Introduction

*Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player*
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
*Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury*
Signifying nothing.


On hearing of the death of his wife, Macbeth likens an individual’s life to that of a lowly actor—a relatively short and ultimately meaningless “playing” at life and death.¹ In spite of all the ‘sound and fury’ of the drama, the passing of time renders the play, and by analogy, life itself, meaningless. Shakespeare’s ultimate nihilistic utterance powerfully links the themes of this thesis: the aesthetic experience of time’s arrow (the way in which linear time is perceived) and the significance of time spent playing (the possible meanings and purposes of the activity).²

This thesis is concerned with the aesthetics of videogame music, and the medium’s place in a broader cultural history. The field of ludomusicology—the musicological study of videogame music—is now rapidly growing in much the same way that film musicology expanded in tandem with the “New Musicologies” of the 1980s and 1990s. One explanation for the timing of this growth is that, although videogame studies developed alongside videogames themselves in the late twentieth century, and despite the fact that music has been a point of discussion among videogame enthusiasts from the outset, musicologists have been consistently slow to address new sub-fields.³ In any case, a musicological approach is now appropriate and necessary not least

---

¹ Like playing as “acting”, playing as “gaming” also involves an element of pretence, or make-believe. See p. 18 below.
³ In 2004, Zach Whalen noted that “While the game industry invests heavily in the creation of music, and nostalgic themes from early games resonate powerfully with mature gamers, music in videogames has so
because in the last decade, the perception that videogame music has come of age has been well
established. After discussing the size of the videogame market (worth an estimated USD$30
billion per annum) in the introduction to his book, The Art of Videogames, Grant Tavinor goes as
far as to suggest that videogames may soon eclipse film and popular music as ‘the predominant
popular art forms of the twentieth century.’ This popularity and the associated economically
driven value system are crucial factors in understanding videogames as cultural objects that
intersect the indistinct and overlapping categories of mass culture and art. This thesis will
investigate the unique ways in which videogame music blurs such boundaries, and in turn, this
will demonstrate the cultural and theoretical value of analysing videogame music.

Of particular relevance to my argument in this thesis will be Graeme Kirkpatrick’s 2011
book Aesthetic Theory and the Video Game, for all that it fails to engage with music. His

far remained a tangential footnote to preliminary studies that attempt to account for the medium within
the academy.’ See Zach Whalen, ‘Play Along - An Approach to Videogame Music,’ Game Studies 4/1
eyear overview of interest in videogame music can be found in Matthew Belinkie, ‘Video Game Music: Not
Just Kid Stuff,’ on vgmusic.com (15/12/1999), retrieved from <http://www.vgmusic.com/vgpaper.shtml>,
accessed 04/09/2009. On musicology’s late interest in postmodernism, see Rudolf Flotzinger,

4 The inclusion of videogame music in the ClassicFM 2013 Hall of Fame sparked a lively debate on their
website including many interesting thoughts contributed by composers such as Garry Schyman, James
Hannigan and Jason Graves. See ClassicFM, ‘Classic FM Conversation: Video game scores - what do you
music-hall-fame-opinion/>, and ‘Rachmaninov and video games triumph in Classic FM Hall of Fame,’ on
classicfm.com (02/04/2013), retrieved from <http://www.classicfm.com/hall-of-fame/2013/video-games-
beethoven-hall-fame-top-5/>, both accessed 15/04/2013. Grant Tavinor also highlights a number of
developments that contribute to this view including the size and nature of popular internet forums: ‘These
discussion boards have led to a level of gaming criticism and connoisseurship not previously seen.’ Grant

5 Tavinor, The Art of Videogames, p. 7. This question of ‘art status’ will be considered gradually over the
following chapters. In mainstream media, the issue is still divisive: Keith Stuart, ‘Video games and art: why
does the media get it so wrong?,’ in The Guardian (08/01/2014), retrieved from
new>, accessed 10/01/2014. See also Phillip Lipari, The Video Game as an Artistic Medium According to
Kantian Aesthetic Theory (Dissertation, Boston College, May 2007), retrieved from
<http://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/schools/cas_sites/communication/pdf/thesis07.lipari.pdf>,
accessed 22/07/2013. Grand Theft Auto V (Rockstar/Take-Two Interactive, 2013) for instance, generated
USD$1 billion within its first three days of sale (beating predications of one month), Take-Two claiming that
it is the fastest-selling entertainment product in history. See Andrew Goldfarb, ‘GTA 5 Sales Hit $1 Billion In
Three Days,’ on Imagine Games Network (20/09/2013), retrieved from
provocative idea is that the videogame object is best understood from the perspective of traditional aesthetic theory. My contention is that ludomusicology can in fact highlight crucial points of convergence and divergence between videogames and music. This is because both offer aesthetic experiences that are temporally mediated through the tangible qualities of what is generally called “play”. Registering the relevance of broadly accepted definitions of music by Roger Scruton and Nicholas Cook, as Michiel Kamp has done, demonstrates the importance of aesthetic play in the context of videogame music. Scruton says that ‘when we hear music, we do not hear sound only; we hear something in the sound, something which moves with a force of its own.’ Cook recognized that the statement, ‘anything can be music if it is heard as music’ has an important corollary: ‘nothing can be music if it is not heard as music.’ These ideas are closely connected to the active play involved in aesthetic experience, and Roger Moseley’s application of ludomusicology as the study of ludicity in music demonstrates how videogame music is well placed to offer new perspectives on aesthetic theory and wider understandings of music.

Temporal issues are well known in the field of videogame studies. Although Johan Huizinga’s rather static concept of the “magic circle” — a special spatial arena in which a game takes place — has been employed as a standard description of videogame form, Dominic Arsenault and Bernard Perron say that ‘playing a video game is always a continuous loop between the gamer’s input and the game’s output […] We should not forget that the temporal dimension of videogames is entirely constitutive of their experience.”

---


gameplay prevails on its spatial characterization." Nevertheless, the aesthetic experience of time in videogames remains under-theorized. Ludomusicology not only contributes to an understanding of videogame music, but also to videogame studies, and multimedia studies more broadly. In this regard, Tavinor’s characterization of videogames as a “cultural platypus”—an issue or area of study that sheds light not only on the object in question but back on the discipline itself—is apt.

Aesthetic elements of the kind that will occupy me here point beyond themselves to wider-ranging issues of the status of art in contemporary culture and the so-called “high/low” divide. Invoking this terminology immediately risks reinforcing the distinctly modernist binarism of high art and mass culture as a mutually exclusive polarity. This risk of using language that inadvertently reinforces the concepts being deconstructed is itself a standard critique of postmodernism, but since the very term postmodernism responds to modernism, it is necessary to reference its false dichotomies with renewed critical focus. With this broad context in mind, I will consider certain aesthetic similarities and disparities between videogame music and other musics—specifically the non-linear (by which I mean aleatory, indeterminate and mobile form) avant-garde music prevalent since the 1950s. While it is relatively straightforward to draw up a paradoxical relationship between videogame music on the one hand—arguably participating in the Adornian “culture industry”—and avant-garde modernism on the other (usually thought to resist the culture industry), one should remain sceptical of facile parallelism. The modernist music

---


13 Tavinor notes that the discovery of the platypus in the eighteenth century challenged scientists to rethink many of their previous conceptions of biological classification. See *The Art of Videogames*, p. 12.

14 This division between highbrow and lowbrow art has a lot to do with accessibility and target audiences as well as other immanent distinctions.
The Aesthetics of Videogame Music

Mark Sweeney

in question is often thought of in terms of an “order/disorder” binarism that does not necessarily apply to videogame music. However, the distinction between chance (disorder) and choice (a form of non-linear order) was rediscovered by composers such as Pierre Boulez, and this non-linear form of order is more in keeping with videogame music and videogame aesthetics. This thesis will therefore also address questions pertinent to contemporary musicology and postmodern scholarship in general—namely, why the order/disorder spectrum has played such a central role in the aesthetic makeup of both music and videogames, and how it might be reconfigured by contemporary (and particularly postmodern) thought.

Postmodernism is couched in the ensuing chapters primarily in terms of the fundamental principle of relativity. The apparatus of deconstruction critically highlights underlying ideologies, but this first step of self-consciousness need not be the end of the process of critical thought. Indeed, it has not been. James Franklin has argued that from a philosophical perspective, pervasive relativistic arguments have severe limitations that have not yet been circumvented. He argues that the relativist conclusion, “we cannot know things as they are in themselves” just does not follow from the premises about how we can know things only as they are related to us. The fact that these philosophical problems remain contentious at a fundamental level supports the continued efforts of theorists and interpreters. This is particularly clear in the case of the developing New Musicology (although that term has aged considerably), which brought aspects of Critical Theory into play within the discipline. At first, it offered a powerful ideology

15 After experimenting with ‘total serialism’ (where all musical parameters are systematically controlled and serially organized) in order to free himself from the clichés of leaned styles, Boulez rejected the chance procedures of Stockhausen’s Piano Piece XI (1956) because he realized that this was in fact the same trap of ‘automatism’ that Ligeti had levelled against Boulez’s Structure Ia: ‘Leaving any aspect to chance produced exactly the same effect as being forced by some scheme: the composer’s presumed liberty of action was compromised.’ Instead, in his Third Piano Sonata (1955–7) he employed a mobile form based on choice. See Paul Griffiths, Modern Music and After: Directions Since 1945 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 105. This work, and others, will be discussed elsewhere in this thesis.

16 Considering videogame music in this context may already imply aesthetic judgements from the outset. However, the comparisons afforded by this contextualization are informative in developing an aesthetic theory of videogame music.

critique, especially important for those groups that traditional historical musicology marginalized. However, the very self-reflective processes that enabled these developments have subsequently been reapplied on them, enabling the possibility of further “reconstruction”. The spirit of this second part of the repeating cycle of postmodernist methodology is evident in Alistair William’s *Constructing Musicology*.

This discussion does not serve as a definition of postmodernism, of course, but as Fredric Jameson wrote, ‘Postmodernism is not something we can settle once and for all and then use with a clear conscience. The concept, if there is one, has to come at the end, and not at the beginning, of our discussions of it.’ The remainder of this introduction will occupy itself with definitions and categorizations of the videogame object before moving on to consider the issues raised by an aesthetic study of videogame music.

### The Videogame Object: Definitions and Categorizations

As with any related medium—such as film, music, or the novel—ontological definitions are always problematic. Nevertheless, some sense of what constitutes a videogame and how it can be categorized is an essential precursor to a discussion of its aesthetic properties. As the preeminent scholar in the field of videogame sound (including but not exclusive to music), Karen Collins’s adoption of Jesper Juul’s definition of ‘game’ is an appropriate place to start:

> a rule based system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, [where] the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels emotionally attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are negotiable.

The qualifying ‘video’, Collins explains, simply refers ‘to any game *consumed* on video screens, whether these are computer monitors, mobile phones, handheld devices, televisions, or coin-

---

Introduction

The Aesthetics of Videogame Music

Mark Sweeney

operated arcade consoles.’ At the inaugural conference of the Ludomusicology Research Group in Oxford (2012), a productive discussion about the distinction between “playing (musical) games” and “playing with (musical) toys” hinged on the idea of “structured play” as opposed to simply playing. Structuring could point to a mode of reception (a formalized institutional environment such as the concert hall, or more broadly, the way in which it is listened to), or to aspects of form and structure designed by an active agent (the composer). Both meanings are viable and useful, although the second is perhaps the most directly relevant to this study. Playing a videogame, then, involves playing in a structured way, with the game’s rules and mechanisms providing form.

The videogame market is clearly demarcated by genre, each one aimed at a specific demographic. However, there has been much debate about how exactly genre classifications should be defined and, more specifically, whether to rely on pre-established (largely narrative-based) genres adopted from other mediums, such as literature or film, or categories based on a game’s particular mode of interactivity. The Entertainment Software Association (ESA) provides a yearly booklet of statistics summarizing the state of the (American) industry, information that is

21 Collins, Game Sound, p. 3. (Emphasis added: it is no coincidence that Collins uses this word.) It is worth noting a great deal of discussion in the field of videogame studies about the need for consistent usage of certain terminology, especially with general terms such as ‘videogame’, ‘video-game’ music or indeed, ‘video game’. See ‘Introduction’ to Perron and Wolf, The Video Game Theory Reader 2, pp. 1–21, 6–8. For more detail, see David Thomas, Kyle Orland and Scott Steinberg, The Videogame Style Guide and Reference Manual (London: Power Play Publishing, 2007), retrieved from <http://www.gamestyleguide.com>, accessed 15/04/2013. This guide is in fact more of a glossary than a style guide in the traditional sense, but nevertheless provides a useful index of pertinent nomenclature as well as a limited bibliography and ‘who’s who’ in the industry. I have opted to conform to this guide’s suggestions on the formatting of certain terminology for the sake of consistency and readability, even though it has been criticized as somewhat arbitrary on occasion. For instance, it seems to break its own rule on determining the usage of terminology like ‘videogame’ based on popularity and consistency.

22 Naturally, these are not so much categories as a spectrum. This distinction is similarly useful when it comes to defining music as structured sound, in contradistinction to other unstructured sounds or sound effects (the purpose of which is to render naturally occurring sounds either through recording or some form of synthesis). It is worth noting that in his 1957 lecture on ‘Experimental Music’, John Cage defines music as ‘a purposeless play’ which is ‘an affirmation of life—not an attempt to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply a way of waking up to the very life we’re living.’ These concepts will be also discussed below in terms of aesthetic theory. See John Cage, Silence: Lectures and Writings (London: Marion Boyars, 1973), p. 12. (Emphasis added to highlight that this terminology is not coincidental.) The concept of “play” in terms of aesthetic theory will be discussed in more detail below.

23 See also Anahid Kassabian and Freya Jarman, ‘Representation of Music in Virtual Worlds.’
Introduction

The Aesthetics of Videogame Music

Mark Sweeney

often referred to as a good indicator of annual global trends. It is immediately evident when evaluating their list of so-called ‘super genres’ (see Table I.1) that there is little consistency; the list is a practical commercial categorization derived from ESA’s data source, rather than a systematic or inherently logical one. In addition, the categories are not clearly defined in the document and are in danger of overlapping with one another when compared to other ‘standard’ definitions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Super Genre</th>
<th>% Units Sold 2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Action</td>
<td>19.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shooter</td>
<td>18.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport Games</td>
<td>14.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Entertainment</td>
<td>11.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adventure</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role-Playing</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racing</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casual</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fighting</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Games, Compilations</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s Entertainment</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flight</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arcade</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table I.1: Units Sold by Super Genre (2011)

Alternative strategies have been proposed based on a variety of separate parameters, but no consensus has been reached. As Thomas Apperley has pointed out, these debates are a reflection of a broader methodological divide within videogame studies, namely, between those favouring “narratology” and those who promote a “ludological” approach. Ludology considers

---


videogames as structured play and is primarily concerned with their uniqueness as objects of study.\(^{27}\) In contrast, the narratological approach considers videogame studies as an extension of literary or dramatic narrative.\(^{28}\) Although the binarism of narratology and ludology is problematic for theorists as a powerful false dichotomy, as a spectrum it is unavoidable when considering individual games from the developers’ or the audiences’ perspectives.\(^{29}\) The games themselves can often be categorized as being more inviting to one approach than another. *Crysis* (Crytek/EA, 2007) is a predominantly single player, first-person shooter (or “shoot-'em-up”, also classified more broadly as an action/adventure game), and could be viewed as narrative-oriented in spite of its combative gameplay due to the importance of narrative cut-scenes in its single-player campaign.\(^{30}\) In the second chapter, I will consider an abstract musical puzzle game, *Chime* (Zoë Mode/OneBigGame, 2007), that sits more obviously on the ludo-centric end of the spectrum. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that this spectrum is a guide to classification and not a prompt to a particular set of methodologies, both of which are useful. (Issues concerning music’s ability to portray a narrative have been discussed at length since the advent of the New Musicology in the 1990s. While these debates have significance here and in the following chapters, for the most part they are not directly applicable to these mixed-media contexts.\(^{31}\))


\(^{30}\) This observation reflects a tendency, rather than a rule. *Crysis* also has an additional multiplayer mode but unlike other FPS games such as those of the Call of Duty or Battlefield franchises, it is thought of as a single-player game first. These games also have single-player campaigns but their primary selling feature is a multiplayer gameplay experience.

The genres in Table 1.2 have been selected as the most commonly cited by both gamers and critics as the core categories. Whether or not a game is single player or multiplayer is one of the principal levels of categorization. Many games are also distinguished by the player’s perspective, despite the fact that the player is often able to change perspectives during gameplay. For instance, shooters are often referred to as ‘first-person shooters’ (FPS), regardless of whether the player can switch to an over-the-shoulder camera third-person perspective. (The two images shown in Figure I.1 are both taken from Crysis: the first is in the default first-person perspective [FPP], as intended for normal gameplay, while in the second the player has switched to third-person perspective [TPP].)


32 Of course, many games include both modes of gameplay. This sometimes strains resources so that priority is given to one over the other. See, for instance, Ken Levine’s comments on the decision not to include a multiplayer mode for BioShock Infinite. Goldfarb, ‘Ken Levine on Reinventing BioShock Infinite,’ on *Imagine Games Network* (11 December 2012), retrieved from <http://uk.ign.com/articles/2012/12/12/ken-levine-on-reinventing-bioshock-infinite>, accessed 07/10/2013.
### Table I.2: Genre Descriptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shooter/Shoot ‘em up</td>
<td>FPP/TPP combat-oriented games in which the principal weapons are firearms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role-Playing</td>
<td>The RPG is often a TPP action/adventure game that involves developing a character’s “statistics” (such as health) whilst exploring their story in a virtual world.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action/Adventure</td>
<td>Category that could feasibly include most FPP/TPP games. Aside from the specific genres described above, other sub-genres include Stealth, Detective and Survival Horror. Usually predominantly narrative-based.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fighting/Beat ‘em up</td>
<td>Martial Arts/Boxing games in FPP/TPP.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport</td>
<td>Virtual representation of any sporting competition/activity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racing</td>
<td>Arguably a sub-genre of Sport, could include any form of racing, although generally refers to motorcar racing games in FPP/TPP.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casual</td>
<td>A catchall category that includes anything from card games (such as Solitaire) to “Social Games” (such as Farmville, on the Facebook application platform).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy</td>
<td>Further divided into the subcategories of real-time (RTS) and turn-based (TBS) games, these are most similar to board games such as RISK, and chess, usually providing large-scale bird’s-eye overviews rather than FPP/TPP.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simulation</td>
<td>Tend to emphasize realism, simulate specific real-world scenarios, such as city building/management or aviation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massively Multiplayer Online</td>
<td>MMO games deserve special mention, although they are not a genre in the same sense as the others described above. They usually comprise large-scale persistent online virtual worlds in which players interact and socialize through their avatars. Can be a multiplayer version of any of the above genres, but is most commonly associated with the RPG (MMORPG).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While not directly musically relevant, these classifications do encompass musical trends. For instance, racing games are invariably dominated by high-octane rock music, often licensed. Such correlations have been the subject of recent study: Tim Summers concludes that

> Certain genres... prioritize distinct modes of interaction and components of musical function because of the interactive mechanism of the game, and thus provide the opportunity for the examination of those particular musical concerns. That this is so indicates the close relationship between music and gameplay/interaction in the video game medium.\(^{35}\)

---

\(^{33}\) I have provided my own basic definitions of genre, which while broad and undoubtedly problematic, are sufficient for my purposes here.


While music has perhaps been more often approached in terms of the contribution it makes to mixed media meaning, in the case of videogames, it is clear that music also has close ties to ludological constructs. Describing ludology and narratology as a spectrum on which genre can be located is certainly an intellectually fruitful starting point as it highlights salient tensions between play (and its inherent cognitive requirements) and hermeneutic aspects of the videogame object. This tension is crucial to understanding the role of videogames in contemporary culture and such theorizing will also shed new light on musical aesthetics in general.

Aesthetic Theory

Graeme Kirkpatrick argues that videogames primarily demand to be considered aesthetically. Though Grant Tavinor’s interests are explicitly focused on “art status”, he concurs that the ‘fictional first-hand experience of gameplay seems to give it an aesthetic edge.’ It is important to clarify exactly what is meant by the term “aesthetic” before going any further. The word comes from the Greek, *aisthanomai*, meaning ‘to perceive’, and along with the moral branch of philosophy, it has traditionally been categorized as “value theory”, because it deals with value judgements. The study of aesthetics has generally gone hand-in-hand with art, and the orthodox opinion that art is a sub-category of aesthetics still holds sway. Although it is generally used to refer to objects that are simply visually pleasing, traditional aesthetic theory of the sort outlined by Immanuel Kant aims to move beyond the superficial surface of the object through a

---

38 Though the converse—that all art is aesthetic—is implied, it is less often stated, since art may also involve other aspects, such as meaning. Kant argued that art entailed knowledge (specifically, knowledge that an object has been intentionally created or crafted) in a way that aesthetic experience did not. See Eaton, ‘Art and the Aesthetic.’
consideration of the interaction between “play” and “form”. The concept of play adopted from
Kant by subsequent theorists—imagination free from determinate concepts—is the basis from
which form is perceived. Kant famously valued music the least of the arts, themselves
collectively subordinate to nature. However, as Scruton argues, music is actually an excellent fit
for Kant’s aesthetic theory:

When I hear music, I hear a certain organization. Something begins, develops, and
maintains a unity among its parts. This unity is not indeed there in the notes before me. It
is a product of my perception. I hear it only because my imagination, in its ‘free play’,
brings my perception under the indeterminate idea of unity… But this perception is not
arbitrary, since it is compelled by my rational nature. I perceive the organization in my
experience as objective.

Thus, this unity of form is created in the subject (the listener/viewer) through a type of play, even
though it is also possible to uncover its origins in the object (the music/image) through a process
of objective analysis. The result of the interaction between play and form can be judged as
aesthetically pleasing or beautiful. Explaining Kant’s theory, Kirkpatrick stresses that it is not the
value system that is at issue here, but the combination of play and form in the videogame as
creating an aesthetic experience. Early forms of art theory (broadly speaking classical aesthetic
theory) were based predominantly on mimesis—representation of an actual object. However,

---

39 Prior to the publishing of his seminal Critique of Judgment in 1790, Kant himself had considered
aesthetics as somewhat of a non-starter, since it seemed to be simply a question of taste and not an issue
worthy of philosophical rigour. However, Kant later turned to aesthetics as the crucial subjective link
between the two distinct realms of objective knowledge accessible by science (nature) and philosophy (self-
consciousness). It is no coincidence that it was in the 1950s that a similar impasse in philosophical
approaches to aesthetics was breached. See Peter Kivy’s ‘Introduction’ to The Blackwell Guide To Aesthetics,
1–11, pp. 1–3. See also Andrew Bowie, Aesthetics and subjectivity from Kant to Nietzsche (Manchester:

40 ‘Indeterminate ideas’ like formal unity are, in other words, abstract ideas of the imagination. ‘In the free
play of the imagination, concepts are either wholly indeterminate, or if determinate not applied. An
example of the first is the imaginative “synthesis” involved in seeing a set of marks as a pattern. Here there
is no determinate concept. There is nothing to a pattern except an experienced order, and no concept
applied in the experience apart from that indeterminate idea. An example of the second is the “synthesis”
involved in seeing a face in a picture. Here the concept “face” enters the imaginative synthesis, but it is not
applied to the object. I do not judge that this, before me, is a face, but only that I have imaginative
permission, as it were, so to see it.’ Scruton, Kant: A Very Short Introduction (Oxford: Oxford University

41 For a psychological evaluation of play as ‘imagination’, see Huizinga, Homo Ludens.

42 Scruton, Kant, p. 106.


44 The opposition of mimesis to diegesis (a story enacted as opposed to a story ‘told’ by a narrator) is
derived from Plato’s Republic and Aristotle’s Poetics. The terms are not to be confused with more recent
the aesthetic theory that emerged in the eighteenth century recognized an unbridgeable gap between the semblance of an object and the object itself, and therefore came to value aesthetic elements as distinct from representational accuracy. The growth of the importance of “absolute music” in the nineteenth century owes much to the fact that music was considered the most abstract and non-representational of the arts, its ability to express the inexpressible reflecting ‘how our self-understanding can never be fully achieved by discursive articulation.’

In some contexts—especially those associated with the visual arts—the term “form” is often used in a more Platonic, ontological sense. Form can be conceived of both spatially and temporally and the ambiguity arising from this lack of conceptual clarity is perhaps responsible for any confusion in Kirkpatrick’s equation of videogames and the aesthetics of fine art (videogames being temporal, like musical performances, while form in fine art paintings is primarily a spatial concept). The current move to develop appropriately medium-specific terminology and theory is therefore also particularly relevant for the concept of aesthetic form.

In his essay ‘The Video Game Aesthetic: Play as Form’, David Myers uses the term in more of an ontological sense (an object whose form represents a horse, for instance) than a musicologist might (as a synonym for, or category of, structure). Due to the similar temporal and performative nature of both music and videogames, then, the musicological understanding of form should also prove to be particularly useful for videogame aesthetic theory. Jameson’s...
description of music, and pertinently, animation, in postmodern culture as ‘spatialized time’, is surely significant to the aesthetic theory of videogame music too.48

Discussions of aesthetics tend to revolve around complex issues about the historical contingency or autonomy of aesthetic properties. On the one hand, Carl Dahlhaus states that ‘esthetic experience implies something historical.’49 On the other, although Scruton promotes the idea of a critical function for art, by which art questions social conditions through artistic autonomy, he simultaneously argues that great art transcends social conditions: ‘Its meaning as ideology may be what interests us least, when we see it as a work of art.’50 If aesthetic judgements are to be drawn (through analysis) from the music itself (in its most objective sound or notated form), they must be to some degree autonomous—as Dahlhaus would have it, “relatively autonomous”—from external goals and historical context. Nevertheless, such judgements are historically contingent: for instance, the influence of dance on musical form is a critical aspect of the aesthetics of a Chopin Waltz, although the dance characteristics have been absorbed into immanently musical ones and shed their original functions. Lawrence Kramer describes even Dahlhaus’s compromise of relative autonomy as a ‘chimera’—‘neither music nor anything else can be other than worldly through and through.’51 This stance is grounded in the view that pretences to an autonomous artwork are in fact a means of promoting a concealed ideology. Therefore, Kramer argues that it is essential for postmodern musicology to subject theories of musical understanding to criticism.52 This has led contemporary (and postmodern)

musicologists to employ dialectical approaches.\textsuperscript{53} An appreciation of music as aesthetic experience should form part of a dialectical understanding alongside historical, analytical and hermeneutical modes of knowledge. Perhaps Kant’s view of art in fact embodies these different modes well: ‘Art is… an organ of philosophy, a means of advancing as we grope in the darkness where senses, imagination, and understanding coalesce into knowledge.’\textsuperscript{54}

Adorno and the Culture Industry

Theodor Adorno complicates Kant’s idea of formal autonomy with Hegel’s emphasis on an artwork’s intellectual “import” (its significance and meaning) and Marx’s insistence on the embeddedness of art in society. (The impact of New Musicology in the 1990s largely encouraged a perception of formalist analysis as a relic of modernist musicology.\textsuperscript{55}) This results in a precarious and complex understanding of art’s aesthetic autonomy. Art’s import is brought into a dialectical relationship with its “function”—categories that are at once distinct and yet ultimately inseparable. Adorno still tends to lay emphasis on the former, because he believes that art should be socially meaningful although not political (a “functionlessness” reminiscent of Kant’s ‘purposeless purposiveness’\textsuperscript{56}), and also due to the importance of his conception of “truth content” (\textit{Wahrheitsinhalt}). An artwork’s import stems from another dialectical relationship

\textsuperscript{53} I posit that listeners shift focus through different modes of thought, aesthetic being just one. If this ability depends on the aesthetic and intellectual experiences of the listener (Dahlhaus suggested that they are an intrinsic part of aesthetic perception), then aesthetic experiences are indeed subjective to a degree. See Dahlhaus, \textit{Esthetics of Music}, p. 73.

\textsuperscript{54} Dahlhaus, \textit{Esthetics of Music}, p. 38.


between form (*Form*—the articulation of a whole structure into various parts) and content (*Inhalt*—the specific organization of musical material that makes up a particular work).⁵⁷ Truth content (ostensibly a Boolean value judgement with no granularity or critical element) is contingent on a negotiation between the general and the particular. Adorno’s conception of art is thereby predicated primarily on his aesthetic theory, rather than extra-musical signification.

Building on this aesthetic theory, Adorno suggested that traditional art is contingent on generating aesthetic pleasure and that it points beyond itself to a better place. In contrast, the products of the culture industry merely pretend to aspire to such ‘transcendental beauty’ but in fact pacify the population by displacing the desire for ‘freedom and the genuinely new’ with consumerism, and labelling those who are dissatisfied with the *status quo* as abnormal.⁵⁸ Unlike the music of Beethoven and Schoenberg, composers championed by Adorno, music produced in the culture industry provides facile and immediate pleasure that gives the impression of promoting individualism by claiming that what are in fact variations on a theme are real differences. This ‘pseudo-individualization’ masks both the standardization of products and their schematization, phenomena that ultimately encourage their audience to be unreflective of their condition and socio-economic status.⁵⁹ This is the hallmark of capitalist culture, as Adorno sees it.⁶⁰ As Andrew Bowie explains, aesthetic theory itself developed as a form of resistance to the dominance of the capitalist value system: ‘Even though artworks clearly do become commodities,

---

neither their use-value nor their value as commodities can constitute them as works of art."61

Indeed, Kant argued that although art is intentionally produced (it is purposive) it is without purpose (social function).

Classical music is often repackaged as Muzak—the background music heard in supermarkets and elevators with its dynamic contrasts normalized—manipulative sounds to be *heard* but not *listened* to.62 Cook notes that historically, any music that confines the listener’s ‘freedom of imagination’ (Schumann’s formulation), whether it be overly prescribed modernist music or inane Muzak, jeopardizes its status as *music* in the eyes of many (conservative) critics.63 Like Eduard Hanslick, Adorno even extended this criticism to include “programme music” (music reliant on, or at least supplemented by, a written programme, often in the form of a narrative). Hanslick’s own seminal work on musical aesthetics, *On The Beautiful in Music*, was published about a century before Adorno but already made clear that aesthetic art was more than a series of psychological effects and required the active participation of its audience.64 Cook summarizes that in spite of many significant points of difference in the numerous positions put forward,

‘Adorno, Dahlhaus, and [Stephen] McAdams are in agreement with each other... that the active participation of the listener plays an essential role in the constitution of the musical artwork.’65

However, *pace* Heinrich Schenker, Cook finds that even musically educated listeners do not

---

generally listen to form in the way an aesthetician might desire. He nevertheless concludes that the disparity between musical experience and the aesthetic idealism of music theorists is an acceptable one because it is ‘a defining attribute of musical culture.’ I would add that while actively applied knowledge is necessary to label aspects of musical form, such as a recapitulation, only an active memory is required to experience the sense of return. Furthermore, when used by an aesthetician rather than a music theorist, the term form is a broader concept of musical structure that also encompasses smaller-scale microstructures such as a melody or rhythmic patterns—aspects of musical form that are viable candidates for the conscious or unconscious experience of listeners, regardless of their musical education.

Kirkpatrick’s Theory of Videogame Aesthetics

In response to the emerging cultural climate (the perceived rapid Americanization or Westernization of global culture), post-war modernist conceptual artists sought to offer a form of artistic resistance through increasingly complex and abstract work: ‘Art’s seeming disorder is its organized response to the deeply administered chaos of capitalism.’ This in turn eventually led artists to a rejection of semblance, arguably even negating conventional aesthetics altogether. Kirkpatrick argues that objects such as Duchamp’s infamous Fountain (1917) have no form and therefore offer no aesthetic experience, at least in the traditional sense of the phrase. According

---


70 On the contrary, one might argue that much modernist art prioritizes an excess of form over semblance in similar ways to what Kirkpatrick describes as neo-baroque. In this sense, some modernist art could be seen as ‘just aesthetics’ or ‘pure aesthetics’. The anti-utilitarianism of Romantic idealism was a significant impetus for both modernist and postmodernist attitudes towards form and utility.
to Arthur Danto’s 1980 hypothesis, after the developments in sociology and cultural theory in the 1960s (such as attempts to reveal underlying issues of class bias and an insistence on the primacy of social context), art was ‘liberated’ from the constrictions of aesthetic criteria.71 Although such modernist art continued to have an element of play in the puzzles it presented, the sphere in which it operated was decisively relocated from semblance/representation to the socio-political.

Adorno and Horkheimer’s 1944 exploration of the so-called culture industry (in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*) has been updated to take into account developments in the second half of the twentieth century in Scott Lash and Celia Lury’s *Global Cultural Industry*.72 While Adorno pointed to comparatively long-term cycles of manipulation, Lash and Lury suggest that the contemporary culture industry encourages the consumer to somehow participate in the creation of the very commodities they are buying through the mode of play—something they describe as ‘getting ontological’.73 This argument puts Kirkpatrick in a position to state that the videogame occupies a unique place within this cultural history through a precarious balancing of semblance with playing games. (Though “play” alone usually involves a pretence that the activity is real, playing a game tends to involve abstract ludological rules that are just mechanisms of gaming. Kirkpatrick argues that in general, gamers tend to be even more reluctant, than, say, the audiences of plays or filmgoers, to willingly suspend their disbelief. This is ironically at odds with the widespread emphasis on immersion within a game’s fictional world—though of course, in another sense one can be immersed in the activity of playing—and highlights a disparity in two types of players, casual, and more serious gamers who place much greater emphasis on the competitive nature of gameplay at the expense of everything else.) He suggests that there is a transfer of autonomous aesthetic principles from the modernist artwork, which can no longer contain them, to the

73 See Kirkpatrick, *Aesthetic Theory and the Video Game*, p. 44.
videogame object, which, whilst appearing able to accommodate them, nevertheless participates at the same time in some form of culture industry. Crucially however, Kirkpatrick argues that due to the interactive nature of play, videogames stimulate action from the gamer rather than pacify them.74

Like other ludologists, Kirkpatrick re-employs the traditional divorce between meaning and form in order to focus on the latter. (This approach also has the additional benefit of avoiding the slipperiness of the former.) While not denying the possibility of other routes of investigation, or that videogames can signify in multiple ways, Kirkpatrick expands the concept of play to encompass the player’s tangible, physical interactions. He reinterprets the role of ludology as a defensive strategy that facilitates the re-emergence of form and play in videogames (their aesthetic autonomy) and provides a shield against the largely meaning-orientated humanities.75

According to Kirkpatrick, ludologists nevertheless miss the importance of aesthetic experience. Kirkpatrick posits that the aesthetic experience of gameplay is a form of ‘virtual time’ akin to dance due to its peculiar ‘meaning dynamics’.76 This sense of ‘virtual time’ is predicated on the postponement of a decision regarding meaning. (The connection to dance also leads him to draw parallels between gameplay and musical performance, although he does not pursue tantalizing temporal similarities between videogame aesthetics and musical aesthetics.77) Subsequently, Kirkpatrick considers the videogame aesthetic as an inversion of the modernist artwork (predicated on primarily visual grounds), in that the latter presents an abstract (non-representational), static experience of form discoverable through play, whereas the videogame

74 See Kirkpatrick, Aesthetic Theory and the Video Game, p. 44. This is discussed in more detail below.
76 Related to this is Aki Järvinen’s discussion of play experiences, aesthetics and emotion in ‘Video Games as Emotional Experiences,’ in The Video Game Theory Reader 2, pp. 85–108, esp. pp. 94–5.
77 See Kirkpatrick, Aesthetic Theory and the Video Game, Chapter 2, pp. 48–86. Kirkpatrick maps the ludology/narratology spectrum onto space and time and suggests that ‘temporal factors... [such as] embodied rhythmic experiences... determine the spatial character of the video game form’. While he applauds ludology’s focus on the importance of play in videogames, he also argues that its exaggerated spatial conception of videogame form fails to account for the role of ‘suspended time’, a gap he aims to address ‘by aligning video games with dance.’
player constantly undermines the surface fiction while attempting to master the game’s routines. He suggests that the nearest cultural precedent for such paradoxical ‘meaning dynamics’—an excess of form overriding and negating meaning (here gameplay is corrosive to semblance, fiction and meaning)—lies in Angela Ndalianis’s conception of a “neo-baroque” aesthetic (after Benjamin). Although Kirkpatrick’s focus on higher-level philosophical concerns ignores the arguably socially conformist nature of gaming, his opposition of gameplay and meaning, being predicated on a more restricted concept of meaning, nevertheless warrants further discussion on its own terms.

Drawing on Jacques Rancière, Kirkpatrick resists Pierre Bourdieu’s rejection of aesthetic form as an objective or socially autonomous phenomenon, arguing that ‘the problems of essentialism and idealism really only arise if we overstate the relationship of form to meaning.’ (Whilst Bourdieu is ultimately correct, his objection to aesthetic theory in principle risks disregarding aesthetics altogether.) Kirkpatrick steers his reader through abstract puzzle games (such as Tetris), largely avoiding narrative-orientated games, and thus is able to emphasize the fact that games need not signify, or rather, mean anything. By restricting his definition of meaning to narrative, morals, satire, and parody, Kirkpatrick underplays the culturally embedded significance of play as performative in its own right. However, this enables him to cast gameplay in opposition to meaning, and he draws alternative hermeneutic approaches into a precarious relationship with his own:

...while there is convergence of contemporary play with mediated fiction, there is an equally significant move within fiction towards increased ludicity. These tendencies are related to one another in a move within the culture as a whole that exceeds either gameness or fictionality in the direction of form. The outcome of this move itself remains incomplete or undecided, which is the central difficulty for discussions of the videogame object.

This is, in part, further justification for the aesthetic approach—the gameness/ludicity and fictionality/narrativity of the videogame object can be envisaged as two competing spheres of influence. As one contracts, the other expands to fill the space. The opposition of ludicity to meaning, at least in broad terms, is manifestly contestable. However, Kirkpatrick provides evidence (which I corroborate to a degree in Chapter 2) which certainly points to an antagonism between the requirements of playing a videogame and immersion within its fictional narrative.

Kirkpatrick states that:

Play and form in videogames are implicated in a specific kind of cultural politics, namely, one in which meaning is at stake. The metaphoric construct, commonly applied to games, of ‘world creation’ is indicative of their status in a culture that Geert Lovink (2008) accurately characterizes in terms of ‘creative nihilism’. The playful activity that surfaces here at the heart of consumer culture spins webs of meaning that offer some psychic protection from the salient threats of economic precarity and the kinds of subjective desolation associated with life in a manipulative ‘culture industry’ (Adorno 1991). At the same time, the resulting cultural practices (of gameplay) are hollowed out, transparent in their emptiness and increasingly stand as the sign of choices people are not making.  

In other words, Kirkpatrick discovers a duality within the videogame aesthetic: on the one hand, it appears to offer attractive forms and meanings that stand against the so-called ‘creative nihilism’ of the times, but on the other hand, the element of play acts as a powerful counterweight, all but negating any trace of meaning, rendering it ‘transparent’. Kirkpatrick’s word is appropriate since the fiction is rendered a transparent layer through which players focus their attention on the mechanisms of the game. Indeed, the game designers themselves usually assist in this. David Myers recognizes a similar negation of meaning by play that works in conjunction with his concept of “anti-form”—the knowledge that play involves a pretence (either in terms of semblance—players pretend an object is real—or more fundamentally in terms of play itself not being real, but a game). The abstract structure of rules that make up (comprise) a game (its form) also signal that they make up (invent) a game and not something real:

---

81 Kirkpatrick, Aesthetic Theory and the Video Game, p. 16.
82 Numerous developer diaries and interviews demonstrate that game designers foreground gameplay mechanisms in multiple ways (such as audio and visual cues) but such systems, like the ‘heads up display’ (HUD), are removed during cut-scenes which are largely identical to film.
83 Myers, ‘The Video Game Aesthetic,’ p. 47.
During video game play, representations of human experience—histories, narratives, societies, and simulations—are equally hollowed by the habitual and repetitive nature of play and are equally transformed by a more fundamental, proto-representational form: an anti-form. Video game play then serves as a revelation of those natural and historical affordances that determine our behaviour, and, simultaneously, for better or worse, as a means to avoid and deny those determinations.\(^{84}\)

The theoretical position we are left in is paradoxical: although Kirkpatrick’s vision of an autonomous videogame aesthetic relies upon the bulwark of ludology, the aesthetic experience is contingent on the player negotiating between meaning and play, or postponing a decision on the former in favour of the immediate requirements of the latter. (Furthermore, as we shall see in the case of Crysis, the analysed form of a videogame object, when kept autonomous from any hermeneutic dispositions of the player, is a very different object of study to that player’s aesthetic experience of form. Whether it is right and useful to consider the structure of a videogame as an autonomous “work” or whether it is only proper to consider a player’s particular experience of form are questions on which musicology can offer insight.\(^{85}\) Kirkpatrick views the videogame as a cultural form that dialectically succeeds in maintaining aesthetic autonomy, whilst simultaneously, being heteronomous in its relation to contemporary consumerism.\(^{86}\) Indeed, paradoxically, he goes as far as to suggest that the aesthetic autonomy of all aesthetic art is in fact contingent on the heteronomy of its medium. This is because its existence and effectiveness, he argues, depends on the ‘logic of contemporary domination’—capital and commerce.\(^{87}\) Although this is a generalization that may not always hold true, it is a paradox closely related to both Scruton’s precarious dialectic of art’s critical function and autonomous existence, and Dahlhaus’s concept of ‘relative autonomy’.

---

\(^{84}\) Myers, ‘The Video Game Aesthetic,’ p. 61.


\(^{86}\) See Kirkpatrick, Aesthetic Theory and the Video Game, p. 35.

\(^{87}\) Kirkpatrick, Aesthetic Theory and the Video Game, p. 36.
Perhaps controversially, Kirkpatrick draws from Rancière to argue that videogames stimulate action:

The video game and its culture of play are ambivalent. On one side, this cultural form possesses the autonomy of the aesthetic artwork. It maintains an internal dissonance that ensures it is encountered and experienced as something that is not the same—it is not like the other things we experience in consumer capitalism. The video game does not pacify; it stimulates us into action and... this places it at odds with the culture industry.  

Whether playing really amounts to action in the Adornian sense (as the antithesis to pacification) remains highly questionable. Although Adorno did not exactly define ‘action’ in this sense, pacification is a critical component of his conception of the culture industry. To argue that videogames stimulate action in this context must entail more than the physical action required by interactive play; players would need to be aesthetically, emotionally, or intellectually engaged. The state of consciousness of the player is a crucial factor here that might be broadly linked to different game genres, although such generalizations should be resisted. Indeed, Kirkpatrick’s generalizing assertion reduces the diversity of videogame experiences to an idealized, and convenient, misrepresentation. However, there is also supportive evidence presented in the subsequent chapters that players may engage with videogames on both mimetic and diegetic levels (by which I mean that they are conscious of and participate in various ludological and narratological modes of manipulation across multiple levels of diegesis).  

It should be noted that Kirkpatrick presents the ‘meaning dynamics’ of the videogame aesthetic as an ‘internal dissonance’. The musical metaphor is particularly apt to this thesis, as a dissonance begs to be resolved. Kirkpatrick suggests that the way in which form is experienced in videogames through temporal and spatial exploration (his term is ‘extension’) of play is a unique mirror to that of modern art, in which form is internal to the subject. This “feeling out” of form is something like dance, he says, or musical performance. However, Kirkpatrick does not recognize

---

88 See Kirkpatrick, Aesthetic Theory and the Video Game, pp. 41–44.
90 Kirkpatrick, Aesthetic Theory and the Video Game, p. 35.
91 Kirkpatrick, Aesthetic Theory and the Video Game, p. 36.
the special relationship between music and aesthetic theory, and subsequently does not expand on his reference to musical performance as a parallel zone of meaning dynamics. Many have argued, like Andrew Bowie, that music is the “purest” realm of aesthetics because of its abstract non-representational similarity to language.\textsuperscript{92} Indeed, scientists have repeatedly shown that both music and language are processed in the same areas of the brain.\textsuperscript{93} However, as Adorno noted, music is unlike language in that it is not literally symbolic of clear concepts.\textsuperscript{94} Adorno goes as far as to argue that music has no semiotic system (though this is certainly contestable\textsuperscript{95}), and that ‘it is by distancing itself from language that its resemblance to language finds its fulfilment.’\textsuperscript{96} For Adorno, this fulfilment is “meaningfulness” brought about through the interplay of form and content.

Nevertheless, it is clear that not all accept Adorno’s belief that the content of art is ultimately its aesthetic. Summers suggests that music contributes to the goal of making games ‘fun’—a crucial aspect of play according to Huizinga.\textsuperscript{97} As such, music is an important aspect in the

\textsuperscript{92} Of course, both music and language can be representational, such Olivier Messiaen’s \textit{Réveil des Oiseaux} and simple uses of onomatopoeia.


\textsuperscript{97} Summers, \textit{Video Game Music – History, Form and Genre}, p. 378.
creation of the magic circle. Furthermore, Summers emphasises that the hermeneutic call from music in videogames is far from a clear-cut semiotic system—of course, semiosis is rarely clear-cut. Rather, he suggests that it is itself a form of play: ‘music does not simply determine one particular effect upon a listener, it creates a space of negotiation with, interaction with, play with, humans.’98 Drawing on the work of Tia DeNora and Thomas Henricks, Summers considers music as a ‘playful negotiation’ that ‘highlights the playfulness in music’s meaning-generation. Perhaps this, then, is the legacy of game music—it reveals not only the importance for music in play, but the play in music.’99

Carolyn Abbate’s argument (following Vladimir Jankélévitch) in favour of “drastic” experience over “gnostic” knowledge is of relevance here too.100 A critical element of this argument is Abbate’s distinction between the performer and the audience and the recognition that the performer has additional technical anxieties that preclude an active or conscious engagement with gnostic modes of knowledge (broadly speaking hermeneutics). In the case of videogames, it is clear that the role of the player is multifarious, and therefore, it should come as no surprise that the many different relevant modes of knowledge and experience do not always “play together”. My focus on the aesthetics of videogame music is therefore not a denial of hermeneutic methodologies, but a recognition of a concern shared by Scott Burnham, Pieter van den Toorn and literary critic Peter Brooks—for music to have a capacity to express something it must first have its own (relatively) autonomous voice. Though their anthropomorphisation of music confuses matters, in essence, they suggest that we should ask ‘not only what a musical text

98 Summers, Video Game Music – History, Form and Genre, p. 380.
means but how it means.\textsuperscript{101} Furthermore, the assumption that the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of musical meaning are necessarily mutually exclusive categories is also erroneous.

At the heart of this thesis then lies the argument that the ‘internal dissonance’ created by the precarious ‘meaning dynamics’ explored by Kirkpatrick can be better understood in a musical framework. Kirkpatrick’s internal dissonance may not simply be an antagonism between play and meaning but rather, playing with form versus playing with meaning. Both are types of play that entail some sort of mental activity within the subject: this active engagement through play is the defining feature of aesthetic experience. The former (playing with form) entails a focus on aesthetic theory; the latter (playing with meaning) involves hermeneutics and narrativity. Regardless of these focal spheres, studying ludomusicology (encompassing both methodologies) draws attention to the concept of play as an active engagement with the music/game/Text—a concept, I argue, more significant than distinguishing between high and low art. Ultimately, my suggestion is that the activity of play lies at the heart of both art and the entertainment provided by mass culture. The videogame aesthetic, and videogame music especially, draws attention to this crucial feature, thereby softening the grip of rigid conceptions of high and low.

**Thesis Overview**

My epigraph from Macbeth’s famous soliloquy encapsulates the significance (or lack thereof) of mortal life experienced through time. Pertinently, Macbeth suggests that in spite of all the ‘sound and fury’, the playing on a stage (Shakespeare’s metaphor for the world) ‘signifies nothing’—a charge that could be levelled at videogames. I will challenge this nihilism by arguing that

videogames are invariably meaningful and are valuable pursuits of aesthetic experience. videogame music often operates in similar ways to music in other mixed-media scenarios, such as film, or opera. However, in the same way that film music cannot be completely divorced from film, videogame music is contingent on and part of a videogame aesthetic. While much videogame music is composed in the traditional manner, supporting a primarily visual narrative, more recently it is becoming increasingly popular to incorporate non-linear musical systems that tailor pre-composed music and other musical elements to the dynamically changing dramatic action produced by the game. I will argue that the videogame medium—and videogame music—warrants attention as a unique but not *sui generis* set of aesthetic experiences. Precedent can be found for many of the formal ideas employed in such systems in certain aspects of avant-garde art, and especially in the aleatory music of the 1950s and 60s. Videogames are a temporal medium, and this temporal quality conditions the ways in which form and play can be conceived. While Kirkpatrick recognizes elements of this, his hypothesis can be both enriched and challenged by the connections between videogame aesthetics and musical aesthetics.

Through a series of analyses, I will show that videogames now offer a diverse range of aesthetic experiences that are not easily corralled. The videogames selected as the core case studies in the following chapters are varied, but in order to offer sufficient evidence and insight into the culture industry, the majority are “blockbuster” archetypes of the most popular genres. Whilst it is possible to find low budget, independently developed and published games that aim at more niche markets, this would not be reflective of the medium as a whole. It is important to remember that one of the principal criticisms of Adorno’s conception of the culture industry is that he greatly reduced a diverse terrain.\(^\text{102}\) While accepting the importance of independent videogame production, I would propose that its experimental leanings tend to be situated on the

Introduction  The Aesthetics of Videogame Music  Mark Sweeney

outskirts of the industry, the core of which forms the object of investigation in the present study.  

Following this introduction, the first chapter will investigate the main problems that arise when analysing videogame music and non-linear musical structures. The principal theme of the chapter is the issue of play, whether engendering aesthetic form or semiotic meanings. This introductory case study will focus on the music to the first person shooter, Crysis, and specifically, the way in which it is implemented and categorized within the game engine. It is important to note that software companies copy-protect their content and methodologies and it is often difficult to obtain research materials in the field. While scores are also practically unattainable (notation of these forms is problematic at best), several scholars have made pioneering and highly successful investigations into ludomusicology through transcriptions and descriptions of audio cues alongside multimedia examples.  

I have transcribed only a minimal number of musical excerpts, as my analysis is focused on how these function within the structure. With this in mind, I have employed Crytek’s level editor (Sandbox 2) to provide insight into the workings of their engine, allowing Inon Zur’s music to Crysis—and its implementation—to be analysed in a more systematic way than has yet been achieved for any videogame. My analysis will contrast aesthetic idealism against the pragmatic functionality favoured by the commercially driven industry. Through conducting a musical analysis of a single videogame, I will consider in detail how the elements of play and form combine to provide an aesthetic experience. With reference to topic theory, I will also evaluate ways in which musical meaning can be established and categorized in videogames, enabling me to situate problematic discussions of musical meaning.

---


104 See for example Zach Whalen, ‘Play Along: An Approach to Videogame Music.’
alongside aesthetic considerations. This, in turn, provokes a re-evaluation of the significance of setting up form and meaning as a dichotomy.

Chapter 2 will situate the videogame aesthetic within the discourse of poststructuralism as a means to investigate issues of authorship. This discussion will be centred on *Chime*, a musical puzzle game, which will be presented as a Text. I will consider the role of the player as a Barthesian Reader whose co-authorship of the music is jeopardized by the requirements of gameplay, calling into question Kirkpatrick’s claim that videogames are a call to action. The aim is not to re-engage directly with debates about poststructuralism, but rather to draw on certain ideas that may prove useful to understanding videogames as postmodern objects. The chapter will look at both questions of form and meaning, with reference to Kofi Agawu’s notion of play in musical semiotics.

The third chapter will consider the possibility of a musical-historical concept of postmodern temporalities (following the work of Karol Berger). I will consider the distinctions between choice and chance and evaluate the importance of the order/disorder spectrum to both the musical and videogame aesthetics. The significance of these concepts lies in their enrichment of the understanding of the nature of videogame interactivity and listener participation. To bring this into focus, I will provide an overview of two games—*Shadows of the Colossus* (Team Ico/Sony Computer Entertainment, 2005), and *Journey* (Thatgamecompany/Sony Computer Entertainment, 2012)—both offering teleological temporal experiences. This will be followed by a more detailed case study of *The Witcher 2* (CD Projekt RED/Namco Bandai Games, 2011), a narrative-orientated open-world game focused on the importance of player choice. Finally, the theme of postmodern temporalities is taken to an extreme in *Bioshock Infinite* (Irrational Games/2K Games, 2013) which provides a commentary on the interactive nature of the videogame medium.

---

105 Berger, *Bach’s Cycle, Mozart’s Arrow.*
Chapter 4 will invoke other strands of postmodern temporality, offering an analysis of the role music in constructing geopolitical landscapes in *Skyrim* (Bethesda Softworks, 2011). Instead of considering the overall form of the music in the game, here I investigate more traditional ways in which music has been used to create a particular temporal experience. I will start by providing an overview of the game’s landscapes and lore, before evaluating the relationship of the theme music to that of other games in *The Elder Scrolls* series. This will be followed by a consideration of the Nordic features to diegetic songs heard within the gameworld. Finally, I will draw on Carl Dahlhaus’s concepts of *Naturklang* and *Klangflächen* and the work of Daniel Grimley in an analysis of the game’s exploration music.¹⁰⁶

In Chapter 5, the historical themes surrounding the mass-culture/high-art binarism alluded to in previous chapters come to a head in a case study of the survival-horror game *Dead Space* (Visceral Games/EA, 2008). The theme of the chapter is purposiveness—the origins of particular musical aesthetics and the intentions attached to their use. Music in this game is composed predominantly in two distinct “soundworlds”, neo-romantic and modernist. For the latter, the composer drew heavily on avant-garde modernist techniques that Hollywood has normalized into a clearly recognizable signifier for alien otherness.

The thesis concludes by uniting the themes outlined in the previous chapters around the concept of play. This provides the basis for a mediation between Adorno’s culture industry and Kirkpatrick’s videogame aesthetic. Finally, by drawing on parallels with the critical reception of Hollywood film music, I argue that ludomusicology provides a powerful new perspective from which reductive conceptions of the dichotomy between high and low culture are disrupted.