The Fate of Polystilism:

The ›Orchestral Shift‹ and the ›Redefinition of Sonic Hierarchies‹ in Recorded Video Game Music

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There are not many moments in the history of home gaming hardware that can be considered as revolutionary as the shift from on-board synthesis to playing pre-recorded music directly from the game's support.[1] This important milestone was reached in the mid-1990s, when it became possible to directly play pre-recorded music stored on the newly adopted CD-ROM support, capable of storing more than a hundred times more data than a cartridge for 16-bit home consoles. Prior to this moment, music had to be generated via on-board synthesis, mainly because of the limited space available.[2] This only allowed for basic data and instructions to be stored on the cartridges,[3] which typically had a capacity of a handful of megabytes – e.g. up to 6 megabytes in the case of Nintendo SNES[4] – to include not only music, but all the game data. This was perhaps best exemplified by the limited audio channels that early home consoles could support. A Nintendo NES/Famicom (third generation)[5] could only count on five audio channels, three of which were dedicated to the generation of simple waveforms (two pulse waves and one triangle wave), while the other two were usually employed for percussive sounds obtained via white noise

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2 For a general overview of the technological evolution in the field of video games music, see Collins 2008, 7–84; Fritsch 2013; Summers 2017, 134–146.

3 For a more detailed account of how 8–16-bit consoles worked and what their musical affordances were, see Braguinski 2018; Ciesla 2022, 197–210; Newman 2021.

4 While SNES cartridges were theoretically capable of containing 128 megabit (= 16 megabytes, because 1 byte = 8 bits) of data, the games that are normally considered the largest ever released for that console (TALES OF PHANTASIA and STAR OCEAN) were about 48 megabits (= 6 megabytes) large.

5 The concept of ›generation‹ is commonly used in video game discourse to group together consoles that share similar technical features – especially in terms of computational power (see Dreunen 2020, 31; Summers 2017, 140). The most relevant generations for the scope of this article are the fourth (starting in 1987) and fifth (starting in 1993) generations, with occasional incursions into adjacent ones.

and microscopic samples. Fourth generation consoles would employ much more sophisticated synthesis methods: the Sega Mega Drive (Genesis in the US), for instance, used FM synthesis, while the Nintendo SNES relied on wavetable synthesis, thus introducing a rudimentary (but serviceable) form of sampling into the world of gaming audio.

Thanks to the revolutionary capabilities that CD-quality audio afforded by most fifth generation consoles, recorded instruments could now have a significant presence in video games. That said, it would be misleading to say that on-board synthesis was instantly abandoned. On the contrary: there were still considerable limitations that forced composers to continue incorporating older technologies on which a lot of games still relied. Despite the huge increase in available space (700 MB), video games of that era had become more and more demanding in terms of required space, so this was still an issue. An even greater challenge was the bottleneck that occurred when consoles had to load both audio and video data from the CD simultaneously, resulting in potentially very long loading times, overusing the CPU, and saturating the RAM (Collins 2008, 81–84). The recollections of Hiroshi Tamawari, a Japanese composer who was active at that time, offer us a valuable insight into these considerable challenges, which suggests a historical narrative where the revolutionary impact of this pivotal moment in the history of video game music is reassessed:

> The music for the first SUIKODEN allowed streaming and direct playback of the waveform data that was recorded on the CD-ROM. […] While much of the game's music was streamed, the music for the world map had to be played back through the internal sound fonts, as they required having the map data read from the CD-ROM's contents. I think this game was the very first one in which Konami used the PlayStation's internal sound fonts for music creation, not to mention one of the first in general ([t]he game was released in 1995 in Japan). […] In contrast to SUIKODEN, the entirety of the music for the VANDAL HEARTS games used the sound fonts of the original PlayStation. The main director demanded that we didn't access the CD-ROM at all because the game would need to constantly read other data like the image files. (Hiroshi Tamawari, quoted in Collins & Greening 2016, ch. 84)

So, composers could choose between the two methods, and (as opposed to what has sometimes been implied, see Summers 2017, 145) it is hard to argue that opting for pre-recorded music ruled out the use of on-board synthesis entirely. One further account – this time by Nathan McCree, composer of the soundtracks for the early titles in the TOMB

RAIDER franchise – is useful for understanding how limited the use of recorded music was, thus forcing the composers to make difficult decisions:

> That was a really big leap for us. You know, all of a sudden we were competing with pop artists and producers and orchestral scores and live orchestras […] but of course we didn't have a full orchestra. Games were still considered the poor cousins of movies. And so, OK, I could abandon [Mega Drive's] Yamaha chip and instead I brought in three, I think it was, keyboards, proper synth machines, so my sounds were suddenly a lot, lot better, but I still wasn't using any samples. We still really weren't in that technology, yet, that really hadn't come about. I mean, there were sample-based things. Even the Amiga was playing samples, but again the limitations were so tight, it wasn't really a good solution, so I found that using synthesized orchestral sounds actually was pretty good, and again, with a little bit of care and attention I could get things sounding as close to an orchestra, certainly close enough to fool people. (Nathan McCree, quoted in Collins & Greening 2016, ch. 50)

From a ludomusicological perspective, then, it becomes interesting to delve deeper into how this shift in technological affordances affected the composers' musical choices. In this article, I highlight stylistic changes in the music of a selection of examples, also including games that have been remastered or remade. In particular, I focus on the shifts in the trait of stylistic eclecticism, by which I mean the polystylistic coexistence of musical features, and especially timbres, arising from different music genres. As I have argued elsewhere (2023), one of the factors that could be deemed responsible for promoting such eclectic choices is heavily technology-bound. In line with music production studies emphasizing the role of technological affordances and material constraints in the creation of music (e.g. Zagorski-Thomas 2014; Strachan 2017), I have interpreted eclecticism as a multi-faceted phenomenon which is also rooted in the use of now-obsolete technologies that allowed composers to easily mix disparate musical elements into a common synthetic texture, in which all timbres sounded equally emulated and ›fake‹ (Merlini 2023). Thus, they could be perceived as more sonically consistent than they would have been in a pre-recorded rendition of the same music.

In this article, I explore this assumption showing that, while this specific hypothesis remains difficult to prove, there are at least three ways in which eclecticism has gradually been pushed to the margins of the dominant ludomusical styles, namely the ›orchestral shift‹ enabled by the advancements in fulfilling the ›cinematic promise‹ of video game music (Mc Glynn 2023); the subsequent rise of ›symphonic hypertrophy‹; and the ›sound-

scape densification‹ caused by new technological affordances, which led to a shift in the role of music in games that relied on streamed audio. The following three subsections address each of these aspects in turn. While the first dynamic follows a specific trend, the latter two relate to a more general redefinition of the ›sonic hierarchies‹ that does not eradicate eclectic elements but does relevantly change their centrality and audibility within tracks and in the general soundscape. The structure of this article is inherited from this same tripartition, and in each section I explore the corresponding factor mainly by providing a selection of representative and compelling case studies from the age of transition to pre-recorded music or later, which reveal the presence of these patterns and trends. Of course, I cannot provide a comprehensive overview of ludomusical production during the transition from sequenced to recorded music,[6] nor is it my aim to prove that my observations are universally applicable. Instead, I aim to highlight the impact of certain game-changing processes (rooted in the transition to recorded audio) that may have discouraged stylistic eclecticism and the way players are allowed to perceive it, without necessarily embracing an apocalyptic narrative where the persistence of stylistic eclecticism in contemporary video game music is downplayed.

The Orchestral Shift: Towards the Fulfilment of the Cinematic Promise

The first – and most obvious – aspect to highlight is that, while an actual symphonic sound was unachievable by older technologies, relying on recorded music enabled composers to finally be aligned to contemporary film music practices. Not coincidentally, in the latter category falls Michael Giacchino, credited for what is usually praised as the first entirely orchestral video game soundtrack (Fritsch 2013, 27) – THE LOST WORLD (1997), soon followed by HEART OF DARKNESS (1998), with a soundtrack composed by Bruce Broughton. The new musical possibilities marked a major step forward in the fulfilment of what James Mc Glynn has called the ›cinematic promise‹ of video game music, that is »the latent aspiration to evoke the sights and sonorities of contemporary Hollywood film that persists throughout the development and marketing of so many video games« (Mc Glynn

[6] While a comprehensive history of ludomusical production has yet to be written, a general account of the transition and of the 32–64-bit era can be found in: Collins 2008, 68–73; Fritsch 2013, 24–28; Summers 2017, 42–45.

2023, 109). This is part of a wider process of remediation of cinema in video games (Brooker 2009; Fassone 2017), which persists to this day. New original symphonic music could then be marketed as not inferior to that of films, because it could finally rely on similar possibilities. I call this tendency the ›orchestral shift‹.[7]

The Japanese role-playing game GRANDIA (1997) serves as a good example of symphonic affordances being used for promotional purposes aimed at showing how powerful the new Sega Saturn console was – as composer Noriyuki Iwadare himself confirmed in an interview (Collins and Greening 2019, ch. 34). In the same source, Iwadare explains that having orchestral music was part of the promotional plan, made possible by a bigger budget than usual. Although many of the tracks made for the game are still synthesized by the sound chip (e.g. »Justin, Stand Up!«),[8] there are also fully pre-recorded orchestral tracks (e.g. »Delightful Adventure«).[9] By employing clever strategies to spare as much on-disk space as possible (e.g. inclusion of brief, reverberated, and repeated sampled orchestral modules or even single gestures, triggered by the sound processor, almost as they were one of those little waveforms at the core of wavetable synthesis), games like this could also feature individual orchestral parts within pieces that predominantly comprised synthesized sounds. Notably, unlike in Western counterparts, here the quest for symphonism is not as systematic, but this is likely the result of a peculiar relationship with eclecticism that can be found in a lot of Japanese video game and *anime* music, which routinely mixes elements from different styles (Merlini 2023).[10]

The emphasis on instrumental fidelity can be interpreted in relation to the techno-teleological ideal that Tim Summers has called ›chrononormative‹ (Summers 2023, 1–5, 26–29). Here, Summers draws on the queer theories of Elizabeth Freeman; Freeman speaks of

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7 At the same time, another functional way of promoting new games was also the inclusion of popular-styled music in games or even involving well-known songs and artists – in continuity with cross-promotional strategies that were already well established in the world of cinema (Smith 1998). While this approach is radically different from the symphonic one, it does not necessarily involve eclecticism, but just an overall change of the soundtrack's domestic style.

8 Noriyuki Iwadare, *Grandia Original Soundtracks*, King Record 1997 (KICA-5003), Disc 2, Track 14.

9 Noriyuki Iwadare, *Grandia Original Soundtracks*, King Record 1997 (KICA-5002), Disc 1, Track 3.

10 This can at least be interpreted through the lens of cultural peculiarities shaped by a long history of hybridization, while also exhibiting postmodern and globalized traits (see Galliano 2002; Iwabuchi 2002; McQueen Tokita, Hughes 2008; Ōtomo 2021).

›chrononormativity‹ in reference to the normative chronological logics and »the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity« (Freeman 2010, 3), i.e. those institutional configurations that synchronize individuals to a normatively imposed temporality and historicity. Calendars, time zones, wristwatches, time-bound recurrences and common ways of scheduling the everyday activities: these are all examples of modalities through which those ›hidden rhythms‹ that regulate the social conception of time are inculcated into all of us, acting as »teleological schemes of events or strategies for living« that synchronize human bodies to precise trajectories and »narratives of movement and change« (Summers 2023, 3–4). Summers borrows this concept to indicate those uses of ludomusical technology that fit the customs of the time, typically oriented by a teleological perspective in which a result is considered appropriate, valid and ›maximally productive‹ when it aims at the highest sonic fidelity. The advent of CD-quality audio was a major achievement in this process: from that moment onwards, ›good-sounding‹ video game music would have to leave behind hyper-compressed and synthesized sounds and embrace state-of-the-art technological possibilities allowing real instruments to be recorded. Although anti-chrononormative trajectories were possible as well, generally speaking, when the possibilities of pre-recorded music were unlocked, the music of previous generations would mostly be perceived as inadequate and obsolete: it would be seen as music that ›sounds bad‹ when compared to the state of the art, and thus subject to devaluation and synonymous with little care or investment in the game's music department. Of course, this may be seen as an inevitable consequence of the advent of CD-quality audio: what better way to celebrate the coming-of-age of video game music than by accelerating in the direction of a previously unattainable musical style, further ennobled by its illustrious precedents in the field of film music (i.e. symphonism)?[11]

Yet it would be unfair to state that recorded audio in video games only allowed for more canonical and cinematic musical experiences. Being able to use recorded music also meant that composers could manipulate samples from recorded music to build experimental tracks that could not exist in earlier console generations. For instance, Nobuyoshi Sano's soundtrack for DRAKENGARD (2003) features newly recorded performances of

[11] Curiously, a recent rise in interest in old-styled, synthesized video game music has also been observed (e.g. Summers 2023).

classical music, chopped down and remixed in an eclectic hip-hop fashion (e.g. »Chapter 10: Ground«).[12] This choice is apparently consistent with the similarly hybrid and uncanny narrative style of the game, written and directed by Yoko Taro, later to be known for his fictional universe mixing classic fantasy and sci-fi tropes with excessive stories of violence, drama and grief, often bound to producing distorted versions of those same tropes. Nevertheless, the reception of such a peculiar style of music was not exactly encouraging: Sano still recalls to this day the huge quantity of negative comments about his music for the game (see Nobuyoshi Sano in Collins & Greening 2016, ch. 74), and it was probably also because of this reason (and of the ›orchestral shift‹) that in DRAKENGARD 2 (2005), the new music by Aoi Yoshiki shifted to the much safer ground of an almost entirely symphonic score (e.g. the track »Fate«).[13]

Similar shifts can also be observed in the West. The long-running series developed by Insomniac Games, beginning with RATCHET & CLANK (2001), features music composed by the French composer David Bergeaud, an artist known for his musical cross-pollination and hybridization, and who has himself cited ›fusion‹ as »one of the many key ingredients of our cultural evolution« (Bergeaud 2008). According to the composer, game music easily allows mixing various »flavors and spices«, and he likes to play with contrasting elements to create friction (Bergeaud 2008). This approach is very apparent in Bergeaud's game scores. Take, for example, the track »Dobbo – Inside the Facility« from RATCHET & CLANK 2: GOING COMMANDO (2003).[14] Here the French musician mixes symphonic textures with material mainly derived from sample libraries published by companies like E-Lab (e.g. *X-Static Goldmine 1-5*, *XTC Files of Jungle*) and Spectrasonics (e.g. *Distorted Reality, Metamorphosis*) on CD.[15] Gradually, the brand underwent a general ›polishing‹ procedure. Initially, RATCHET & CLANK games featured a kind of humor that was not exactly politically correct and quite rich in sexual innuendos, as made evident by

12 Nobuyoshi Sano, *Drag-on Dragoon Original Sound Track Vol. 2*, Marvelous Entertainment 2003 (MJCG-80137), Track 11.

13 Yoshiki Aoi, *Drag-on Dragoon Original Soundtrack*, Sony Music 2005 (AICL-1628), Track 2.

14 As no information regarding an officially released soundtrack album from the game can be found, the audio source used here is a track from the »gamerip« unofficial release uploaded on YouTube and arranged in a coherent tracklist here: https://ratchet-galaxy.com/en/games/ps2/ratchet-and-clank-going-commando/media/original-soundtrack (18.07.2025).

15 A video proving the employment of such samples in the RATCHET & CLANK franchise can be found at https://youtu.be/igLqb6UX4_g (20.10.2024).

the subtitles of many of the sequels (e.g. *Going Commando*, *Up Your Arsenal*, *Size Matters*, *Quest for Booty*). Now, the series' protagonists Ratchet and Clank are depicted as two intergalactic heroes that have much more in common with the superheroes of Insomniac Games' other titles (Marvel has licensed many of its most well-known superheroes to the studio, e.g. SPIDER-MAN, WOLVERINE and X-MEN) than they resemble their original form.

In parallel, the style needed for the soundtrack became significantly less ›transgressive‹ than in the previous games, ultimately leading to the split between Bergeaud and Insomniac Games. This shift was already audible even before the separation. RATCHET & CLANK: QUEST FOR BOOTY (2008), which was the last game of the franchise to feature music by Bergeaud, contains music in a style that had already been forced to adopt a more magniloquent orchestral sound (e.g. »The Azorean Sea«).[16] In an interview just before the end of his collaboration with Insomniac Games, Bergeaud alluded to the increasingly widespread tendency of video game music to mimic film music by employing orchestral traits. Not a negative thing *per se*, but one that should be weighted and measured cautiously, avoiding symphonism when not necessary to the game (Bergeaud 2008). Yet the composer, after all, still sounded optimistic about this:

> […] I don't think that all games should or will try to emulate films. In fact, it's such a young medium with so many other things to offer that there is still plenty of room for fresh inventions and creative originality and that is why I am drawn to it. (Bergeaud 2008)

Not as optimistic are many long-time fans of the series: looking to comments found under YouTube uploads of Bergeaud's scores for the RATCHET & CLANK series, especially in one popular video that traces the sources of Bergeaud's samples,[17] one can find much heated discussion by fans comparing the older soundtracks versus the new ones, as the following exchange illustrates:

> User rbeng1095 [most upvoted comment]: »Such a shame video game music don't [*sic*] use many breakbeats in video games anymore[,] but it nice to know [*sic*] what

16 As no information regarding an officially released soundtrack album from the game can be found, the audio source used here is a track from the »gamerip« unofficial release uploaded on YouTube and arranged in a coherent tracklist here: https://ratchet-galaxy.com/en/games/ps3/ratchet-and-clank-future-quest-for-booty/media/original-soundtrack (18.07.2025).

17 https://youtu.be/igLqb6UX4_g (20.10.2024).

> David [B]ergeaud used to make [R]atchet and [C]lank soundtracks[. T]hanks for reupload[.]«
>
> User Casketkrusher_ [replying to the previous comment]: »I agree, today's gaming music is all orchestrated crap, epic songs. I couldn't give a shit, I rather have some breakbeat or drum and bass[.]«
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> User isaaccooper862 [replying to the previous comment]: »My guess is around the PS3 era, and especially recently, people want to take a more realistic approach to games, and saw Bergeaud's music as ›unprofessional‹. It might also have to do with new management moving into the company […]. The new staff probably wanted a ›Star Wars‹ space symphony orchestra feel to the series, but even growing up I could just tell the musical vibe (and even vibe of the characters and weapons) just felt different. I still play them cause [*sic*] they're Ratchet and Clank games, but the PS2 series is still king imo.«

One last notable example is the *Hitman* franchise, a Danish stealth game series which initially featured music by Jesper Kyd. While the soundtrack for the first instalment in the series, HITMAN: CODENAME 47 (2000), blends electronic and orchestral elements together in a mostly electronic texture, its sequel HITMAN 2: SILENT ASSASSIN (2002) showcases a quick shift in the direction of a soundtrack largely based on an entirely pre-recorded symphonic score. The change is clearly showcased by a comparison between the two respective »Main Title« tracks from the two games.[18] It is easy to ascribe this change to the success of the first game in the franchise, which would have invariably allowed for greater investment in the game's music. Today, this has led the latest instalments in the series to feature even more refined orchestral cues, although the presence of non-symphonic (and especially electronic) elements can sometimes still be found in these games as well (e.g. »The Farewell« from HITMAN III).[19]

Changing Sonic Hierarchies, Part 1: The Rise of Symphonic Hypertrophy

All these examples illustrate how this symphonic model – which was unattainable before the advent of CD-quality audio in home consoles – gained considerable traction. Its influence becomes even more apparent when we examine the hierarchy of sounds within the tracks. This is the first of two changes in sonic hierarchies that we will explore in the

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18 Jesper Kyd, *Hitman: Codename 47 / Hitman 2: Silent Assassin – Original Soundtracks from the Eidos Videogames*, La-La Land Records 2005 (LLLCD 1030), Disc 1, Track 2 (»Main Title (Extended Version)«) & Disc 2, Track 1 (»Hitman 2 Main Title«).

19 Niels Bye Nielsen, *Hitman 3 Original Soundtrack*, included in the game's deluxe edition, 2021, Track 21.

remainder of this article, and concerns how clearly single sounds, timbres, instruments (or groups thereof) are audible in the arrangement (and mix) of a composition found in video game soundtracks. This pertains to the prominence/audibility of eclectic elements detected within the dominant style of the arrangement (mostly orchestral): these elements *might* be present, yet buried under increasingly denser layers of other instruments. This can be understood as a consequence of the orchestral shift made possible by the inclusion of pre-recorded music, which eventually led to virtually limitless polyphony, since sounds no longer had to be produced on-board. The Japanese arcade game composer Hisayoshi Ogura has described the current situation in terms of a widespread ›orchestra-sickness‹. According to his account, everyone now wants (and is often capable of incorporating) orchestral music in their games:

> I think Japan is infected with an ›orchestra-sickness‹ at the moment. It might be a global thing, but there is *zaaaaa* [makes sounds] orchestral music in every single game. […] So, I really think that game music hasn't developed at all in the past twenty years. To put it frankly, I don't think there is any progress. (Hisayoshi Ogura, quoted in Collins & Greening 2016, ch. 61)

While Ogura's view might sound pessimistic, it is undeniable that this symphonic element of video game music has become more and more prominent, even hypertrophic at times. Interestingly, this does not imply the total erasure of eclecticism: with the diffusion of the ›integrated soundtrack‹ model (Kulezic-Wilson 2020, 3–5), where all sonic elements (music, sound effects, and dialogue) intertwine, it is indeed quite common to hear electronic and symphonic elements mixed in the same track. This phenomenon also relates to what Sergi Casanelles has called the ›hyperorchestral‹ sound, typical of modern Hollywood blockbusters (2016), showcasing a certain degree of polystylism, but on a safe symphonic ground – that once again suggests an assimilation of Hollywood models into video games. Casanelles describes the hyperorchestra as:

> a virtual music ensemble that inhabits hyperreality, a product of the combination of virtual instruments (sampled and synthetic), real live recording sessions and sound processing. […] The hyperorchestra expands the possibilities of the traditional Western orchestra, which has been the dominant mode of musical expression for film and television music. (Casanelles 2016, 58)

This style can be heard in the previous HITMAN III example, as well as in the latest instalments of the JAK & DAXTER franchise. While Josh Mancell and Larry Hopkins' score for

JAK II (2003) features a largely synthesized yet eclectic soundtrack, which combines electronic, ›ethnic‹ and pseudo-orchestral sonorities (e.g. the track titled »Haven City Walking«),[20] most of Jim Dooley's music from the later spin-off JAK & DAXTER: THE LOST FRONTIER (2009) mimics this approach, but it often hides its more eclectic elements under thick layers of apparently pre-recorded orchestral textures, sometimes arriving to the point of (almost) erasing them (e.g. »A Captain's Sacrifice«).[21]

An interesting field to track orchestral hypertrophy is that of remakes and remasters.[22] For instance, LIVE A LIVE (1994) is a representative case: Yōko Shimomura's music for the original title was recently reworked for a 2022 remaster of the game by a team of ten arrangers (and also features some new tracks by the original composer). The original SNES/Super Famicom game was not released outside of Japan and was not localized for North American or European audiences. As such, the remaster was the first time that many Western audiences encountered this title (and thus its music). Some of the most obvious changes to the original music are to be found in the strong presence of the orchestra. This approach is consistent with the principle according to which rearranged music should follow chrononormative standards of the present time. Essentially, it adopts the approach of asking: how would this music sound without the technical limitations of the older console that the original game was designed for? However, sometimes there is more to it. Consider the track »The Bird Flies in the Sky, The Fish Swims in the River« from Shimomura's score for LIVE A LIVE:[23] the original piece is not especially eclectic in its style, but is far from being symphonic, as it mainly features synthesized instruments that emulate the sound of traditional Japanese instruments – perhaps a *shakuhachi* playing the main melodic line and a plucked string instrument (*koto* or *shamisen*) accompanying it.

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20 Official release unavailable, a tracklist based on unofficial »gamerips« can be found here: https://jakanddaxter.fandom.com/wiki/Jak_II_soundtrack (12.07.2025).

21 Jim Dooley, *Jak and Daxter: The Lost Frontier Original Soundtrack from the Video Game*, iTunes release, 2009, Track 12.

22 The basic difference between remake and remaster is that while the first are completely new editions of old games, that are rebuilt from scratch and can also feature quite relevant changes in the narrative and, even more so, in the gameplay (e.g. RESIDENT EVIL 2 remake from 2019), remasters are just technically improved versions of the same old games, that are usually limited to higher-resolution graphics and a more stable framerate, and may feature single remade elements (e.g. rearranged music, quality-of-life improvements, new models for important characters etc.) without changing the core of the ludic experience.

23 Yōko Shimomura, *LIVE A LIVE Original Sound Version*, NTT Publishing 1994 (PSCN-5007), Track 17.

Contrastingly, the new version arranged by Akira Iwata for the 2022 remaster[24] buries these traditional elements under an orchestration that is clearly indebted to classical Hollywood film scoring, and which bears little resemblance to the original.

A similar rebalancing of the timbral hierarchies can be heard in many examples from the so-called ›pixel remaster‹ editions of the first six entries in the *Final Fantasy* franchise (2023). Here, in the attempt at creating the ›definitive‹ versions of the first entries in one of the most important JRPG series, music director Hidenori Miyanaga gathered a number of arrangers to work on 332 tracks (originally composed by Nobuo Uematsu) in total, who strove to strike a balance between faithfully delivering the same final effect of the original music loved by so many fans around the world, and creating a new version that would be free from the technical constraints of the original music; in his words, the team's aim was to create music that that could sound ›the way it always should have sounded‹ (Miyanaga, Uematsu 2022) – although this does not necessarily align with the players' wishes and opinion.[25] The result is a body of work where Uematsu's polystylistic compositional choices are usually maintained, yet – again – they are often buried under much more dense symphonic layers. A good example is the presence of the electric bass in »Final Battle« from FINAL FANTASY IV (1991):[26] although clearly audible in the original version, heard in combination with the drumkit, it is barely discernible in this new hypertrophic symphonic context. In examples like this, eclecticism is not entirely absent, yet it is positioned lower in the sonic hierarchy of the arrangement – an arrangement that could become so dense only after the limited polyphony that was typical of on-board synthesis was overcome.

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24 Yōko Shimomura, *LIVE A LIVE HD-2D Remake Original Soundtrack*, Square Enix Music 2022 (SQEX-10948~9), Track 19 (here translated as »Unto the Birds the Heavens, unto the Fish the Seas«).

25 I say this because players often prefer to stick to the original music (see an example in Cheng 2014, 78), despite (and even *because of*) its technical limitations. So, it should not come as a surprise that the option to turn on the original soundtrack was soon added to the ›pixel remasters‹.

26 Nobuo Uematsu, *Final Fantasy IV Original Sound Version*, NTT Publishing 1991 (N23D-001), Track 43.

Changing Sonic Hierarchies, Part 2: The Role of Video Game Music in the Age of Soundscape Densification

This final section continues in the same direction, yet delves deeper into how the sonic hierarchy has changed not only within the single tracks, but also in the audio environment of video games more generally, because of the ›soundscape densification‹ afforded by fifth generation (and later) consoles. We should then ask ourselves how current productions tend to implement and use this (eclectic or not) music, and how this affects the player's musical experience. I must confess that, before embarking on this study, I felt that Ogura's description of the ›orchestra-sickness‹ permeating contemporary game scoring trends was even more severe than he describes; I essentially thought that new technological developments and stylistic trends had made eclecticism much less common in current mainstream video game soundtracks. However, as we have seen, this is not exactly the case, even though a certain degree of standardization can be observed. Nonetheless, in the final section of this article, I will embrace an autoethnographic approach to game music (see Kamp 2021, 168–170) in an attempt to account for my initial impression of recent game scoring trends.

First, I will revisit RATCHET & CLANK franchise and especially the 2016 remake of the first game in the series, comparing the battle with the ›Blargian Snagglebeast‹ with the same gameplay section from the original game (2002),[27] which features entirely different music, as the soundtrack for the remake was composed from scratch. When we listen to the relevant cue from the soundtrack album of the remake, we can easily discern electronic elements among the more prominent symphonic sound in Michael Bross' new music; in contrast, the sample-based techniques employed by David Bergeaud in his music for the original game's soundtrack has an unmistakable hip-hop character. To a certain extent, both Bergeaud's original cue and Bross' version for the remake can be defined as stylistically eclectic. Why then, when I was playing the remake in 2016, did I have the disappointing impression that the peculiar original soundtrack had been replaced with

[27] Two gameplay videos can be used to compare the two sequences, and I would like to thank the users Amados King and CrashRatchet008 for uploading them on YouTube: https://youtu.be/0vS3TYnKjFw (24.10.2024) for the new version and https://youtu.be/2bbfoynDoBU (24.10.2024) for the original one.

›ordinary‹ Hollywood-sounding orchestral music? This is where a difference between the heard soundtrack (in the context of the game and its many other sounds) and the recorded soundtrack (typically to be found in the soundtrack album) must be made. In this respect, following the suggestion many ludomusicologists make about studying video game music in the ludic context (e.g. Fernández Cortés 2021; Summers 2016) becomes handy. Indeed, if we do not listen to the tracks in isolation and instead revisit them in their intended interactive context, the reasons behind my first impression become clear. In Bross' new version for the remake, the music is mixed at a quite low volume and buried under a plethora of sound effects and relatively frequent voice acting, while in the original version the sonic environment was much less crowded. The new track is thus barely perceptible to the player, let alone its eclectic elements, which are themselves mostly covered by orchestral hypertrophy: musically present, but phenomenologically erased.

It is thus only by comparing the in-game sonic experience with the stand-alone listening experience that one can get the full picture. The music is not entirely symphonic, but its eclectic details are found at a low level on two orders of hierarchies: one relates to the track's arrangement (and mix), and this is one more example of orchestral hypertrophy; the other one relates to the overall soundscape, i.e. the hierarchy in the sound mix. So, eclectic elements are further relegated to the bottom of the mix and easily disappear from our perception. This reveals an important aspect of music's role in contemporary video games, as opposed to the way things used to work before the advent of CD-quality audio in video games. At one point, music had to convey all the expressivity that graphics with relatively low levels of detail and the lack of voice acting were unable to deliver. Then, with the advent of recorded music, it became possible to populate the sonic spectrum with voices and many more sound effects. Moreover, 3D graphics helped build a more credible virtual world, and so music became just one of many expressive means a video game could exploit. So, while game music may not be any less valorized, and while it may not be deemed any less of a priority, it is certainly the case that it is less under the spotlight, as it is often relegated to the periphery of the (increasingly dense) sound mix. This phenomenon is the ›soundscape densification‹ I mentioned earlier. Nowadays, I often end up adjusting the audio settings to make the music sound more audible, since standard levels do not allow me to have a decent idea of what is happening, musically. Paradoxically

enough, in the very moment that new compositional affordances were unlocked by the introduction of pre-recorded tracks, that same revolution brought to a downsizing of the centrality of music in the sonic economy of video games – not always described positively by players and critics, again in parallel with the transition to sound film (see Cheng 2014, 60–61). After all, it could be argued that this is just another face of fulfilling the cinematic promise, as music had to lose its centrality (and frontality) to become an ›unheard melody‹ (Gorbman 1987).[28] Embracing recorded audio – and the cinematic promise – brings with it both positive and negative consequences: timbral fidelity on the one side, and the concurrent forces of enhanced graphics and of a much more crowded audio spectrum on the other.

To illustrate this shift, we can compare the original version of the scene in FINAL FANTASY VII (1997) where Sephiroth loses his mind to the remade version seen in the recent FINAL FANTASY VII: REBIRTH (2024).[29] This comparison shows how video games now speak an entirely different audiovisual language. The original version was dramaturgically almost entirely built around the music, which is also dynamic because it stops and then restarts with an additional instrumental layer in the emotional climax of the scene. The new version is simply a cinematic cutscene with no interactivity whatsoever and with a soundtrack that underscores the scene in a much subtler way. The audio environment now features sound effects and fully dubbed characters, and new graphics (also employing motion capture technologies) help convey all the expressivity that pseudo-human characters should be able to show via their faces and bodies. If the scene works, in the end, it is thanks to the synergy between every single element I have just mentioned (and probably many others as well), and music is but a part of a complex apparatus. This is basically cinema, and music has the role that is expected according to mainstream aesthetics, that is, to make it simple: underscoring the sequence and providing references to recognizable leitmotifs (Sephiroth's theme and Jenova's themes can be heard clearly during the scene). It is just a different language, one that implies a different role for music (and for players,

28 In this sense, a double parallel between silent cinema/on board synthesis (Lerner 2013) and sound cinema/recorded music could be drawn.

29 Two gameplay videos can be used to compare the two sequences, and I would like to thank the users curryking1 and Owl-Quest for uploading them on YouTube: https://youtu.be/DwDQSXXCy94 (24.10.2024) (especially 30:01–30:43) for the original version and https://youtu.be/4QTfOQxuX3o (24.10.2024) (especially 23:58-25:07) for the new one.

who no longer need to complete the lack with their imagination, see Cheng 2014, 58–59) – for better or for worse. In such a position, music is not the absolute protagonist of the sonic environment anymore, and it is much easier to overlook it and especially its eclectic elements, which are often already quite deeply buried under hypertrophic symphonism. It is not (necessarily) a musical change, but a phenomenological change, that must take into account the perceptual experience of players in the act of playing.

Conclusion

I have explored several ways in which the ›orchestral shift‹ – enabled by the fulfilment of the ›cinematic promise‹ of video game music – along with the rise of ›symphonic hypertrophy‹ stemming from the ›orchestra sickness‹ described by Hisayoshi Ogura, and the ›soundscape densification‹ associated with the shift in music's role in the audio-streamed, (partially) pre-recorded ludomusical environment, have affected the presence (and audibility) of eclecticism in recorded video game music. Although my point here might sound apocalyptic, this is definitely not the case. There is still room for non-conventional solutions in video game music (especially in the ever-growing indie world), and recorded music can even emphasize timbral distance in eclectic music, which could sound much more homogeneous when synthesized on board. While the major eclectic stylistic models (at least in the West) tend to rely on strategies that are commonplace in contemporary cinema (e.g. the hyperorchestra, as per Sergi Casanelles), a lot of other video game soundtracks also offer stylistic alternatives – be they eclectic or not. Yet, I believe this short and inexhaustive overview has nonetheless illustrated some ways in which the adoption of recorded audio has caused several readjustments in previous balances between timbres and between the various elements of the audio mix, not necessarily erasing polystylism, but often de-emphasizing it in favor of the fulfilment of the ›cinematic promise‹, usually in the direction of the sound of mainstream Hollywood cinema. If we see this as a potential problem, then we must keep in mind that this is part of a much bigger process that is central to the contemporary situation: the simulation of cinematic models (to the point of making video games that are more accurately described as ›interactive films‹, see Powell 2021, 24–29), with consequences that go far beyond video game music. If some critics

and players have found the audiovisual experience recently offered by HELLBLADE II (2024) too akin to that offered by a film and not a sufficiently compelling gameplay experience, maybe this should suggest us that the video game, as a medium – having lost most technical constraints that characterized it as something clearly different from cinema – now needs to find its way to aspire at being something more than just cinema's (or, to be more precise, Hollywood's) little brother.

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