our melodies flounder, Toadofsky's symphony carries us through. Its harmonies drive the tune forward and keep the player's spirits high. Having spent seven years researching video game music, I admit I increasingly find myself wondering these days whether a different kind of ludomusicology is possible—a ludomusicology that bounces along feelings of musicality, pleasure, and imagination, rather than critical missions that get mired in agonism, definitional boundaries, and high scores. I can no longer recall the precise notes my brother and I chose each time we recomposed the fourth phrase for Toadofsky. I do recall the other sounds of these joyous moments: holding our breaths as the symphony played for the first time, and chortling whenever the game's chord progression made our funky melodic creations into something... well, salvageable.

In this gleeful hush and laughter, something musical came to pass.