

Early Video Game Soundtracks

1982-1987

Seth Price, 2001

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Video game soundtracks appeared in the early 1980s, when primitive analogue oscillators allowed for the first real musical accompaniments. Previously, most of the noises emanating from the machine were isolated sound-effects, layered on minimal, repetitive backgrounds, such as the menacing 'putt-putt-putt' of *Asteroids*. Today, the industry-wide use of sampling has produced a genre generally indistinguishable from commercial pop. Between these two eras, however, composers made due with the scraps of technology at hand, generating an eerily beautiful back-catalogue of obsolete approaches. I don't want to attempt a proper history of the genre, rather to make some suggestions or observations around the release of this album.

1

The soundtracks were encoded into arcade games, disks and cartridges, and were not available beyond this context. Unlike film soundtracks, then, video game music was inseparable from its original medium. Composers had to assume a transience for their work, since game systems changed rapidly and the games themselves were often discarded or forgotten. By the same token, this medium-specificity assured a well-defined audience, constituted largely of adolescent and teenage boys.

2

Structurally, the genre presents unique limitations. A track must be energetic but not distracting, the consummate "background music". It need not follow a standard musical trajectory, since it must

be capable of looping ad infinitum, allowing players as much time as needed with a given screen or level. Because of this, many of the album tracks start abruptly or quickly peter out, their duration determined by the programmer who removed them from the circuits. For this reason, many of the tracks must be considered extracts or samples of larger and arguably infinite compositions.

3

Dictated by a game's theme, the songs reference vernacular musics such as horror soundtracks, carnival music, and vaguely ethnic genres. However, even as a song may sound like, say, 'Asian music', it's not clear that the composer knows much about the idiom. In any case, this is irrelevant if a listener gets the shorthand; in this there is a similarity to advertising jingles, which also quickly supply complex discursive cues to a broad audience, with little concern for authenticity.

4

While today's computers and game consoles can reproduce entire sampled bands, these older soundtracks were programmed, not 'played' in the traditional sense. They have always existed solely as strings of numbers, and do not derive from analogue or 'real world' signals. At the time, this was uncommon among commercial pop music, which relied heavily on microphone recording. At times, the game music's reliance on programmed mathematical progression suggests classical composition and sequencing.

5

The release of this album enacts the corporate strategy of uprooting an ‘underground’ or otherwise obscure cultural artifact and exposing it to a broad audience. Fans extracted these songs from long-dead cartridges, tapes, and arcade machines, and placed them on the internet for trade with other fans. Historically, this is a practice of hacker culture, with its credo “information wants to be free”. Free, in other words, from corporate control; put more romantically, this means the liberation of art from commerce. The aim of this album is not to profit, rather to raise questions of access, distribution, and circulation, by reinserting these songs into the marketplace. The market is their original context, a context without which they could never have existed. The fans who mined these soundtracks and placed them on the web might object to the gesture, recognizing the labor that goes into finding and guarding the troves of popular culture. But free circulation of material on music trading sites is as legally suspect as the release of a pirated compilation, which only returns the problem to a traditional distribution model. The cover was reproduced from an album on cdcovers.cc, a web-database of downloadable record-cover art that derives its content from user input. When asked about the site, a lawyer for Warner Brothers remarked that it was no big deal. It is CD packaging, however, that is the industry’s last line of defense, and the only added value that they can append to musical content.

6

Until now, these songs have existed solely as digital information: programmed, encoded, extracted, sometimes going through MIDI translation, uploaded and downloaded, finally burned to compact disc; all the while passing through numerous data compressions and file formats. The album release wraps them in plastic and cuts them loose from their origins. In a sense, the shift of context is a liberation; on the other hand, they are stamped with the authenticity accorded to genuine cultural articles (as opposed to mere electronic data)—and this raises the question of how much an authentic article of culture depends on legitimization by the packaging and distribution systems of the market.

The history of the mechanization of environmental management is a history of extremists, otherwise most of it would never have happened. The fact that many of these extremists were not registered, or otherwise recognized as architects, in no way alters the magnitude of the contribution they have made to the architecture of our time.

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