



Computer & Video Game Music

5 MINUTES READING #1

“The ultimate goal for me in making music, or at least one of the main goals for me, is to create memorable melodies. That goal is there regardless of the tools we have.”

- Koji Kondo



Questions to think about:

1. Can you think of any other computer or video games (like Dance Dance Revolution or Frequency) where interacting with the music or soundtrack is the very focus of the gameplay?
2. How did directional and simulated surround sound technology affect game audio?
3. How important is the music or soundtrack to a computer or video game?

Once an afterthought in terms of game design and overall pop-culture consciousness, video game music is now a legitimate industry of its own. Today, internationally renowned orchestras perform entire concerts of music composed specifically for video games, and game soundtracks regularly feature top-drawer techno, hip-hop, rock, and punk bands. Video game soundtracks have their own real estate now in retail outlets both online and off. There's even a small but growing movement of video game music cover bands, which incorporate 1980s console hardware into live performances of classic arcade themes.

Music is, of course, only one element of the overall sound design of video games, and in this larger arena too, expanding leaps have been made in a relatively short period of time. With the advent of directional and simulated surround sound, game audio became integral to the action itself. (Hear that crunching, gnawing sound to the left? That's why we're taking this here passage to the right...) First-person "sneakers," like the popular Thief series, turned the art of listening and eavesdropping into a survival skill in itself.



And for some games, sound and music are the point in and of themselves. Consider the genre of rhythm games like Dance Dance Revolution (shown left) and Frequency. With these titles, interacting with the soundtrack is the very focus of the gameplay. DDR and similar games have made an even broader impact on the video game form by introducing full-body tracking and dance pads (or drum kits or guitars) as the central control interface.

In fact, historians will likely look back on these last few and current years as the golden age of video game music. As a media form, video games are emerging from the "ghetto" of teenage fanatics and hardcore techies into the sunlight of respectability and mainstream acceptance. This is a cyclical process in mass media, as new technology creates new forms--from hip-hop to animation to graphic novels to even cinema itself.



Early Computer Game Music

5 MINUTES READING #2

“I like silence. I think silence is an under-utilized concept in game music.”

- Rich Vreeland, AKA
“Disasterpeace”



Questions to think about:

1. What would computer and video games be like without music or sounds?
2. Can you think of any other games like “Simon” which use sounds and tones which are performed in patterns which you have to repeat or copy?
3. What does the abbreviation VCS stand for?
4. What did the first sound effects on the VCS sound like?

The Silent Era – From 1958

The very first video games, alas, had no sound component whatsoever. In 1958, William Higinbotham, an engineer at Brookhaven National Laboratory, a US nuclear research facility, fashioned a crude tennis-type game on an oscilloscope. (Many experts consider this the first “hack” of a computer system.) Five years later, Spacewar--MIT student Steve Russell's protogame--featured two dueling spaceships controlled by toggle switches. It was created on the hulking PDP-1 computer, a \$120,000 mainframe of colossal size. Both games, however, were silent.

1972 - Magnavox Odyssey Released

The first home video console, the Magnavox Odyssey, is released in the US (shown right). The fully analog system is fully silent as well.



1972 - Pong Heard Around the World

Nolan Bushnell test-markets his protovideo game, Pong, at Andy Capp's Tavern in Sunnyvale, California. The arcade video game as we know it is born. The sonar-blip sound that's generated as a digital ball is batted back and forth is the first true video game sound effect. It proves to be oddly compelling and kind of hypnotic.

1974 - Simon Says

Milton Bradley releases Simon, one of the most popular handheld games ever. Simon plays patterns using four separate tones and four different-colored lights. You repeat the patterns, and then a new note is added every go-around. In that sense, Simon was the first game to incorporate music as a game element--in a very Zen, free-jazz kind of way.



1977 - Atari Comes Home

The Atari Video Computer System (VCS) hits shelves in time for the Christmas holiday season. Nine game cartridges are available upon the system's release, and the sounds of a generation are born. Scratchy and primitive sound effects on the VCS (later known as the 2600) are still unlike anything to ever come out of a TV set. Highlights: the rumbling tanks of Combat, the bleep-bloop-bleep rhythm of Breakout, and the ominous silence of Adventure.