Video Game Music: Structure and Analysis

1 Unit P/NP
Tues 5-6pm
128 Morrison Hall

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Not long after the inception of the video game medium, music was introduced to enhance the gaming experience. As the video game medium evolved, video game music has flourished into a distinctive genre. In this course, we will address questions such as “What is the unique sound of the video game music genre?,” “How is music integrated into video games?,” and “How has video game music changed over time?” We will analyze common structures in video game music and their relationship to their context, both in-game and historically. A previous familiarity with basic music theory will not be assumed but will be a helpful background for this course.

We will begin the course with elements and examples of early video game music and proceed to study music of multiple eras simultaneously, structuring each session around the analysis of a particular facet of the genre. As the course progresses, students will develop a basic musical vocabulary, collection of examples, and repertoire of analytical tools through which they can understand and appreciate video game music. The course will not focus on the influence of notable examples of video game music on the genre; rather, representative examples of musical elements and historical trends will paint a more general picture though which students will be able to determine the significance of video game music pieces not discussed in class.

The course sessions will consist of lecture and discussion portions; participation in class discussions will be required. During the class meetings, we will listen to and discuss musical excerpts, including examples from Super Mario Bros., Kingdom Hearts, Cave Story, Halo, Xenoblade Chronicles, Super Smash Bros., Undertale, and more. Homework will consist of active listening to pieces listed in the syllabus. The class will meet for one hour each week.

This course will be offered for 1 unit on a Pass/No Pass basis. To receive a Pass, students must regularly attend class and reasonably complete the course assignments listed below. A passing grade will correspond to a 70% or higher in the course.

The grade will be comprised of 3 components:

1. Attendance and Participation (30%)
2. In-class Analyses(2) (30%)
3. Final Project (40%)
Weekly Listening Assignments:
Every week, students will be required to listen to a selection of pieces in anticipation of the upcoming lecture. Listening assignments are listed below in the schedule of classes and should be completed before the lecture with which they are listed. The purpose of these assignments is to let students become familiar with the music we will discuss in class before we analyze it. As such, during lecture, it will be assumed that you have completed the listening assignment and are familiar with the music. These assignments are intended to be active listening. Do not perform any other tasks (e.g. homework for another class) while completing the listening assignments; when you listen, make the music the only focus of your attention. To teach yourself to direct your ears to specific elements of music, you must practice listening in a careful, discriminating way. You will get the most out of the course if you listen to each piece multiple times, preferably with some context of where the music appears in-game.

Attendance and Participation: There will be a sign-in sheet each week at the front desk. Students are responsible for signing themselves in each week. Excessive tardiness (more than 25 minutes) without an excused reason will count as an absence. If you are tardy, enter the room quietly and sit at the back of the room so you do not disturb class. Having more than two unexcused absences will adversely affect this portion of the student’s grade. Each subsequent unexcused absence will result in a 10% deduction from your overall grade; if such absences persist, these deductions may exceed the 30% of the final grade normally allotted for attendance and participation. Students should give advance notice of at least 48 hours before missing class for any reason.

In-class Analyses:
In-class analyses will be short, written responses discussing one or multiple pieces of music. The subject of the analyses will be pieces assigned for homework. Responses should be about 1-3 paragraphs in length.

Final Project:
The final project will be a typed analysis of 3 video game music pieces of the student’s choice, with a coherent topic connecting the pieces used. The analysis should be at least 2 pages long, double spaced, with 12 point font and 1 inch margins. None of the pieces that have been assigned for homework or presented in lecture may be used for this assignment without facilitator consent.

Plagiarism:
Plagiarism will not be tolerated in this course. Refer to the Berkeley Campus Code of Student Conduct for detailed policies.

Accommodations:
Students with disabilities, religious conflicts, or other circumstances should contact the course facilitator as soon as possible to secure arrangements. More information can be found at dsp.berkeley.edu.
Schedule of Classes

Lecture 1: Introduction to Thematic Music
- “PAC-MAN Theme” — PAC-MAN
- “PAC-MAN (Club Mix)” — Super Smash Bros. for Wii U
- “Super Mario Bros. Theme” — Super Mario Bros.
- “Tetris Theme A” — Tetris

Lecture 2: 8-Bit and 16-Bit music
- “Brinstar” — Metroid
- “Fight Theme” — Punch Out!
- “The Moon” — DuckTales
- “Guile’s Theme” — Street Fighter II
- “Secret of the Forest” — Chrono Trigger
- “Into the Thick of it” — Secret of Mana
- “Bloody Tears” — Castlevania II: Simon’s Quest

Lecture 3: Ostinato and Repetition
- “Night of Fate” — Kingdom Hearts
- “Unfinished Battle” — Xenoblade Chronicles
- “Aquatic Ambience” — Donkey Kong Country
- “Song of Saya I” — Saya no Uta
- “Lavender Town” — Pokemon Red and Blue
- “Miror B Battle” — Pokemon XD: Gale of Darkness

Lecture 4: Basic Theory: Rhythm, Tempo, Meter, Mode, Timbre
- “Goldenrod Game Corner” — Pokemon HeartGold and SoulSilver
- “Bob-Omb Battlefield” — Super Mario 64
- “Roaring Tides,” “Roaring Tides II” — Clannad
- “At the End of Time” — Chrono Trigger
- “On to Grasstown” — Cave Story
- “Treasure Trove Cove” — Banjo Kazooie

Lecture 5: Instrumentation
- “Groose’s Theme” — The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword
- “Season in Full Bloom (Double Quartet Version)” — Quartett!
- “Ferrum Dojo” — Pokkén Tournament
- “Bout of Arena ~ Battle Banquet” — The Last Story
- “Pushing Onwards” — VVVVVV
- “Schizophrenia” — Saya no Uta
- “Mechonis Field” — Xenoblade Chronicles
- “Town, Flow of Time, People” — Clannad

First In-Class Analysis Assignment
Lecture 6: Case Study: The Battle Theme

- “Isaac’s Battle Theme” — Golden Sun
- “Battle 1” — Chrono Trigger
- “Battle Theme” — Final Fantasy X
- “The Gongs of Battle” — Bravely Default
- “Normal Battle” — Pokemon Colosseum
- “Passionate Rhythm” — Romancing SaGa: Minstrel Song

Lecture 7: Area Music

- “Dr. Wily Stage 1 & 2” — Mega Man 2
- “Tephra Cave” — Xenoblade Chronicles
- “Gerudo Valley” — The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time
- “Lazy Afternoons” — Kingdom Hearts II
- “Mute City” — F-Zero
- “The Meat Circus” — Psychonauts
- “Sylvan Tranquility,” “Aurora of Darkness” — Bravely Default
- “Casinopolis” — Sonic Adventure DX

Lecture 8: Arrangement

- “Main Theme,” “Shulk and Fiora” — Xenoblade Chronicles
- “Platforms A Plenty” — Super Mario Sunshine
- “Bad Apple!!” — Lotus Land Story (Touhou project), “Bad Apple!! feat. nomico”
- “J-E-N-O-V-A” — Final Fantasy VII, Smooth McGroove
- “Ryu Stage” — Street Fighter II, Super Smash Bros. for Wii U
- “Ice Mountain,” “Lava Path” — Super Mario Galaxy

Lecture 9: Vocals

- “One Winged Angel” — Final Fantasy VII
- “Twister” — The World Ends With You
- “Opening Suite” — Halo
- “N市L街A (Part II)” — Xenoblade Chronicles X
- “Changing Seasons” — Persona 3
- “Still Alive” — Portal
- “Concept of Love” — Jet Set Radio Future
- “Dragonborn” — The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim
- “White Light” — Tales of Zestiria
Lecture 10: Thematic Continuity

- “Bonds,” “The One Ruling Everything” — The Last Story
- “Hyrule Field,” “Midna’s Lament” — The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess
- “Town of Beginnings,” “Wicked Battle,” “Wicked Flight” — Bravely Default
- “Dearly Beloved” — Kingdom Hearts, Kingdom Hearts II, etc.
- “Heartache,” “ASGORE” — Undertale
- “Raindrops and Puddles,” “Painful History” — Katawa Shoujo

Lecture 11: Cutscene Music

- “Engage the Enemy,” “Grandeur” — Xenoblade Chronicles
- “Another Side, Another Story” — Kingdom Hearts
- “Overcome This Crisis” — Tales of Zestiria
- “The Great Mighty Poo” — Conker’s Bad Fur Day
- “Disrupted Ritual” — The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword
- “Time’s Scar” — Chrono Cross
- “Prologue” — Warhammer 40000: Space Marine

Second In-Class Analysis Assignment

Lecture 12: Music in Relation to Game Mechanics

- “Saria’s Song,” “Song of Storms,” “Song of Time” — The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time
- “Through the Fire and the Flames” — Guitar Hero III
- “Dry Guys,” “Even Drier Guys,” “Dangerous Guys,” “More Dangerous Guys” — Mother 3
- “Disco Descent” — Crypt of the Necrodancer
- “Downstream” (normal and reversed) — Braid
- “Ringside” (watch in-game) — Rhythm Heaven Fever

Lecture 13: Recent Trends in Video Game Music

- “Flaming Bonds are Being Tested” — Tales of Zestiria
- “Strike the Earth!” — Shovel Knight
- “Megalovania” — Undertale
- “A Wonderful Guy” — Fallout 4
- “After You’ve Gone” — Bioshock Infinite
- “The Trials” — Halo 5: Guardians

Lecture 14: Student Presentations

Final Project Due

RRR Week: No Class

Finals Week: No Class