

## Review

Michael Austin, ed. 2016. *Music Video Games: Performance, Politics, and Play*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic. ISBN 978-1-5013-0852-9 (hbk). 328 pp.

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*Music Video Games* is a book that does not solely revolve around the idea of video-game music; instead it looks at the way in which the musical experience is manifested in games. This is a positive contribution to the discussion of videogames and music studies alike. The book is comprised of 11 chapters, which sadly cannot be discussed at length, as well as a remarkable afterword by William Cheng on the fascinating feature of being able to 'help' Toadofsky compose 'his' piece in *Super Mario RPG*.

One of the most refreshing aspects of this book is the variety of games being critiqued; editor Michael Austin presents what he describes as rhythm, pitch, mixing, music-making and metonymic music games. In this manner, the book looks into the usual suspects (*Dance Dance Revolution*, *Guitar Hero*, etc.) but also makes way for the exploration of new and old games, such as *SIMON*, *Mario Paint Composer*, *Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* and *Rhythm Heaven*.

There are different ways in which this publication can be approached: first, by looking at it as a specialized book on music video games which contributes to the growing scholarship of the recently labelled—but still debated moniker—ludomusicology. Each chapter is strongly based on the theory of recognizable authors such as Karen Collins, Kiri Miller, Zach Whalen, and this is reflective of game music studies' move away from interdisciplinary research. *Music Video Games* allows these authors to delve deeper into very specific topics.

Second, the focus of this book is not necessarily to reaffirm the notion of ludomusicology, but rather the way in which our interaction with music manifests through the interactive medium of the videogame. Several considerations are made throughout the book on this particular topic. Whether there is a relationship between musicality and game design (Austin, O'Meara), whether button-mashing is a musical activity (Roesner *et al.*, Lind), and how these interactions

affect the way in which we perceive musical experiences in the broader social context (Plank, Fritsch), particularly in educational spaces (Roesner *et al.*).

Third, notions of performance and play are also strong themes throughout the book. Austin quotes Ian Bogost who writes, 'music and games share a fundamental property: both are *playable*, offering listeners and operators expressive experience within the framework of melody and rhythm' (3, italics in original). Of course, although this correlation of 'play' between games and music is purely a trait of the English language, it does open up the discussion of what is socially perceived to be a serious task, or at least one with inherent value. The discussion surfaces at various points in the book, with discussions of how musicianship is achieved in the 'absence' of an instrument by Roesner *et al.* and discussion of whether the videogame can be considered an instrument in and of itself by Lind and Austin. If this musicianship is musical (despite music being a result of players' actions), this poses the question of whether it should be taken as 'serious' or 'valuable' performance as it is happening within the medium of the videogame. As it becomes evident throughout the book, whether games and the musical performances within them will be taken seriously by society depends on the types of exposure that individuals have with interactive digital environments, in a way reopening the debate on whether games should be called games at all. On the whole, *Music Video Games* is a commendable example of the growth within the field of ludomusicology, and its chapters present various challenging and ingenious propositions which open up discussions surrounding our relationships with music in interactive environments.