Panel 1: Adaptations & Reworkings 1

Historical Trends of EDM in the Soundtracks of the Super Monkey Ball Series (Jeremy W. Smith)

The *Super Monkey Ball* games are a series of platformers in which players roll a ball into the goal. The original two titles, *Super Monkey Ball* (2001) and *Super Monkey Ball 2* (2002) were popular on the GameCube. This presentation shows how the musical style of the series evolved over several games, particularly focusing on the original games and their 2021 remake, *Banana Mania*. The presentation argues that the remake's new arrangements show how global trends of EDM style changed over two decades (2001–2021). Results are based on analysis of all 67 tracks on two soundtrack albums, one for the remake and one for the "classic soundtrack," which is DLC in *Banana Mania*.

The music of the series mostly fits within the umbrella of electronic dance music (EDM), which was an inspiration for the original composer Hidenori Shoji (Estética Cibernética, n.d.). EDM has changed significantly over the last few decades, however. Most of the original soundtrack could be described as techno, house, or hardcore, which were three of the "four fundamental genres of dance music" at the turn of the millennium (Wiltsher 2016, 417). The remake, however, features techniques from brostep, trap, and bass house, which are more recent genres (Russell 2023). This is exemplified by many risers, drops, snare rolls, rapid hi-hats, heavy bass sounds, and often a half-time drum feel. This presentation builds on scholarship about game remakes, which shows how they need to adapt original material to "meet the expectations of modern audiences" (Worrall 2024, 37).

Prosumer Practices of Ludomusical Upgrade and Downgrade in Online Participative Cultures (Mattia Merlini)

The figure of the prosumer is increasingly central in today's musical landscape, as digital tools for music production and affordable online distribution have become ubiquitous. A key actor in online participatory cultures, the prosumer engages in communities that creatively rework and pay homage to existing music, often in playful and ludic ways. Here, video game music serves as both a repertoire and a technological reference for reimagining other kinds of popular music. On the one hand, new versions (e.g., covers, remixes) of video game soundtracks are produced,

and when the original material is early or low-budget video game music, this means rearranging it for real instruments, “upgrading” the original material. On the other hand, tracks from various sources are “downgraded” to fit the technological constraints of early or low-budget video game music. These two trends mirror practices like remakes and remasters versus demakes and other anti- chrononormative operations, respectively. This paper examines the broader cultural and technological contexts of these practices, focusing on two case studies: first, the “upgrading” of tracks from the *Undertale* soundtrack, and second, the “downgrading” of progressive rock and metal songs into “soundfont covers”. Special attention is given to the role of changing technological affordances in shaping peculiar timbral choices and fostering innovative listening experiences. These practices not only provide the listeners with reimagined versions of familiar music but also help us study and understand some practices behind past and present video game music production from a different perspective.

Panel 2: Radio, Radio

Radios, Alienation, and Imagined Communities: The Defamiliarizing Broadcasts of *Paratopic* (2018) (Logan Davis)

How do videogames use non-essential interactive objects to immerse players in their world? How do games use our expectations of those objects to defamiliarize and alienate us? Applying Michele Hilmes's reconception of Benedict Anderson's "Imagined Communities," radios are used in videogames like *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2008) and *Grand Theft Auto* (DMA Design, 1997) to help establish a sense of lived-placed and implied listeners (Hilmes, 2012: pg 353). Diegetic broadcasts can remediate the tension of a player's exceptional status with the gameworld while still being a part of said world. Listening to curated music and talk show segments, the player partakes in the "avatar's social milieu" through participating in "quotidian gameworld life" (Miller, 2007: pg 415). Games use original and licensed music as well as fully voiced talk show hosts to attest to a sense of "realness". The radio establishes "places, situations and sonic culture beyond the [player's] immediate experience" to create a "liveliness of place" (Galloway, 2022: pg 86). Games like *Paratopic* (Arbitrary Metric, 2018) use our preconceptions of radio to defamiliarize us from the gameworld (Mitchell & Van Vught, 2023). In *Paratopic,* players are forced to drive down a highway with nothing to do except turn on a radio. The broadcast greets them with the familiar form and sound of a talk show, but is filled with unrecognizable speech. In the game about helping aliens disguise themselves, the player has this one "peek" at the imagined community of the gameworld but is denied from joining it. Playing with our listening perspective, the radio in *Paratopic* reminds us what we really are: interlopers in a digital community trying to pass off as the real world.

Truck Game: Radio, Community and Transformation through Collaborative Storytelling (Odin Goldman)

Truck Game is a collaborative storytelling game played using Citizens' Band (CB) radio– a personal, point-to-point mode of radio communication used primarily by long-haul truck drivers– as a medium in order to challenge conventional boundaries of play in a semi-public space. In order to maintain structure within gameplay, given the unpredictable nature of CB radio communication, I have built the game's

narrative around the Fool's Journey as described in tarot. By using this story as reference I am able to keep gameplay focused and structured without limiting player input. The game's physical and narrative movement subverts Johan Huizinga's concept of the magic circle as something requiring complete consent and separation from the "real world." The CB radio, an inherently liminal communication tool, becomes a site for playful storytelling blending the fictional and the real, dissolving the delineation between players, the gamespace, the soundscape of solo long distance driving, and everyday life. This paper examines how the mechanics of *Truck Game* facilitate collective authorship, foster emergent narratives, and resonate with players' personal metamorphosis. Furthermore, it investigates how the open, participatory nature of the CB radio blurs the boundaries of the magic circle, questioning its utility in contemporary game design and play. CB radio storytelling is a powerful form of experimental game design that bridges traditional narrative theory and avant-garde play; it reveals the transformative power of mediated communication in the creation of shared mythos.

Panel 3: Ethnographies

A Walkie-Talkie, A Telephone, A Field Recorder: Digital Placemaking and the Listening Affordances of In-Game Intelligent Environmental Sensing Sound Objects (Kate Galloway)

How do listening devices and practices of listening alone-together connect players with place? How do ecological sense-making technologies transform into surveillance culture? What does it mean to collect field recordings and archive the soundscape at the end of the world? These questions point to the ways players use sound technologies and listening practices in placemaking practices during play to explore and embody environments shared among multispecies communities. My title is a citational invocation of Laine Nooney's media archeology that unsettles gendered objects and histories of video games (2013), offering a critical materialist reading that reconsiders the agencies, affordances, and politics of in-game intelligent environmental sensing sound objects. Informed by ethnographic close readings of the materiality, interfaces, and listening techniques of in-game sound objects, I listen to and examine three environmental monitoring devices of digital placemaking: 1) the walkie-talkie of *Firewatch* (2016), 2) the telephone of *Nuts* (2021), and 3) the field recorder of *Season: A Letter to the Future* (2023). These vignettes about specific technologies and practices of in-game listening illustrate their respective complicated entanglements with an ethics of environmental care, documentation, and mediation. These intelligent environmental sensing sound objects mediate player's embodiment of digital environments and aid in understanding player-environment relations. By listening across in-game sound media—the many objects, materials, and technologies involved in making, listening to, and circulating sound and music in games—serious attention is paid to media that is not clearly musical and their aurality and materiality is inscribed in ecologies of performance and play.

"We're Going to Silver Scrapes!": *League of Legends* Esports and the Sonic Construction of Liveness (Nic Vigilante)

League of Legends, the world's largest esport, has an extensive musical ecosystem that includes products ranging from collaborations with high-profile artists (such as Lil Nas X and Imagine Dragons) to records and concerts produced by an in-house music studio. And yet, even with music videos garnering millions of views and sold-out concerts in the world's largest stadiums, the most iconic sound of *League* esports

derives from a dubstep song found in the deep corners of a 2000s pay-to-use online music library. “Silver Scrapes,” first used as filler music during the 2012 *League* world championships, has grown in the decade since into the most iconic sound in esports; Silver Scrapes has come to refer to both a specific moment of heightened competitiveness and the singing and headbanging of thousands of fans that accompanies it. Drawing on two years of ethnographic fieldwork conducted at professional *League* esports tournaments, both regional and international, as well as in online esports fandom communities, I argue that Silver Scrapes has become a communal performance ritual that primarily functions to produce an affect of liveness. In doing so, I examine esports’ ambiguous relationship with the category of the “live” and how Silver Scrapes reinforces the scene’s philosophical and economic foundations. Silver Scrapes, despite its humble origins, helps elucidate the historical trajectory of esports, the place of sound and the body in highly technologically-mediated environments, and the ethically complex labor of producing liveness.

Panel 4: Sound Design

Just One More Run: How *Balatro* Appropriates the Casino's Sonic Aesthetics for Immersion (Nolan Miranda)

Balatro (2024), the poker deck-building roguelike nominated for five categories at this year's Game Awards, recently celebrated a cumulative playtime of "11,000 years across all platforms" according to a tweet by LocalThunk, creator of *Balatro*. Despite the game's single-song looping soundtrack (composed by Luis Clemente) and the roguelike genre's pain of permanent run loss, *Balatro* manages to captivate players for hours on end. Satisfying sound design, snappy visuals, and flow-state game design play an integral part in the game's immersive power.

I argue that *Balatro*'s trance-inducing gameplay playfully appropriates and eschews certain principles of casino machine design, both sonic and visual, in a manner that dilates the player's sense of time. These techniques are well-known to casino auditory designers (Noseworthy & Finlay 2009 and Dixon et al., 2013) as sedatives for increased player engagement, but *Balatro* has no ongoing monetary incentive and as such has increased aesthetic freedom. I maintain that LocalThunk and Clemente employ this freedom to construct an immersive experience in the sense of van Elferen's ALI model (van Elferen, 2016) with a soundscape primarily composed of confirmation sounds (Collins, 2013). These repetitive and directly-mapped sound effects combined with Clemente's odd-meter single-track score induce the slot-player's "compulsive form of listening that cannot be sated" (Waltham-Smith, 2017), allowing players to withstand and even enjoy over 96 million cumulative hours of Clemente's 4-minute composition on repeat.

Case Study: Marvel's *Spider Man: Miles Morales* and Imagined Deafness (Cecilia Hiros)

Research in music and disability has been slow to gain attention in ludomusicology scholarship when considering the impact of video game sound and its relationship to disability. This topic has been solely discussed by Dana Plank in her work on disabled representation in retro games (2018). In this presentation, I will contribute to this field of study through an analysis of the design and function of sound in *Marvel's Spider Man: Miles Morales* (2020). In this game, players have the opportunity to play as a deaf woman named Hailey Cooper. My analysis explores the unique experience to embody deafness through the developers' sound design and gameplay mechanics.

For many players, the developers' imagined experience of deafness is the only exposure they have to deaf perception. To represent their perception of deafness, developers have created a static background sound, similar to an air-conditioning unit, that sounds throughout the entire quest as Hailey. As a result, many gamers now believe that hearing impaired people perceive a constant static background noise in their daily life, which would not be true nor demonstrate the nuanced experience of hearing loss. I believe that it is important to consider the implications behind the power of sound design through a detailed analysis of correlations between visual and auditory cues, embodied auditory experience of people with hearing impairment, and compositional decisions made to represent hearing impairment. This study will argue for the need to more carefully consider sound design in an effort to better represent people with disabilities.

Panel 5: Adaptations & Reworkings 2

Transmedia Transylvania: Interactivity and Adaptation in *Rocky Horror* Video Games (Will Gibbons)

Despite some recent efforts to blend aspects of musical theater with video games, few stage or screen musicals have yet received interactive cross-media or transmedia adaptations. That is, with one notable exception: Richard O'Brien's transgressive rock musical *The Rocky Horror Show* (1973), best known via its enduringly popular film adaptation, The *Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975, hereafter *RH*). Since the cult classic premiered, there have been three video game adaptations of *RH: The Rocky Horror Show* (1985), *The Rocky Interactive Horror Show* (1999), and *The Rocky Horror Show Video Game* (2024).

Due to technological limitations and game design choices, each of the three *RH* games approaches its source material differently. For example, while the 1985 game incorporated only small snippets of music from *RH* as background music, the 1999 game includes full performances of songs and narration from *RH* creator O'Brien. The 2024 game, meanwhile, evokes both nostalgia and *RH*'s long history through its pixel graphics and chiptune musical arrangements.

In each case, the games not only evoke the plot and music of *RH*, but also engage with its fandom. Indeed, I argue that *RH*'s appeal to game developers emerges from the film's afterlife as an interactive experience. Since the 1970s, fans have attended screenings of the film that include active participation—including props, dancing, cosplay, and interjected dialogue. As a musical that is both beloved by nerd culture (broadly speaking) and already "gamified," *RH* offers developers a unique solution to the challenges of adapting screen musicals into games.

One Score to Rule Them All: *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* and Multi-platform Musical Adaptation from Film to Games (Justin Sextro)

The early 2000s represent a pivotal moment in transmedia adaptation history, with perhaps no better-known example than *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (New Line Cinema, 2002). The developers for the PlayStation 2 (PS2) and Game Boy Advance (GBA) adaptations, published by Electronic Arts, had unprecedented access to Peter Jackson's film production, including art assets, design concepts, sound files,

and even agreements to make new voice recordings with several of the film's actors. While they had this extensive access, the sound designers and composers of both iterations faced a major hurdle: they could only draw from Howard Shore's musical cues from the first movie in Jackson's trilogy, *The Fellowship of the Ring.*

This paper compares how composers and sound designers leveraged Shore's original score to create authentic yet platform-appropriate musical experiences. I argue that the sound designers expanded on Shore's established soundscape to strengthen the narrative connection between film and game. How each team accomplished this differed—the PS2 sound team focused on dynamic rearrangement of Shore's cues to fit new contexts, while the GBA composer, Ian Stocker, elaborated on the leitmotivs with new compositions. While scholars like Tim Summers, William O'Hara, and William Gibbons have examined music in film-to-game adaptations, the significance of simultaneous, multi-platform releases remains understudied. Through audio-visual analysis and developer interviews, I examine how technological constraints and narrative modifications shaped the transplantation of musical cues from *Fellowship* to *The Two Towers* across both platforms, revealing how different hardware capabilities influenced creative adaptation decisions.

Panel 6: Literacies

Lena Raine's Soundtrack to *Chicory: A Colorful Tale* as a Critique of White Supremacy in Postsecondary Music Programs in North America (Nina Penner)

Chicory: A Colorful Tale (2021) is a 2D adventure-puzzle game that takes place in a colouring book world. One plays as Pizza, janitor to the current wielder, Chicory. One day, colour disappears from the world. Chicory has abdicated wielder responsibilities and Pizza decides to take up this mantle. In this paper, I argue that Lena Raine's soundtrack, though its use of leitmotivs and timbral choices, comments on gatekeeping and white supremacy in postsecondary music programs. Read in conjunction with Ewell (2023), Jenkins (2021), and Robinson (2019), this paper offers thoughts about where to go from here.

Leitmotivs for the previous generations of wielders (Chicory and her teacher, Blackberry) are grounded in western tonal practice, whereas Pizza's theme employs modal progressions more common to popular music. Raine (Moukala 2021) has spoken about the tendency for conservatories to silo western classical music off from other traditions. Drawing on Yee (2024), I argue that her melding of musical idioms from different times and places (e.g., the hip hop fugue "Grub Deep") constitutes an antiracist approach. Raine also questions "dominant timbre aesthetic values of perfection and realism" (Summers 2023, 26) by juxtaposing instruments with the same referent but different degrees of fidelity. In *Chicory*, there is no implication that, with more practice, Pizza's SNES-style singing will become more "realistic." Finally, the game suggests that it's *because* Pizza does not fit the mould of a wielder that they are able to do the impossible and imagine a world in which anyone can be an artist.

Learning to Listen: Topical Literacy in 1990s 'Edutainment' Games (Pamela Mason-Nguyen)

Children's games engage children in playing and listening to facilitate the learning process. These "edutainment" (education and entertainment) games remain underrepresented in scholarship despite the insight they provide about the perpetuation of musical topics over time. This paper investigates the role of edutainment games in developing musical knowledge. Players enter the gaming experience with preexisting stylistic *literacy* (van Elferen 2016; Lind 2023). The game may then present unfamiliar musical material. These new ideas become marked in contrast with learned musical experiences (Hatten 1994). Through continued

encounters with these topics, players learn to recognize associated concepts. From there, literacy grows, and the newly-learned topics enter players' preexisting knowledge, which lies in waiting for the next novel musical experience.

This ten-minute presentation argues that music in edutainment games both *textures* (Summers 2016) the gameworld and familiarizes children with the real-life musical world. My analysis examines three American computer games from the late 1990s: *Reader Rabbit Thinking Adventures Ages 4–6* (1999), *Reading Blaster 2000* (1996), and *Putt-Putt Travels Through Time* (1997). The soundtracks familiarize players with various styles and forms, including 12-bar blues, jazz, country, medievalisms, classical music ("fancy" in *Reading Blaster 2000*), and futuristic space music. This focus tests the framework within a specific time period and socioeconomic context and draws upon my experience as a child born in the late 1990s as a heuristic. In doing so, I develop a deeper understanding of how video game music interacts with and informs our understanding of the American media landscape.

Panel 7: Outside Digital Games

Bach at the Barcade: BWV 565 as the Most Used Classical Work in Early Game Music (Neil Lerner)

Even if Johann Sebastian Bach never actually spent time at a barcade, his music most certainly has: his Toccata & Fugue in D Minor (BWV 565) appears in multiple game soundtracks. William Gibbons and Dana Plank have discussed its regular appearance in video games from the 1980s and 1990s. Gibbons (2009) hears BWV 565 in *Battle of Olympus* (1990) as a signifier of divine majesty and perfection, while in 2018 Gibbons posits that its use in *Gyruss* (1983) was a way to show off improved sound hardware. Plank proposes and elucidates (with examples) three categories of its usage in video games: synthesis and homage; sublime juxtaposition; and provocative mistranslation. Building on this foundational scholarship, I will demonstrate that Bach first arrived at an arcade in 1979, as part of the sound package in *The Incredible Hulk*, but then recurs in multiple pinball machines throughout the 1980s.

In my earlier work on Mamoulian's *Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde* (1931), I noted the centrality of BWV 565 to that film's narrative structure: the soundtrack borrows from the beginning, middle, and end of the musical work at the beginning, middle, and end of the film. The opening point of view shots of Jekyll playing the organ also emphasizes the gothic significance of that instrument and more specifically BWV 565 in this particular horror film, an association that continues through the century in various media. Because Marvel comics' character of the Hulk and his alter ego Bruce Banner offers an updated reworking of the Jekyll & Hyde story, the deployment of some of BWV 565 in *The Incredible Hulk* represents perhaps the most sophisticated musical signification in a pinball game up to that time.

These Bricks Sound Fun!: Paidia-Sonic Semiotics of LEGO Super Mario (Pete Smucker)

The LEGO Super Mario system offers a unique convergence of sonic play and musical meaning, combining the Lego Group's "system of play" (Wolf 2014), sonic inclusion in toys (Dolphin 2014), and Nintendo Co., Ltd.'s history of musical play (Moseley 2014, 2016). This presentation demonstrates how the music and sounds of the LEGO Super Mario system inhabit multiple spheres of interactivity (Packwood 2020, Schefcik 2020). This multidimensional, modular approach to analyzing game sounds provides a framework for deriving exchanges of sonic meaning when these sounds migrate between virtual and actual environments (Smucker 2024). Central to this investigation are questions regarding whether the LEGO Super Mario system is

a game or a toy, and how the meanings of these sounds shift through realizations in different media.

I use three primary axes of interactivity to address these questions: 1) interplay in a ludic-paidic spectrum (Caillois 2001, Kendrick 2011, Huizinga 2016); 2) distinction between virtual and actual environments (Galloway and Hambleton 2024); and 3) blurred lines between music and sound effects (Medina Grey 2021). Collectively, these axes express shifting semiotic relationships between the "gamer/player" and the sound design of the LEGO Super Mario system. I show how this specific LEGO system can inhabit both spheres of games and toys by expanding Smucker's "ludic-consumer exchange" of sonic value between virtual and actual environments. Through examples of "gameplay" and "play sessions," I further show how initial associative meanings of these sounds may semiotically evolve (Hart 2021, Pozderac-Chenevey 2014), based on how users engage with the system.

Press Play and Lean Back: Passive Listening and Platform Power on Nintendo's Music Streaming Service (Ryan Blakeley)

Unlike many video game publishers, Nintendo has conspicuously withheld its music from streaming services such as Spotify and Apple Music. In October 2024, however, Nintendo launched its own music streaming service, Nintendo Music. The platform caters to video game fans through its unique "Spoiler" filter, screenshots accompanying each track, and recommendations based on a user's play history. But perhaps most notable is the service's emphasis on background listening through contextual playlists and its "Extend" feature—an approach that aligns with current music streaming trends and the immersive nature of video game music.

In this paper, I analyze Nintendo Music's platform design and marketing materials to demonstrate how and why it strategically embraces passive listening. Drawing from ludomusicology and streaming scholarship, I explore how Nintendo Music exploits video game music's background function to appeal to listeners who are accustomed to using music streaming services to regulate their affect and accompany daily activities. At the same time, however, I suggest that passive listening is part of Nintendo's larger strategy to control its brand through a standalone streaming service—a strategic move from a company that is famously (over)protective of its intellectual property. I argue that Nintendo Music sheds light both on the prevalence of ubiquitous listening and on the increased power that platforms wield over music consumption and circulation in the streaming age.

Panel 8: Identity

(Re)Packaging Japanese Musical Identity in *Ghost of Tsushima, Genshin Impact,* and *Ōkami* (Thomas B. Yee)

Despite Japan's outsized role as a video game producer, cultural representation of Japanese identity in video game music remains relatively underexplored. '(Re)Packaging Japanese Musical Identity in *Ghost of Tsushima*, *Genshin Impact*, and *Ōkami*' proposes 'cultural resolution' as a framework for evaluating musical representations of culture, theorizes four parameters for analyzing Japanese musical elements in a soundtrack, and examines three case studies of Japanese cultural representation from American, Chinese, and Japanese developers.

In computer graphics, 'resolution' expresses the clarity and detail of an image. A high-resolution image provides a clear picture of its subject, while a low-resolution image is blurry or distorted. In musical analysis, 'cultural resolution' measures a representation's degree of width (range of cultural sources/influences) multiplied by its depth (impact of cultural sources/influences on multiple musical parameters). 'Cultural resolution' shows that clarity and detail, rather than strict adherence to historical accuracy, is cultural representation's goal. Common methods for encoding Japanese cultural identity in game music – instrumentation, mode, harmony, and idiomatic composition – enable ludomusicologists to assess musical representations of Japanese identity.

Ghost of Tsushima (2020) refracts Japanese cultural identity through an American perspective, producing a low-resolution representation more closely following cinematic conventions of film and game scoring over Japanese musical traditions. The Chinese-produced *Genshin Impact* (2020) presents a racialized fantasy world, with Inazuma corresponding to Japan. Inazuma's soundtrack communicates a high-resolution portrait of Japanese cultural identity through instrumentation, mode, idiomatic composition, and intertextual reference to the Japanese folk song *'sakura*.' *Ōkami* (2006) presents a veritable *tour de force* of traditional Japanese music including *gagaku*, *sankyoku*, *kabuki*, and *matsuri bayashi* music, all composed idiomatically without concessions to Euro-American expectations, resulting in very high cultural resolution. As Japanese culture becomes increasingly mainstream, evaluating game music's representations of Japanese identity using cultural resolution is more imperative than ever.

Sounding Spaces of Trans* Resistance in *I Can't Follow You Anymore* (2023) (Aria Christopher Greene)

Bringing work by Elias Krell and Susan Stryker into conversation with Dana Baitz, Jeremy Chow, and Bo Ruberg's work in musicology and game studies, I outline a few of the many paths that intersectional Trans* ludomusicology can take; building upon Ruberg's call for a trans game studies which centers trans voices, bridges scholarship and design, and actively facing the complex relationship between transness and queerness (Ruberg 2022, 202-203).

Taking Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley's browser game *I Can't Follow You Anymore* (2023) as a case study, I argue that sound and space play key roles in shaping Trans* subjectivities in video games, emphasizing their sonic and visual potential to catalyze the player's self-reflection on their own identities. In *I Can't Follow You Anymore*, Brathwaith-Shirley uses the rich mythology of vampires to examine black trans* identity and spirituality, material vs immaterial experiences of transness, connections between black trans history and electronic music, and reckons with the erasure of black trans* women. Combining PS1 graphical aesthetics with Congolese DJ Nkisi's music, the player takes control of a black trans* resistance leader. Fighting and dancing their way through a dystopian world that sonically evokes spaces centering trans bodies, the player is urged to adopt a radically open perspective on identity as the game invites the player into what Edward Soja describes as a "Thirdspace". The game accomplishes this by combining its immersive soundscapes, the urgency of its rhythm game mechanic, and its dramatic second-person narration to bridge the lines between "real" and "virtual," imagined and physical

Panel 9: Video Game Orchestras

Between Theory and Practice: A Co-Op Presentation on Starting a University Video Game Orchestra (Adam Kasti & Stefan Greenfield-Casas)

Video game music concerts seem to be all the rage these days, with a variety of games and series being represented: from long-running AAA franchises (e.g., Final Fantasy and Sonic) to newer indie games (e.g. *Stardew Valley* and *Neva*), and everything in between (e.g., Pacific Opera Project's *Super Magic Flute*). This rise of game concerts has garnered an increasing level of ludomusicological attention, with scholars writing on these concerts (Böcker 2021; Hunt 2022; Lo 2024; Miller 2024), the arrangement of video game music (Thompson 2018; Schirripa 2022), or a combination of the two (Gibbons 2018; Grasso 2020; Greenfield-Casas 2022). And yet, little work has been done within the academic field of ludomusicology in terms of how to actually organize a video game music ensemble at the institutional level (cf. Eng 2023, Voima and Eng 2022).

Following the practice-based vein of Joshua Derringer's (2024) essay on starting a collection of video game music within an institutional library, this presentation will be given by a student-advisor duo on the logics of starting a (student-led) video game ensemble at a university. In this presentation, we will consider the theory and practice both of starting the ensemble, as well as the theory and practice of arranging the music for such an ensemble. Here, theory refers both to the existing scholarship on video game arrangement and concerts, as well as the theoretical best-case scenario anticipated (that was—spoilers—not fully met). This presentation will be presented as an interview-style dialogue between the two presenters.

Panel 10: Time, Space, and Place

The Map Becomes the Territory: Deriving meaning from musical metonymy in richly diegetic game worlds (Jordan Stokes)

The town themes from *Phantasy Star III* and *Crystalis* are *metaphorically* related, i.e., they *sound like each other* (and like other town themes) due to shared musical features. This paper focuses on a less familiar kind of connection — *metonymic* relationships — where the tracks are similar because they are located in the same place. I will argue that the "Lost Woods" theme from *The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening* is in some sense related to the "Lost Woods" theme from *The Legend of Zelda: Echoes of Wisdom*, despite the fact that they don't sound anything alike.

I am here drawing on Roman Jakobson's classic linguistic account, according to which metaphors operate by the principle of similarity whereas metonyms operate by the principle of contiguity. Later theorists have applied Jakobson's concepts to domains such as music — and game music is particularly rich with metonymy, because the formal map of the game's various states creates additional relationships of contiguity. (e.g., the battle theme leads to the victory theme, which leads to the main overworld theme). What is more, in games with well-defined diegetic worlds, the formal map is tightly linked to the diegetic map of the game-world, which lets both maps live vividly in the players' imaginations. And this brings us back to the curious case of the Lost Woods theme(s). How much, and in what ways, does music take its meaning from its place on a map?

Music for the Final Voyage: Learning About Loss Through *Spiritfarer*'s (2020) Musical Chronotopes of Death and Grief (Chris Copley)

In 2020, Thunder Lotus released *Spiritfarer*, "a cozy management game about dying." Playing as a psychopomp, players explore a liminal world between life and death at sea, caring for lost spirits before releasing them into the afterlife. Reactions emphasize how the game helped them "learn about loss" and "process grief," which has sparked interest in the game among scholars in clinical psychology as a potential model for art therapies through gameplay. The game's casual, non- competitive gameplay and agentive mechanics are described through their temporal and spatial

frames that allow players to safely explore themes of grief and loss by choosing how and when to navigate each spirit's backstory and departure.

However, while recent clinical literature disregards the game's score as simply "calming music," this paper argues that the game's music is crucial in establishing the temporal and spatial frames that allow for processing of the game's central themes of grief and loss. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhin's analytical tool of the *chronotope*, this project investigates the temporal and spatial transformation of the primary, recurring themes throughout the game's score that are tied to moments of loss, arguing that these musical time-spaces help to create the therapeutic time-spaces described by clinical psychologists. As clinicians are turning towards casual art games for immersive and therapeutic patient interventions, this project aims to further therapeutic understanding of casual art games through an investigation of the *chronotopes* established through the *Spiritfarer*'s musical score.

Panel 11: New Modes of Analysis

“Message from the Veins”: Analyzing Charts in the VR Rhythm Game *Beat Saber* (Drake Eshleman)

When creating a rhythm video game, developers are tasked with creating “charts” which map in- game phenomena to pre-existing musical material. Through repeated play, rhythm game players develop an understanding of the chart, the music it represents, and the relationship between the two. Recent research by Kara Yoo Leaman (2016) on ballet choreography and Olivia Lucas (2021) on light shows consider how audiovisual representations of music can facilitate a transfer of theoretical knowledge from artist to interpreter to audience. I argue that rhythm game charts contain musical, in-game, and cross-domain analytical knowledge that is similarly passed down to the player through repeated play, a process that Kiri Miller calls a “transmission of embodied knowledge”.

I first discuss rhythm games more broadly, summarizing existing scholarship (Shultz 2008, Chang 2022, Lind 2024) and employing theories of cognitive metaphor and sound-motion bonding (Zbikowski 2002, Cox 2017, Godøy 2019) to demonstrate how rhythm game systems communicate musical information to the player. I then analyze the *Beat Saber* chart for “Believer” by Imagine Dragons. I illustrate how a player may learn and internalize, through repeated play, the nuanced analytical knowledge embedded in a chart. To aid my analysis, I introduce two novel chart-transcription methods for *Beat Saber*: “hand mappings” and “accent maps,” which track instances of embodied accent. Through this analysis, I demonstrate the analytical value of rhythm game charts and encourage further investigation into this unique modality of musical learning and play that occurs in living rooms and arcades across the world.

Understanding the Sonic Frame in Game Function Transitions (Stephanie Lind)

In *Red Dead Redemption 2*, as Arthur Morgan records a diary entry, the scene turns to sepia, accompanied by a clear, tonal guitar phrase. This is a contrast from the game’s usual scoring of brief motivic interjections. Such changes in musical density mark transitions from cut scene to player- controlled gameplay, from reminiscence to engagement with the present, and from areas of minimal to maximal threat. They thereby take on a clear framing function.

Such sonic signifiers are common in videogames. In *The Witcher 3*, Ciri's flashbacks dramatically shift the soundscape, muting sound effects and dialogue. In *The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom*, discovered 'memories' of the past shift the game's sound from its sparse overworld to more active piano and woodwind timbres.

A few methodologies will contextualize how sound frames out narrative and game functions. The *magic circle* conceptualizes "every game exist[ing] within a frame: a specially demarcated time and space" (Salen Tekinbas and Zimmerman, 99; inspired by Huizinga 1949), but we might also consider how games separate out individual components such as tutorials, cut scenes, and player-controlled gameplay.

Goffman's theories on *frame analysis* (1974) posit the interaction of primary and subordinate narrative lines as well as material within versus out of the frame, but can be adapted from a sonic perspective to demonstrate how musical contrasts frame modes of engagement. This paper will also draw from scholarship by Summers (2016), Grasso (2019), and Lind (2023) to both establish this framing model and model it in musical analysis.

Panel 12: Diegetic Voices

"Artless Singing," Musicking, and Relationships in *Final Fantasy VII: Rebirth* (2024) (Madison Drace)

Claudia Gorbman (2011) coined the term "artless singing" to describe the instances of characters casually singing to themselves in the context of films. One can easily apply this concept to other screen media; this type of singing is prevalent across the gameplay experience of *Final Fantasy VII: Rebirth* (*Rebirth*) (2024). The act of characters singing *Final Fantasy* (*FF*) series themes not only functions as sonic references for long-time fans to appreciate, but is also one method by which "musicking" (Small, 1998) strengthens bonds between characters.

In this paper, I analyze spontaneous musicking in personal or private spaces in Rebirth. I open with a response to Can Aksoy (2022) by discussing how *Rebirth* places *FF* series melodies into characters' voices and how these musical acts may function inside and outside of the game world. The primary example addresses the young Yuffie Kisaragi as she appears to compose songs at random. In addition to singing *FF* themes, she lackadaisically brings her own theme music into the diegesis. Through the playable protagonist, the player may choose to respond positively or negatively to her performance, generating different reactions from Yuffie. Directly building upon Gorbman's and Aksoy's work, I argue that artless singing simultaneously strengthens the player's relationship to *Final Fantasy VII* and its world through developers' intentional employment of musical nostalgia and enhances connections between protagonists during quieter narrative moments. More broadly, I propose that "diegetic musicking" threads together a complex web of relationships that form a gamer's experience.

It takes a (virtual) Village: Identity and Vocal Persona in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Sean M Davis)

This presentation explores how player-created melodies from Nintendo's 2020 video game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (*ACNH*) aid in the construction of players' individual identities as well as the identities of resident villagers. Released at the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, Chris Comerford argues that *ACNH* "…aided players as a method of…self-expression during the COVID-19 pandemic. In part, this…self-expression has been accomplished through the emergence of specific player personas…" (2020, p. 101). A game about developing, decorating, and managing a

house and town, *ACNH* tasks players with populating an empty virtual island with villagers of various temperaments and species: pop-star birds, grumpy bears, hungry octopi, etc. During the game players are given the option to compose an original theme for their island. This theme acts as the island's aural signature: each villager the player recruits sings their own version of the theme in conversation. When performed by a villager, the theme undergoes timbral, scalar, and range manipulation, assigning individual sonic characteristics to each potential villager. Through the combination of critical theories of identity (Butler, Jansz, Vila) with semiotic analysis (Agawu, Atkinson, Tagg), I argue that Philip Tagg's conception of vocal persona can be likened to Comerford's player personas, exemplified in each villager's individualized performance of the player's island theme. By uncovering any potential commonalities among timbre, scale, and range among the various villager species and/or temperaments, I will explore the semiotic and social ramifications of these performances with regard to player and villager identities.