Conclusion

The game plays the user just as the user plays the game, and there is no message apart from the play.

—Espen Aarseth

Allan F. Moore’s simple but effective justification of the study of rock music was that it is valuable ‘to explore any human activity as fully as possible, from any angle that may hold promise, especially since, with this activity [...] so many pairs of ears are involved.’ Quoting Moore, Tim Summers too focuses on the size of the videogame audience, as well as the depth of audience engagement with videogame music, ‘In these respects, the situation is identical for game music. Musicology can no longer afford to overlook a form of music that reaches the ears of millions of listeners, in a dynamic and interactive medium.’ This is not to deny the value of studying music with smaller audiences, but rather it emphasizes that work in this area has inherent cultural significance and value.

However, it is also important to look beyond this justification to recognize the broader cultural and theoretical significance of studying videogame music. Roger Moseley states that,

There is growing recognition that the twenty-first-century media landscape has been profoundly shaped by the rise of digital games to an unprecedented level of cultural prominence. Most commonly registered through its seismic impact on the economic terrain of the entertainment sector, the digital game has also transformed the stock of symbolic and social capital in which global popular culture has traded since the late 1970s. In recent years, moreover, digital games have opened up new modes of representation, expanded the critical lexicon, and stimulated distinctive contributions to debates surrounding music, the visual arts, film, literature, and new media.

1 Aarseth cited by Kirkpatrick, p. 48.
The impact of videogames, and videogame music specifically, on society and culture need not be expressed solely in terms of their socio-economic status as mass culture. Indeed, the growing literature on videogame music has already contributed considerably to critical debates in musicology and media studies, as demonstrated in the preceding chapters. One example is the impact ludomusicology is making in both the critical and pedagogical contexts of performance studies. For instance, David Roesner’s exploration of the experience of music-based videogames, such as *Guitar Hero* or *Rock Band*, has several important implications to the current understanding of the act of music as performance beyond the context of videogames. He argues that such games should not be so readily dismissed as ‘low grade simulation’ rather than a form of musical performance. Furthermore, he situates these games in the context of the educational theory and practice of music, challenging the stifling of creativity in rigid pedagogical systems.

Moseley concludes by noting the interdisciplinary challenges posed by ludomusicology,

> While digital games can simulate—and even enact—the nefarious dynamics of globalized corporate empires, they can also enable marginalized voices to contribute to a vibrant discourse that sustains creative resistance and self-expression. For musicologists, art historians, and other scholars of audio-visual culture, the strategic challenge of coordinating interdisciplinary approaches to digital games thus poses both daunting risks and exciting opportunities.

The diversity of experiences provides fertile ground for the emerging discipline, and it is clear that a considerable range of approaches, including psychology, history, and philosophy, is necessary to advance the understanding of games as a critical component of contemporary culture. Yet the size of the videogame market and its economic foundation appear to be inexorably noteworthy.

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7 Moseley, p. 384.
Videogames are valued as mass culture first, and justification for the study of games (or game music) is invariably set in such terms. This is in no small part due to the dogged perseverance of the mass culture and its other binary, Andreas Huyssen’s ‘Great Divide.’ This theme has never been far from the discussion in previous chapters because the aesthetic theory of videogame music presented, and ludomusicology more generally, provides a new and significant perspective.

The Aesthetics of Videogame Music

The focus of this thesis has been on the musical aesthetics of single-player (and with the exception of Chapter 2) narrative-based games. Chapter 1 presented Crysis as a poly-aesthetic accommodation of both mobile form—a non-linear aesthetic form—and traditional linear harmony. The music system in the game engine connects the music closely to the player’s actions, but both player freedom and musical structure are subject to the macro structure of the narrative. This coupling of ludic and musical form shows how closely music is embedded within the videogame aesthetic; by playing the game, the player simultaneously feels out the form of both the ludic constructs and the musical structure, creating an aesthetic experience. Chapter 1 also demonstrated the ways in which the player might play with meaning through topic theory, but ultimately, I suggested that both form and meaning are functions of play.

The Chime case study in Chapter 2 provided a very different genre of game, and enabled a focused discussion on issues of player attention, and the work concept. I argued that the mobile form minimalist music in Brazil (which is, in this sense, representative of the rest of the music in the game) is neutralized by the ludic attention required of the player. Although the player may be distracted from engaging in the activity of play in terms of the musical form, at times, there is

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scope for the player to play with musical meaning. I presented *Chime* as a poststructural Text, with the player as an active Reader, and clarified that although authorial authority over meaning may be dispersed by the practices of modern industry, authored meaning continues to be significant. Nicholas Cook’s emphasis on the emergent construction of meaning in multimedia contexts alongside his argument that musical meaning is about communication embodies this paradox well.\(^9\) Cook’s provocative idea that *all* musical meaning stems from the interaction between different media is particularly pertinent, provided one does not fall into the trap of attributing music or media its own meaning-generating agency (which Cook does not do). My analysis therefore also drew on Agawu’s concept of semiotic play as the activity between extroverive and introverive semiotic poles: the active play of the listener/audience/player constructs meaning from the authored, or composed, media. Agawu’s concept of play can be aligned to Chapter 1’s playing with meaning.

Chapter 3 investigated philosophical aspects of temporality, a central feature of the videogame aesthetic due to the nature of the interactive medium. Specifically, I pointed to a paradigm shift in conceptions of temporality, and demonstrated that the experience of videogame aesthetics increasingly reflects these new, non-teleological modes. *The Witcher 2* was presented as a non-linear narrative that apparently prioritizes artistic goals over commercial resources. Its music is subordinate to the flexible narrative structure that can render large amounts of musical material redundant. In *BioShock Infinite*, the experience of linear narrative is disrupted by musical anachronisms that draw attention to the game’s core themes. The game is self-reflective and provides a commentary on the nature of freedom of choice within the videogame medium. The music in both games signals what is most significant about them—the aesthetic experience of postmodern temporalities. I remarked at the end of the chapter that it is no coincidence that these sorts of games are often used to present the case for videogames as

art. This could be applied to many of the main examples discussed in this thesis, because they all provide aesthetic experiences that are appropriately tailored to the peculiar nature of the medium, specifically, interactive or performative audio-visual experiences.

In *Skyrim*, the focus of Chapter 4, the aesthetic sense of an epic Nordic saga is conditioned by the stasis generated by the music. Its *Naturklang* aesthetic is arguably more important to the game’s success and identity (what the player remembers of their experience playing) than the construction of the fictional narrative and lore. The analysis of the role of music in the game’s geopolitical landscape suggests another fertile territory for ludomusicologists. Furthermore, the construction of this landscape by the player is another form of aesthetic play. The game’s popularity is frequently ascribed to how immersive it is, but I suggest that the more significant reason for the game’s successfulness is its integral and appropriate aesthetic experience, and this experience is largely contingent on the game’s musical aesthetics. Indeed, the musical aesthetic of *Naturklang* parallels the game’s ludic aesthetic experience (the rhythm and pacing of the player’s exploration and action), and both are metaphorically connected to the fictional mythology. Like the games in Chapter 3, this coming together of multiple elements attracts claims of art status.

Chapter 5 investigated the relationship of videogame music to both Hollywood and modernist avant-garde music, through the case study of *Dead Space*. The game’s dynamic music system remixes static elements of aleatory-inspired avant-garde music. This music is presented as alien otherness to the security of the otherwise neoromantic score. Yet, this musical style soon becomes normalized and the greatest musical disturbance comes instead from a traditional nursery rhyme. The adoption of modernist avant-garde music—explicitly antithetical to mass cultural forms such as Hollywood film, or the videogame—but through the filter of Hollywood seems to be only for the purposes of utilizing a well-established topic or sign. However, taking into account the additional complexity of the mobile form provided by the music engine, the
game achieves a complex synthesis with its own logic and integrity. In this way, the Dead Space series demonstrates the potential of games to surpass The Shining as Barham’s retort to Adorno and Eisler, and exemplifies the tensions felt across the video game industry in collapsing the space between art and mass culture.

All of these examples highlight that (non-)linearity, whether abstract/structural or phenomenological/temporal, is crucial to the videogame aesthetic because of the relationship between the interactive nature of the medium and aesthetic play. I have suggested that the player feels out the aesthetic form of these games regardless of the degree of freedom offered. Players also (re-)construct or play with musical form and meaning in videogames. Playing with form and playing with meaning (I have provided analytical examples invoking topic theory, harmonic expectation analysis, semiotics, and narratology) are often thought of as separate categories of experience, and separate modes of engagement. However, the preceding chapters collectively highlight the importance of the activity of play to both. The diversity of the videogame medium exhibits the engendering of meaning in a plethora of ways. This thesis has aimed to shed light on the entangled strands of signification and phenomenological layers of aesthetic experience in videogames. Players actively engage with the meaning in games in a multitude of different modes: semiotic, emotional, narrative and inter-textual. Yet they also play with games as aesthetic objects as well as Texts. While I concur with Kirkpatrick’s characterization of videogames as aesthetic objects, I have refined his conception of videogame aesthetics through a more sophisticated consideration of the role of music within videogames, and through a direct comparison with theoretical aspects of musical aesthetics. The tangible element of play provides an aesthetic experience through the navigation of form that is temporally conditioned (as demonstrated in Chapters 3 and 4) and therefore, the role of music within the videogame aesthetic, and musicology’s own theoretical apparatus, provide crucial points of comparison. The ‘meaning dynamics’ of the videogame aesthetic can be characterized as an ‘internal dissonance’
not simply between play and meaning but rather, playing with form and playing with meaning.
Both are types of play that entail an actively engaged subject.

**Videogame Aesthetics and ‘The Great Divide’**

This conception of active play is crucial in understanding the role of videogames in contemporary culture. In fact, the notion has been considered a distinguishing feature of Huyszen’s ‘Great Divide.’ Peter Franklin extended Bertolt Brecht’s description of the ‘peculiar doped state’ of bourgeois opera audiences to include Hollywood movies, adding that this state of enjoyment is assumed to be ‘passive and uncritical.’ This could certainly be stretched further to encompass certain videogames. By inviting the audience to play and participate in their own quests and sagas, there is a danger that in accepting this superficial power and agency, they can become more thoroughly enslaved. The supposedly meaningful and consequential choices touted in *The Witcher 2*, for example, are a sophisticated façade for an ultimately controlled and limited experience. In this way, the industry plays its players. Of course, in the context of film music, Franklin critiques this one-sided vision by nuancing the key concepts on which it rests, effectively dismantling reductive and simplistic binaries by highlighting their polarizing gendered language. He demonstrates that although Modernist polemic set the Romanticism/Late-Romanticism of Hollywood film music on the ‘mass culture’ side of the divide, this music already had a complex history occupying the spaces on both sides. Kirkpatrick too, argues that games do not simply pacify their audience as Adorno feared. However, he goes further to state that videogames are a call to action. I would agree that certain self-conscious games like *BioShock Infinite* draw attention to the characteristics and limitations of the medium, and in doing so, cannot be described as mindless entertainment that pacifies an unthinking audience. Yet at the same time, Kirkpatrick’s

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claim seems naïve in suggesting that this might be the case for all games. The breadth and
diversity of games explored throughout this thesis only reflects a small proportion of the creative
eccentricism now available, and to generalize about the medium as Kirkpatrick does sets up a
reductive false dichotomy where there is a whole spectrum of possibilities.

Contrasting the aesthetic pleasure of traditional art with the products of the culture industry, Adorno warned about the replacement of ‘freedom and the genuinely new’ with consumerism and (Marxist) reification. The charge of “pseudo-individualization” can certainly be levelled at many games. We saw evidence of personalizable versions of the same metanarrative clichés in *Skyrim*, but also efforts to move beyond such limitations in *The Witcher 2* and *BioShock Infinite*. The distinctiveness of *Skyrim* is primarily based on the player’s aesthetic experience of the game, rather than the specific narrative and lore, which is not only essentially the same for all players, but also follows the metanarrative of all Scandinavian sagas. This pseudo-individualization masks the standardization of products and arguably diminishes the extent to which audiences are conscious of their own condition and socio-economic status. By way of contrast, complex and abstract modernist art resisted the culture industry by experimenting with and problematizing the order/disorder spectrum. Modernist art derives much of its content from its abstract form, and in turn, its ultimate meaning and significance stems from the way its form reflects (and perhaps reflects *upon*) the complex organized chaos of contemporary life. As we saw in Chapter 5, avant-gardism tends to destabilize itself, as it is unable to escape its historicity just as it is unable to sustain its newness. However, the postmodern temporalities explored in Chapter 3 express neither total order nor complete chaos. There may be choice, or at least an illusion of choice, but there can also be narrative and authorship.

Lash and Lury’s more optimistic description of the contemporary participatory culture (what they call ‘getting ontological’) is applicable to videogames, Kirkpatrick argues, because the
interactive nature of play counters pacification. However, Lash and Lury’s Global Culture Industry rests upon a number of false (or at best, contestable) dichotomies, such as the categorical separation of “goods” and “culture”, and the opposition of economic infrastructure with cultural superstructure. Beryl Langer questions whether Lash and Lury’s “thingification” of culture ‘necessarily precludes or diminishes the continuing operation of ideology, symbols and representation’—the facets of Adorno and Horkheimer’s now rebranded ‘Classical Culture Industry.’

Jameson says that postmodern culture transformed culture itself into a product, but there is no evidence in this thesis that denies the continuing relevance of ideological, symbolic or representational discourse. However appealing the utopian ontological turn of the Global Culture Industry, I not only question Kirkpatrick’s assertion that gameplay always stimulates action, but also argue that many videogames seem to fulfil Adorno’s vision through all-the-more subtle manipulation—the line between ‘getting ontological’ and ‘pseudo-individualization’ is a blurry one.

Kirkpatrick’s suggestion that the autonomous aesthetic principles of modernist art are relocated to videogames seems to be corroborated by the presence of mobile form in the music and narrative structure of games like Crysis, The Witcher 2, and especially by the use of avant-garde aleatoric music in Dead Space. He presents the videogame aesthetic as an inversion of the modernist artwork in that games usually appear ‘readily intelligible’ by masking form, while avant-garde art appears deliberately confusing by bringing form to the surface. Yet both offer

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11 Shigeru Miyamoto, ‘the father of modern videogames’ and Senior Managing Director for Nintendo, has recently expressed dissatisfaction with the passivity of the “casual” videogame market. This has been hailed as a significant reversal of strategy for Nintendo whose successes in recent years have been based on the casual gameplay prevalent on their Wii console. See Seth G. Macy, ‘Miyamoto Looking to shift focus away from Passive Gamers,’ on Imagine Games Network (27/08/2014), retrieved from <http://uk.ign.com/articles/2014/08/27/miyamoto-looking-to-shift-focus-away-from-passive-gamers>, accessed 30/08/2014.


14 Kirkpatrick, p. 37.
aesthetic experiences as form emerges from play. Kirkpatrick’s generalization of the masking of form in games is contestable, especially in non-narrative puzzle games such as *Chime*, which arguably surfaces its form. In Chapter 2, I demonstrated that the competitive aspect of play could dominate the player’s active focus on other modes of experience. However, the opposition of ludicity to meaning is not necessarily an unproductive or undesirable conflict. Examples of performer virtuosity throughout music history, and the theoretical validation of drastic as well as gnostic modes of knowledge, are testament to alternative focal modes for artistic experience.

Kirkpatrick views the videogame as a paradox that, like modernist art, dialectically maintains its aesthetic autonomy by the very fact of its necessarily heteronomous existence. Heteronomy, in Kant’s parlance, is subordination to the influence of an outside force. Only by participating in and deferring to the cultural marketplace can aesthetic objects like videogames have any political effect—their autonomy is contingent on, and justifiable in terms of, their presence within the marketplace.  

Although I have avoided direct engagement with the debate on the art status of videogames, my findings do help to situate the cultural form in a framework pertinent to that discussion. Following both Adorno and Kant, Kirkpatrick maintains that aesthetic form is not limited to so-called “‘highbrow’ cultural activities.”  

Indeed, he notes that aesthetic art has always contained a fundamentally vulgar element of playfulness—what Adorno referred to as the ‘plebeian element.’ Videogames have the potential to diminish modernism’s distancing of high and low. In the context of postmodern culture, such categories no longer hold the power they once did, as Kramer noted in his list of the features of postmodern music (see Chapter 3). In

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15 See Kirkpatrick, p. 36.
16 Kirkpatrick, p. 40.
17 Adorno cited by Kirkpatrick, p. 40.
Chapter 2, I argued that although the videogame industry complicates authorship, videogames are purposive—they are deliberately crafted. Of course, they are not purposeless, as they serve the social function of entertainment, and more decisively, commercial interests invariably predominate. If Hollywood film music straddles the “Great Divide” between Modernism and Mass Culture in its nuanced relationship to Romanticism/Late-Romanticism/Popular Modern music—music from the “high art” side of the divide in one context being considered mass cultural (and feminine) in another—then videogame music’s complex engagement with both Hollywood and Modernist music (particularly as discussed in Chapter 5) occupies a similar space. My notion of play dialectically resolves Kirkpatrick’s theoretical dissonance between aesthetics and meaning, not by subtly shifting it to a new level, but through recognition of the significance of play to both. The aesthetics of videogame music draw attention to play as the crucial feature of aesthetic objects; high art and mass culture are not mutually exclusive.