

---

# VIDEO GAME MUSIC AND ITS EFFECT ON SOCIETY

---

BY RAPHAEL MUN

## INTRODUCTION

---

---

*“In fact, historians will likely look back on these last few and current years as the golden age of video game music.” (McDonald)*

The music of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century is largely defined by operas and concerts and composers like Beethoven and Mozart. It was the era of new instruments and technology to create new, revolutionary sounds and experiences. Music has profoundly affected society in various ways, and even in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century music affected people throughout the world. From folk music to rock and pop, social and political movements of the early 1900s were influenced and inspired by music. (Eyerman and Jamison)

The late 20<sup>th</sup> Century demonstrated a music industry stretching from concerts and stages to boy-bands, television and media, and movies and soundtracks. The new sounds and experiences of music and society were through combining the visual and audio senses to create a “show”. More people in the United States knew of American Idol and the latest

pop music artists than their own governor in the beginning of the new millennium, and the movie industry exceeded the music industry in profit.

Now with even further technological developments of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries, the impact of music has been expanding into more fields of art; one that adds another level of complexity to motion films: video games.

## THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

---

Early stages of the video game industry were seen as child-play, an electronic toy dismissed as buttons pressed by kids. The square pixels representing a bouncing ball and paddles on the screen, yellow pac-men eating dots and ghosts, the interactive side of video games had a long road ahead in terms of reaching maturity.

Video games are still widely viewed as children's toys, but as the video game generation ages and technology improves, it is quickly following the path that Hollywood took to becoming the big industry. As a matter of fact, figures state that in 2001, the video game industry exceeded the movie industry's annual box office sales by \$1 billion and it has only increased since. The Japanese corporate giant, Sony, which holds a large part of the record label and the film industry, gained 60% of its total profit from its video game hardware and software sales from its PlayStation 2. (Krantz)

The game company, Electronic Arts, by itself earned revenue of almost \$3 billion in 2006. (wapedia) Even the software giant, Microsoft, has joined in on the video game industry since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century with its Xbox franchise and has now established itself as a strong competitor in the current generation of video game consoles.

Various other companies and industries have been affected by the video game industry as well, including Barnes & Noble, which owns 60% of the video game retailer, GameStop, and if not for the sales of games, the company would have reported a loss. (Krantz)

The social impact of video games has become much more difficult to ignore, and it is without surprise that music in video games have also begun to show its effects on society. Every two out of three college students could hum the tune to the 1985 video game hit, Super Mario Bros, almost fifteen years later in 1999. (Belinkie) One online user even comments, "I wont lie, at work today I started humming the Super Mario Bros song in the middle of the day, with no concious reason to." (Snow) In short comparison, the theme of Super Mario Bros. is as popular among the young intellectuals, as Mozart and Mendelssohn must have been during his time.

## HISTORY OF VIDEO GAME MUSIC

---

Some argue that part of the success to the game of Pong was due to the simple yet memorable "poink" sounds of the ball moving across the screen. However, for the most part music did not come across the game developers' minds even during the initial boom during the 1970s, mostly because of technological limitations in which processing power was focused mostly on the visual interaction. Most music was still not digital but rather on analog storage devices such as cassettes and records, which were highly inconsistent and expensive. (Wikipedia - Video game music)

It was not until the 1980s that music began to play a big part in games outside of looped noises in arcade machines. On top of that, video games entered the home through Atari and the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) that could play simple two to five voices or tones at a time.

“The limitations of the system forced composers to be creative. Nobuo Uematsu, a Japanese composer, recalls:

‘The NES only had three tracks, and each of their sounds were very unique. I had to focus on the melody itself and think about how each chord will move the audience. I struggled to produce originality in the same three tones, just like any composer from that period. It's amazing to listen to how each of us: Konami composers, Koichi Sugiyama, and Namco composers each had totally different creations by using the same three instruments. There was an originality in 'Game Music' back then.’” (Belinkie)

The idea of creating music with few tones or voices is not something new. It can be paralleled to classical composers working with just two or three instruments for a song. In this sense, every drop of creativity had to be used to maximize the physical limitations, and in the same sense video game music composers faced a technological limitation of having very few musicians/instruments to work with.

In Japan, video game music became an entirely new industry early on, and it is just now entering to the United States, but after the release of the game Dragon Quest in Japan, through which a classically trained musician, Koichi Sugiyama, who had also written film scores, brought classical music to the NES game system, considered impossible at the time,

the original music arranged for an orchestra was also released as an album and became a huge hit along side the video game itself. (Belinkie)

Japanese game publishers commonly also release soundtracks to the games in a similar way that soundtracks are released for motion films in the United States. It has developed a social phenomena of its own and “In Japan, I think they tend to treat game composers like rock stars.” (Belinkie) Although the music itself maybe just have a few tones in the video game itself, the complexity of the full arrangements match or even exceed other orchestral compositions, and is a culture in itself in Japan.

While the technology of the game systems limited composers at the time, but it soon took off with the technological trend and the game systems today include special processing units for sound and musical effects. Technology is no longer a limitation for composers with video game systems containing hardware better than common household computers and the systems such as Microsoft’s latest Xbox 360 and Sony’s PlayStation 3 are also used to replace other media hardware such as multimedia systems and DVD players. (Tatila)

Moreover, with the inclusion of specialized hardware, music in video games have brought the experience to a new level in which the atmosphere and scenes within the interactive video game play will also dynamically change and re-compose the music as fit for the mood and situation. With computer graphics reaching almost realism, video games have gotten to a level at which a player feels as though he is living inside a movie. Furthermore, while previously movies would often become turned into video games, such as Aladdin, Back To The Future, and other blockbuster hits, the trend has been recently

switching the other way around in which more video games are becoming movies such as Final Fantasy and Tomb Raider.

## VIDEO GAME MUSIC TODAY

---

Nobuo Uematsu, the composer famous for music in the Final Fantasy series, is undoubtedly one of the most successful musicians within the video game industry, but not only that, much of his music has been played throughout the world in various bands and orchestras along with the music of another famous composer, Koji Kondo, from Nintendo's Super Mario Bros. and The Legend of Zelda.

Some musicians have even made names for themselves by being able to play video game music and have toured around the world, such as the Video Game Pianist. Video Game Pianist, whose real name is Martin Leung, "takes pleasure in popularizing video game music. By performing and recording music from game soundtracks and being part of the Video Game Live World Tour, VGP increases the universal awareness and enjoyment of such music as Super Mario Brothers, Final Fantasy, Halo 2, and more..." (Leung)

Even the Los Angeles Orchestra have begun to play orchestrated versions of video game music and companies have begun investing in concert bands for video game music. (Criswell) There is also the Eminence Symphony Orchestra based in Sydney, Australia that has been active since 2003: "a symphony orchestra which delves into the classical music featured in video games and anime, as well as film scores." (Wikipedia - Eminence Symphony Orchestra)

Internet communities have also formed behind video game music, such as OverClocked ReMix, in which hundreds of composers and musicians online demonstrate their own arrangements of music based on original video game music, often enhancing the previously technology-limited few-instrument melodies to full potential. (OverClocked ReMix)

Another development in the last decade has also brought on new interface hardware for video game players such as placemats, maracas, guitars, and drum kits, through which many users are introduced to music in an interactive manner rather than simply being the audience. Games such as Dance Dance Revolution (DDR), Frequency, SingStar, Guitar Hero and RockBand, and various others have inspired a generation of video game players to turn back to 80s rock music, hip-hop, even folk music, and other genres, that otherwise may have become slowly forgotten. These games have brought many older musicians back to the fore-front, and revitalized the music industry to a younger generation, many of whom had never heard of these musicians and bands.

## CONCLUSION

---

---

Music has played a big part in social movements through the past centuries, but it is not in any sense slowing its influence on society. Rather, through new technologies and industries, it has expanded to create more awareness of the power of music, much of which is now turning toward interactive multimedia in video games.

The legacy of classical music and composers of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries are not a thing of the past but have instead been re-incarnated through the video game industry

through new classical composers like Nobuo Uematsu, who have brought and continue to bring music to the world and impact society in subtle ways.

The most effective music in movies and video games have been described as such that we are not consciously aware of until it is taken away or muted. In the same way, the music of video games have subconsciously shaped a generation of video game players, and made them more musically aware outside of just games.

Although at first, video game music tried to maximize the technology and utilize it to its fullest potential, it has evolved so that technology is now trying to maximize the music in video games to deliver a profound, new and revolutionary experience that allows music to be expressed as it has never before been possible, with an entirely new social momentum behind it.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

---

Belinkie, Matthew. "Video game music: not just kid stuff." 15 December 1999. VGMusic.com - Video Game Music Archive. May 2008 <<http://www.vgmusic.com/vgpaper.shtml>>.

Criswell, Chad. Suite101.com - Video Game Music Comes of Age. 14 January 2007. May 2008 <[http://musicappreciation.suite101.com/article.cfm/video\\_game\\_music\\_comes\\_of\\_age](http://musicappreciation.suite101.com/article.cfm/video_game_music_comes_of_age)>.

Eyerman, Ron and Andrew Jamison. Music and Social Movements. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Krantz, Matt. USATODAY - Video game college is 'boot camp' for designers. 3 December 2002. May 2008 <[http://www.usatoday.com/money/media/2002-12-03-video\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/money/media/2002-12-03-video_x.htm)>.

Leung, Martin. Video Game Pianist. <<http://www.videogamepianist.com/>>.

McDonald, Glenn. A History of Video Game Music. 2004. May 2008 <<http://www.gamespot.com/features/6092391/index.html>>.

Snow, Blake. "The history of video game music." Joystiq (2006).

Tatila, Veli-Pekka. An Informal History of Game Music. 28 June 2004. May 2008 <[http://www.student oulu.fi/~vtatila/history\\_of\\_game\\_music.html](http://www.student oulu.fi/~vtatila/history_of_game_music.html)>.

wapedia. Wiki: Electronic Arts. May 2008 <[http://wapedia.mobi/en/Electronic\\_Arts](http://wapedia.mobi/en/Electronic_Arts)>.

Wikipedia - Video game music. May 2008. May 2008 <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Video\\_game\\_music](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Video_game_music)>.