

MUSICAL REPRESENTATIONS OF GENDER IN *NIER: AUTOMATA* AND
SIMILAR ROLE-PLAYING VIDEO GAMES

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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It is no secret that the video game industry codifies gendered stereotypes, which appear in mechanics and visual illustrations of characters in games. In this thesis, I scrutinize the construction of gender in the musical elements of soundtracks in role-playing games. Expanding upon Michael Austin's work (2018), I examine how musical gender construction compares with the visual and interactive representations of gender on the screen.

Using *Nier: Automata* as the primary case, I employ a variety of techniques to demonstrate how musical parameters subvert expectations established by other role-playing games. However, a conflict exists when we contrast musical observations with the visual and interactive elements. A ludomusical dissonance sustains between the aural and visual images of the main characters. In examining the gendered ludomusical dissonance in *Nier: Automata*, my thesis shows that dissecting musical representations of gender, in relation to the visual and interactive constructions, transforms unnecessarily gendered perceptions.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“Better make sure he’s actually dead next time. That was dangerous, ma’am,” says Android 9S to 2B with a coy smile after he heroically swoops in and saves the day. This short scene from the beginning of the video game *Nier: Automata* remains pivotal because it introduces the main playable characters, and initially shapes our understanding of their presentations and interactions. This moment, and other similar instances, establish my point of inquiry. What visual elements represent characters within a game? How does the game’s music represent them? In this thesis, I scrutinize the construction of gender in the musical elements of video game soundtracks and examine how that assembly compares with the visual representations of gender on the screen.

Susan McClary started the trend of feminist music criticism in a wide variety of musical traditions with her collection of essays in *Feminine Endings*. Along with viewing music as a gendered discourse, she argues that music is “always fraught with gender-related anxieties.”¹ Others continued this trend of examining music through a feminist lens. Rita Steblin demonstrates the gendered association of instruments throughout Western history, exposing how this resulted in a paucity of women composers.² Fred Everett Maus examines the gendered discourse in the discipline of music theory specifically and claims the listening role of music theorists is gendered as a feminine activity. The resulting discourse about music becomes an overbearing attempt at asserting

¹ McClary (1991, 17).

² Steblin (1995, 144).

masculinity.³ Jodie Taylor discusses diverse erotic pleasures catalyzed and negotiated in music through various “musico-sexual synergies.”⁴ Christine Boone (2018) examines gendered relationships between multiple musical aspects in mashups of popular songs.

Several aspects of the works of Boone and McClary are particularly compelling to me as I frame my own research. Whether discussing seventeenth-century opera or modern-day pop music, McClary does a wonderful job of situating the historical context of a given musical tradition and how gendered stereotypes of the time inform music created during a given era. I aim to do a similar historical grounding in my own area of study: role-playing games created since the 1990s. Boone expertly shows how competing musical parameters create a complex representation of gender in mashups of popular songs. In my own work, I hope to show a similar complexity in gender representation considering the multimodal visual, interactive, and musical elements inherent to video games.

Ludomusicology, the body of scholarship concerning the analysis of video game music, ignited quickly after several key contributions.⁵ Zach Whalen published one of the first articles in the field of video game sound and music studies. He approaches game music from the angle of narrative integration, arguing that cognitive theories of perception and questions of immersion versus engagement allow us to understand "flow" or pleasurability in games and allow for a richer understanding of the complex

³ Maus (1993, 265).

⁴ Taylor (2012, 612).

⁵ The collection of essays in *Ludomusicology*, edited by Summers (2016), are a great introduction to this field.

communication involved in video game music.⁶ Karen Collins kindled the study of music and sound in games with her monograph *Game Sound: An Introduction to the History, Theory, and Practice of Video Game Music and Sound Design*. She provided a foundation through examination of the practice, production, and consumption of video games. Themes covered include differences and similarities between game music and film music, evolution of game technology and constraints it placed on game audio, and historical developments of game sound.⁷

Others pulled the field in various fascinating directions following the contributions by Whalen and Collins. Tim Summers postulates an analytical framework for engaging with video game music, advocating for techniques like mapping motivic relationships and thematic development, harmonic analysis, topic analysis, psychological studies, hermeneutic studies, form analysis, ethnomusicological study, and performance study.⁸ William Gibbons imparts an in-depth examination of where video games meet classical music and the various meanings conjured when video games use extant classical music (and vice-versa).⁹ Steven Reale focuses on barriers preventing players from listening to the entirety of a game's soundtrack. Synchronic barriers occur at specific

⁶ Whalen (2004).

⁷ Collins (2008, 5). Her second monograph, Collins (2013), focuses more on the interactive component unique to video games.

⁸ Summers (2016, 34).

⁹ Gibbons (2018). For examples of the inclusion of extant pop music in video games, see Gibbons (2011).

moments within the game's lifecycle, while diachronic barriers transpire with patches or expansions to the game.¹⁰

Some authors discuss the relationship between music and gender representation specifically in video game music. Andy Lemon and Hillegonda C. Rietveld expose the invisibility of female game composers and the gendered identification of game music. They utilize the music of *Street Fighter* as a case study of a female composer writing music for the masculinized space of the 1990s arcade scene.¹¹ David Machin and Theo van Leeuwen deliberate the relationship between sound, visuals, and gender in two mobile phone games. They argue the two games remain visually highly gendered. In an investigation of the sounds players create during gameplay, they reveal manipulations in sound signal the personal, impersonal, and specific kinds of highly-gendered social relations.¹² Michael Austin examines the role of music and gender in fantasy video games. Observing orchestration techniques in game music specifically, he contends this trait of music is especially laden with gendered meanings that fuel the anxieties described by McClary, while playing into and perpetuating stereotypes about gender.¹³ He concludes his essay noting that:

Although I only discuss a few of the ways orchestration contributes to, undermines, or complicates the visual representation of gender within a video game, I strongly believe that the other elements of music, such as genre, themes/leitmotifs, texture and ensemble size, volume/amplitude, harmony,

¹⁰ Reale (2020, 206).

¹¹ Lemon and Rietveld (2019, 113).

¹² Machin and Leeuwen (2016).

¹³ Austin (2018, 167).

form/structure, could shape or subvert our understanding of gender in video games in similar ways.¹⁴

That the game industry codifies gendered stereotypes remains no secret. These stereotypes appear in marketing campaigns designed to promote games to specific audiences, in mechanics and visual representations in games, or even in the genres within which video games exist within. Winifred Phillips, in *A Composer's Guide to Game Music*, offers an insight into how some of these stereotypes may play out in the composition of a game's soundtrack as well. The book, which primarily serves an audience who either wants to get into the industry of composing game music or already professionally works within that industry, contains a chapter connecting video game genre with music genre.¹⁵ Phillips writes that game developers target specific demographics to market their games successfully. These demographics, through psychology research, prefer certain types of music over others.¹⁶ For instance, shooter games, such as the *Call of Duty* franchise, historically incorporate rock guitars and drums along with the epic drama of the "elite" orchestra. Game developers market these types of games to a masculine audience so it follows that the music in these games likewise appeals to the target group.¹⁷ Considering this, Austin concludes that since various music

¹⁴ Austin (2018, 179).

¹⁵ As with music, there are plenty of video game genres and subgenres. The function of music varies with game genre. For an overview of this, see Summers (2011.)

¹⁶ Phillips (2014, 83).

¹⁷ Phillips (2014, 85). For a deeper consideration of the demographics that make up video game consumers, see Williams, Martins, Consalvo, and Ivory (2009).

genres appeal to males and females unequally, music genres gender various game experiences.¹⁸

Role-playing games (hereafter “RPGs”) are a popular video game genre in both Western and Eastern markets with roots in the fantasy tabletop RPG *Dungeons & Dragons*. Numerous subgenres and genre combinations utilizing RPG elements exist, but most RPG markets split between the West and the East. Western RPGs typically feature darker storylines and settings while Eastern RPGs highlight brighter storylines and settings.¹⁹ Of course, this oversimplifies a complex genre, and plenty of market crossover occurs especially in current times. Nonetheless, it provides a useful starting point for a discussion of how music historically situates within this genre.²⁰ Phillips contends the music in RPGs in the West typically involve thunderous orchestral scores and sometimes include rock elements, while music in these games in the East alternate orchestral and rock genres with techno, light retro-pop, and top-40 style ballads.²¹ As considered previously, hard rock and “elite” orchestral genres appeal primarily to male demographics.

Numerous RPGs depend on financial success through marketing to a masculine audience. For example, the action-RPG *Dark Souls*, notorious for its steep and unchangeable difficulty, incorporated the phrase “prepare to die” heavily in its marketing

¹⁸ Austin (2018, 172).

¹⁹ Phillips (2014, 88).

²⁰ *Music in the Role-Playing Game*, edited by Gibbons and Reale (2020), is an excellent collection of essays detailing how music is used in the RPG genre.

²¹ Phillips (2014, 88).

campaign. Marketing teams even placed the phrase on the back of the game box. Nicholas Hanford claims this type of marketing and intersection of challenge and effort in relation to game difficulty constructs the “gamer” identity.²² “Gamer” identities typically become masculinized and closely associate the amount of work and investment one puts into gaming with status as a “real” gamer. Public and private shaming of “non-hardcore” gamers, often women at gaming conventions or women like Anita Sarkeesian who critique games, comprises an unfortunate effect of this identity. This same “gamer” identity sparked the abhorrent “gamergate” controversies.²³

In summary, RPGs typically employ music appealing to masculine demographics and likewise attract a male market. More specifically, how has music in RPGs historically portrayed these gendered aspects? Two brief examples will situate this conversation. Video 1 juxtaposes encounter musical cues from *Final Fantasy VII* and *Dark Souls*.²⁴ *Final Fantasy VII* is a Japanese RPG, a subgenre of RPG typically referred to as a JRPG. Historically, Japanese developers create the games in this subgenre that utilize turn-based gameplay mechanics and feature a plethora of character statistics (commonly referred to in the gaming community as stats).²⁵ The music of *Final Fantasy*

²² Hanford (2018, 151).

²³ Hanford (2018, 150). For other examples of toxic masculinity in the gaming community, see the collection of essays in *Masculinities in Play*, edited by Taylor and Voorhees (2018).

²⁴ Video example 1: <https://youtu.be/8upSX-knr6M>.

²⁵ There are often opinionated debates about what constitutes a JRPG. Some claim that the game *must* be made in Japan, while some claim the game *must* include a turn-based combat system. For these reasons, later games in the *Final Fantasy* series (spanning 16 main entries and a plethora of side entries) are sometimes not considered a JRPG even though they are still made by Japanese game company Square Enix.

VII encompasses a fantastic example of how music functions within the JRPG genre. The orchestration of the primary battle theme, realized in MIDI format due to space limitations of CD-ROM technology on the original PlayStation, showcases the “epic” orchestra described by Phillips: string section swells, active percussion, and large brass sections.²⁶ The harmony is primarily diatonic, stays within the Aeolian mode, and develops the series’ iconic “Victory Fanfare” exploiting a $\flat VI-\flat VII-I$ Aeolian cadence after the battle concludes with triumph. Figure 1.1 demonstrates this cadence. Historically, this cadence in video games connotes victory or accomplishment. The original *Super Mario Bros.* for the Nintendo Entertainment System (hereafter “NES”) contains this same cadence each time Mario clears a level.²⁷

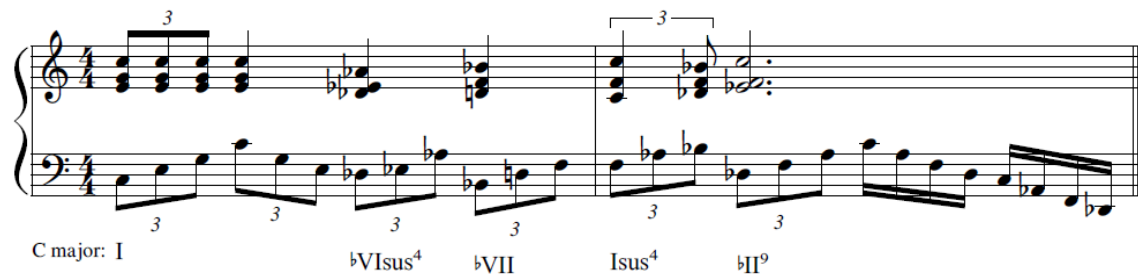


Figure 1.1. Aeolian cadence in “Victory Fanfare” from *Final Fantasy VII*.

²⁶ For more details about technology limitations as they relate to music composition for video games, consult Collins (2008).

²⁷ Musical cues such as “Victory Fanfare” are part of a musical trope called “victory music.” This is the musical cue that accompanies some sort of accompaniment in the game, such as beating a boss or clearing a level. These cues are often fanfare-like and in a major mode. For more information about video game music topics, consult Atkinson (2019), Yee (2020) and Bradford (2020).

Austin contends the orchestration of the music used to represent male and female characters in the *Final Fantasy* series contributes to the gendered aspects of the game's score overall. Leitmotifs for male characters conjure up epic fanfares and flourishes while leitmotifs for female characters usually incorporate ballad-type feminine instruments such as flutes and ocarinas.²⁸ Do other musical elements, such as harmony, contribute to a gendered conception of music in *Final Fantasy VII*? I argue that they do. The Aeolian cadence typically signifies success in games, as described previously. However, masculine tendencies historically intrude upon that victory. In *Super Mario Bros.*, Mario claims success, tasked with saving the princess who always happens to be in another castle. In the original *Final Fantasy* for the NES, a burly group of adventuring men who successfully defeat hordes of enemies take the triumph. I connect the Aeolian cadence to a masculine victory through this historical association.²⁹

Dark Souls is an action-RPG, a fusion of genres combining elements of the action game genre and the stat systems of RPGs.³⁰ The music of *Dark Souls* represents the functions of audio in games within this genre. The orchestration of the battle music that accompanies the fight with the "Taurus Demon" (shown in video 1) utilizes the "elite"

²⁸ Austin (2018, 174). For more information about the historical gendering of musical instruments, see Steblin (1995).

²⁹ Certainly, the Aeolian cadence is used in other musical genres, such as pop music. I am not arguing that every Aeolian cadence is masculinized. However, I argue that they are in video game music due to the historical examples of the victory music trope. For more information about this cadence in the context of video game music, see Baker (2013). For other examples of masculinized tropes or semiotics, consult Brame (2011).

³⁰ Genre fusions in video games are complex. Action-RPGs usually mean the player has complete control over the movements of their character (unlike a JRPG), and there is either a character creation system or customization system, and plenty of character stats.

orchestra described by Phillips: a large active string section, thunderous percussion, and competing high and low voice choirs. The harmony is chromatic and typically descends; similarly, chromaticism and descent mark the melodic lines. The specific example from *Dark Souls* falls within a musical topic specific to video games termed “boss music.” This topic usually features thick orchestration, chromatic harmonies, and (depending on the genre) sacred or rock genre tropes.³¹ Conveying the epic scope of the encounters seen in the visuals and experienced through interactivity comprises the musical objective. Musical elements such as orchestration, harmony, and melody in *Dark Souls* convey gendered expectations when one places the epic scope of the boss music trope alongside the “gamer” identity described by Hanford earlier. All the musical elements described shape this identity.

In this context of genre, market, demographics, and historically-gendered video game music in RPGs, I add my own contribution to the discussion of music and gender representation in video games. Like Austin, I believe many musical elements play a role in the construction of gender in the audio of games. I argue video game music falls into gendered stereotypes within the various game genres codified by the game industry. How a specific game supports or supplants these expectations in terms of its musical content depends on how a game genre historically gendered its music, as well as the target demographic of that genre as outlined by Phillips. Moreover, I believe the audio interacts with the visuals in games, creating a total meaning in terms of gender representation.

³¹ A “boss” in a video game is an extra powerful enemy usually encountered at the end of the level that the player must defeat. “Boss music” is the musical cue that accompanies this encounter. The musical goal of this specific cue is to match the “epic” scope of the boss encounter. For more specific information on the boss musical topic, see Yee (2020).

Interactions of audio and visuals pan out in several ways. In one configuration, the audio elements and the visual elements synchronize in terms of gender representation, providing a solid framework which shapes our understanding. In other instances, the audio and visual elements conflict, resulting in a subversion of our expectations of gender representation. Conflict constitutes a more complex relationship between the audio and visual elements and how we attempt to construct meaning from them in tandem.

Definition of the Project

Using several mainstream RPG series as examples, in this thesis I define some of the gendered musical stereotypes in games. Specifically, I examine how harmonic elements, musical themes, and specific uses of musical voice types may or may not be gendered. My primary musical theoretic tools include Neo-Riemannian theory, reductive analysis, and text-music analysis. My main examples draw from the *Final Fantasy*, *Dark Souls*, and *Persona* series of Japanese role-playing games. To analyze the music in these games, I draw on a combination of recorded gameplay videos and notated transcriptions. This methodology draws on Tim Summers's definition of "analytic play," in which the analyst relies on a variety of critical sources to approach music in games.³² After discussing the gendered musical tropes, I will bring in observations about the gendered

³² In ludomusicology, there are often fierce debates about what constitutes the musical object of video games, and how to present that object. Summers (2016) provides a useful mode of engagement in his description of "Analytic Play," which is the experience of play through captured recordings. For the purposes of this thesis, the object under consideration is my playthrough of the games captured on the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One S consoles. I will use a combination of gameplay videos and notated transcriptions of the music as the objects of my analysis. My recorded playthrough of *Nier: Automata* is given here: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLZVkgvH9VTgEbiDO1IJO-lyvuPwuqRBsF>.

visual, narrative, and ludic elements of these games, and examine how the music relates to these elements.

Nier: Automata is my central case study throughout the thesis.³³ While many of my examples demonstrate the gendered musical norms I define, with *Nier: Automata* I provide an examination of how music in this game subverts typical established gender norms within the RPG genre. Following that discussion, I continue with an examination of the relationship between the audio and visual elements, noting the disjunction between the musical subversion and the visual hypersexualization that plays into masculine tropes established in video games. *Nier: Automata* conforms to standards established in the RPG genre, including hypersexualized female characters, portrayals of male fantasy, and hegemonic power dynamics. A “ludomusical dissonance” exists between the aural and visual images of the characters, demonstrating how gendering in music shapes or contradicts our understanding of gender in video games.³⁴

I hope the research presented in this thesis demonstrates the uniqueness of video games as interactive objects. Nonetheless, I also hope this research will be useful for multimedia studies more broadly. In the context of opera, Mary Ann Smart (2020, 7) notes that meaning can be located not only with the composer, but also with the characters, performers, and audience. In video games, like any other multimedia context,

³³ A playlist containing several of the game’s musical cues as encountered during my playthrough is given here: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLZVkgVH9VTgHS5YmNt8MWT_115pQbmWFc.

³⁴ Kamp (2020, 134) introduces the term “ludomusical dissonance” to identify moments in video games where the gameplay routine does not match the nature of the musical cues. I believe this term applies to situations where the music is in a disjunct relationship with the visual and interactive elements in terms of representation.

I believe gender representation plays a role in multiple areas of contact, including music, visuals, and player interaction.

Chapter Outline

Following this introductory chapter, this thesis contains four additional chapters that continue the discussion and arguments I have outlined here at the outset. Chapter II examines gendered harmonic tropes in role-playing games. I define several categories of how different types of characters are represented through their musical themes. Female characters are often harmonically softened through techniques such as mode mixture. Male characters are frequently defined through heroic themes that include strong cadences and the heroic “victory” aeolian cadence. These tropes can be subverted as well, including different techniques of softening female characters and allowing male characters to have a deeper emotional characterization through harmonic softening too.

Chapter III examines the various roles of the female voice in role-playing games. I provide examples of what I call the “Ah” song, or the use of an untexted female voice in a musical cue. The voice is stripped of semantics and rendered as a pure musical object. Other examples include romantic pop songs, or the use of texted female vocals in a heteronormative context. This use of the female voice lyrically and musically confirms the normative gender roles of the characters the romantic pop song represents. Finally, using an example from *Nier: Automata*, I show how these categories of texted and untexted female voice use can be assimilated, expanded, and cast in new contexts.

In Chapter IV, I look at musical themes. Following the method outlined by Jason Brame, I use reductive analysis to examine thematic material and draw semiotic and

potentially gendered meanings. I seek to answer the question of what themes are associated with what characters and in-game settings, how are these themes musically constructed, what may these themes signify, and how are they musically gendered?

Chapter V concludes the analytic work of thesis by placing previous musical observations next to the visual and ludic elements of the games under discussion. Several relationships between audio and visual elements exist. The *Final Fantasy* series features gendered tropes in both its musical and visual representation of the characters. The *Dark Souls* series uses some of the same gendered musical stereotypes, but its visual and ludic representations of gender allow for a wide variety of player control through character creation and customization. *Nier: Automata* features music that subverts many of the gendered musical norms discussed throughout the thesis, but its reliance on hypersexualized female characters places it in line with other RPGs that use the same gendered tropes in terms of visual representation. These examples demonstrate the ways in which gendered ludomusical dissonance or consonance can be achieved.

CHAPTER II

GENDERED HARMONY CATEGORIES IN ROLE-PLAYING GAMES

Introduction

Given that constructions of masculinity and femininity exist in music, and certainly within the repertoire of the role-playing game, a useful starting point for examining these gendered codes lies within the realm of harmony. In this chapter, I focus on gendered constructions of harmony in the music of role-playing games. I propose several categories of gendered harmonic function. Feminine softening utilizes mode mixture to represent passivity in female characters. Masculine heroicness incorporates the aeolian “victory cadence” (bVI–bVII–I) to represent heroic male characters. Ambiguous chromatic inflections mark an “othering” typically associated with femininity as abnormal in relation to masculinity. Finally, gendered subversions occur when definitions of the previous categories are extended or altered, and when gendered harmonic roles are swapped. Take note that the codes and categories described in this section interact with the player in a reciprocal manner. As McClary notes, codes themselves “participate in social formation, inasmuch as individuals learn how to be gendered beings through their interactions with cultural discourses such as music.”³⁵

It should be clear that I do not intend to argue that harmony in video game music expresses innate femaleness or masculineness. In the context of film music, Laing notes, “[There is no] ‘natural’ musical mode of expression for either femaleness or femininity,

³⁵ McClary (1991, 7).

or indeed any ‘inescapable’ psychological reason why film music affects audiences as it does. Rather, the emphasis is on how culture has positioned women—and men—in relation to both music and emotion, as a result of music’s conceptualization according to prevalent related definitions of femininity and masculinity.”³⁶ The culture and patterns dictate the associations, not the other way around.

Feminine Softening

Music that represents female characters in role-playing games utilizes various harmonic techniques to convey feminine sentimentality and softening. What I call feminine softening becomes even more apparent when compared to music that introduces male characters. According to Western stereotypes about binary gender roles, the feminine is “weak” while the masculine is “strong.”³⁷ These weak and strong qualities can be expressed in a variety of ways, including musical rhetoric, gendered instrumental roles, and the human voice.³⁸ Furthermore, we can extend weak and strong to the realm of harmony and cadence.

Specifically, female gender stereotypes express themselves in game music that employs modal mixture, chordal inversion, and plagal cadences. Musical cues that are connotated with female characters often use mode mixture and borrowed chords as a core aspect of the harmonic progression. Mode mixture in this context connotes a different quality than the aeolian cadence, which is typically reserved for male characters.

³⁶ Laing (2007, 3).

³⁷ McClary (1991, 10).

³⁸ Boone (2018, [3.3]).

Additionally, chords are frequently cast in inversion, eschewing traditional root movement. Musical chord inversion inherently weakens the foundation of the chord, and this weakness is often conflated with the feminine. Plagal cadences are generally not considered as conclusive as authentic cadences.³⁹ As we will see, authentic cadences in root position are typically reserved for male heroes. These approaches to harmony in tandem lend themselves to a softening of the character communicated through music.

Figure 2.1, a transcription of “Aerith’s Theme,” is the musical cue associated with the female character Aerith from *Final Fantasy VII*. In the game narrative, she is a follower merchant turned planet savior. This musical theme occurs several times in game during narrative beats that feature this character, such as when her mother recounts Aerith’s childhood.

The musical score for "Aerith's Theme" is presented in two systems. The first system contains four measures. The chords above the staff are Dadd9, Am/E, Dadd9, and Am/E. The bass line chords are labeled as D major: I, v⁴, I, and v⁴. The second system contains five measures. The chords above the staff are D, Am, B^b, Gm, and D. The bass line chords are labeled as I, v⁴, ^bVI, iv, and I.

Figure 2.1. Transcription of “Aerith’s Theme” from *Final Fantasy VII*.

³⁹ Arnold Schoenberg (1969, 14) describes plagal and Phrygian cadences as “means of stylistic expression and are structurally of no importance.”

Harmonically, several features stand out. Borrowed chords are exceedingly prevalent, such as minor v and major bVI . These chords are used both in neighbor and cadential motions. Composer Nobuo Uematsu uses some root position chords, while others are cast in inversion, such as in the opening $I-v6/4-I$ progression. In neo-Riemannian terms, this is an **LRP** transformation.⁴⁰ The melodic line understood as arpeggiation of an underlying chord progression expresses the efficacy of the voice leading, as the chords are in $P_{0,4}$ relation.⁴¹ Finally, the excerpt ends with a $iv-I$ plagal cadence. All these hallmarks of the harmonic softening of female characters are accounted for in this single phrase.

These harmonic techniques are not relegated to a single theme either. Figure 2.2, “Tifa’s Theme,” is the musical cue associated with the female character Tifa, also from *Final Fantasy VII*. The harmonic essence of this cue is the oscillation between tonic and borrowed minor subdominant chords. Additionally, iv is cast in second inversion with a tonic pedal bass maintained throughout. The $I-iv6/4$ progression is an **RLP** transformation. Smooth voice leading between these chords, in $P_{2,0}$ relation, is found in the accompanimental harp MIDI sound. The second phrase ends with a cadence on the minor dominant in measure 16 before the melodic line repeats with different

⁴⁰ In neo-Riemannian nomenclature, **L** represents the leading tone transformation, **R** is the relative transformation, and **P** is the parallel transformation. For a brief overview of these three transformations and compound transformations built from them, see Lehman (2013).

⁴¹ Jack Douthett and Peter Steinbach (1998, 243) say two chords are related by $P_{m,n}$ if they differ by a half step in m voices and a whole step in n voices, while the remaining voices are held as common tones.

instrumentation. As with “Aerith’s Theme,” “Tifa’s Theme” employs a harmonic strategy meant to soften the character and stereotype them as more passive.

The image displays a musical score for the piano accompaniment of "Tifa's Theme" from Final Fantasy VII. The score is written in 4/4 time and consists of three systems of music. Each system includes a treble clef staff with a key signature of one flat (B-flat major) and a bass clef staff. Chord labels are placed above the treble staff, and Roman numeral figures are placed below the bass staff. The first system (measures 1-6) features chords F, Bbm/F, F, and Bbm/F. The second system (measures 7-13) features chords F, Bbm/F, and F. The third system (measures 14-17) features chords Bbm/F, F, and Cm. The bass line consists of a steady eighth-note accompaniment pattern.

Figure 2.2. Transcription of “Tifa’s Theme” from *Final Fantasy VII*.

A key aspect of understandings of femininity and masculinity developed throughout Western history is the idea that masculine is “normal” while feminine is some sort of “othering.”⁴² This “othering” can also be expressed in music. A prime example comes from “Gwyndolin’s Theme” found in *Dark Souls*, composed by Motoi Sakuraba. A transcription of the cue is found in Figure 2.3. This theme plays during the fight with the boss named Gwyndolin. Therefore, this musical cue falls under the boss-fight topic, (although it does not sound as bombastic and texturally thick as other examples of boss

⁴² McClary (1991, 10).

music discussed later in this chapter). Sakuraba opts for an intimate texture of harp and two soprano vocalists, cast in a slow tempo that utilizes silence to great effect.

The image shows a musical score for a portion of "Gwyndolin's Theme" from *Dark Souls*. It features three staves: two soprano vocalists (S. 1 and S. 2) and a harp (Hrp.). The key signature is D minor, and the time signature is 4/4. The score begins at measure 26. The vocal lines include lyrics such as "Ah" and "Oh". The harp line includes chord symbols: D minor, VI+, VI, v, v, VI+, VI, v, v, i, v. The music is characterized by a slow tempo and a sparse texture.

Figure 2.3. Transcription of a portion of “Gwyndolin’s Theme” from *Dark Souls*.

Gwyndolin, the character this cue represents and the boss that the player must defeat in combat, represents ambiguity. As described in-game, this male character held an affinity for moonlight magic in the fantastical world of *Dark Souls* and was raised as a girl at the behest of the father, Gwyn. However, Gwyndolin is not necessarily a trans character since they identify as male, and other characters refer to them using he/him pronouns. Nonetheless, a certain ambiguity about this character’s gender identity persists.

The music, in certain moments, represents Gwyndolin’s gendered ambiguity. The beginning of “Gwyndolin’s Theme” is harmonically straightforward, cast in F-sharp minor with alternating tonic and dominant harmonies. After a few phrases, an abrupt modulation to D minor occurs. Some interesting harmonic observations can be made after the modulation. In measure 26, an augmented sonority is introduced with the progression VI+–VI–v–i. The augmented triad is inherently ambiguous, because of the stacked major-

third intervals.⁴³ Six potential resolutions exist for a single augmented sonority, depending on which tone one considers as an upper or lower leading tone. This is demonstrated in Figure 2.4. I contend that the use of an augmented triad in this moment plays into inherent ambiguity about the character Gwyndolin’s expression of gender. Of course, not every augmented sonority has this connotation. In this context, however, I think that making this connection falls in line with the typical view of “othering” the “abnormal” feminine qualities (in comparison to the “normal” masculine).



Figure 2.4. Six ways to parsimoniously resolve the same augmented triad.

Masculine Heroicism

Having considered musical cues that represent female characters and the gendered harmonic tropes used therein, how do composers typically utilize harmony when creating music for male characters? In a survey of a few examples, certain trends emerge, which are typically opposite of the techniques described previously. Male characters in role-playing games typically receive music that features progressions using root movement by fifth, alternative uses of modal mixture including the masculine aeolian cadence, and

⁴³ Schoenberg (1969, 45) describes augmented triads as “vagrant harmonies” because of their “multiple meanings.” Additionally, he says that a single augmented triad points to six tonal regions, shown in figure 2.4.

definitive authentic cadences. These stereotypes reveal themselves when placed alongside the music for female characters from the same games.

Figure 2.5 gives a transcription of an excerpt of the music associated with the male player-controlled character Cloud Strife from *Final Fantasy VII*. This theme occurs in a variety of gameplay moments, and the motive that outlines the interval of a major-seventh permeates many musical cues throughout the soundtrack. A few harmonic aspects stand out in this excerpt. First, all the chords are in root position. There is no inversion and so there is no weakening of the root movement. Second, a clear ii-V7-I full perfect authentic cadence terminates the phrase. Absent are any plagal cadences or half cadences resting upon the minor dominant. And finally, the masculine aeolian victory cadence is infused into the theme with the opening I-vi-I-bVI-bVII-I progression. Clearly, the harmonic techniques in “Main Theme” and “Aerith’s Theme” are polar opposites.

The image shows a musical score for the 'Main Theme' from Final Fantasy VII. It consists of two systems of piano accompaniment. The first system has six measures with the following chords: E major (I), C#m (vi), E major (I), C major (bVI), D major (bVII), E major (I), and C#m (vi). The second system has five measures with the following chords: E major (I), A major (IV), F#m (ii), B7 (V7), and E major (I). The score is written in treble and bass clefs with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and a 4/4 time signature.

Figure 2.5. Transcription of “Main Theme” from *Final Fantasy VII*.

As with feminine softening, masculine harmonic stereotypes are not limited to a single example. “Gwyn’s Theme” from *Dark Souls* shares much in common with “Main Theme.” A transcription of a portion from the middle of the musical cue is shown in Figure 2.6. This music plays during the final boss-fight against the character Gwyn, the primary antagonist of the game as well as instigator of several important events within the narrative and lore of the world of *Dark Souls*. While this music falls under the boss-music topic, like “Gwyndolin’s Theme,” it does not sound like other cases of boss-music. Comprising a sparse instrumentation of two pianos, the cue is far more texturally intimate than other boss-music cues in *Dark Souls*.

The image shows a musical score transcription for "Gwyn's Theme" from *Dark Souls*. It consists of four staves. The top two staves are labeled "Piano" and the bottom two are labeled "Pno.". The score is in 3/4 time. The top piano part features a melody with notes like A4, C5, E5, G5, and F5, with a fermata over the final note. The bottom piano part has a rhythmic accompaniment of eighth notes. The piano accompaniment parts feature block chords and textures. Chord symbols are provided: Am, G, F, Esus4, VI, and Vsus4. The score includes various musical notations such as stems, beams, and fermatas.

Figure 2.6. Transcription of “Gwyn’s Theme” from *Dark Souls*.

Nonetheless, aforementioned masculine harmonic tropes make their appearance within the musical cue. Cast in the key of A-minor, the excerpt features a diatonic descent in its root movement. All chords appear in root position and the phrase ends with a half cadence on V6/4. While the aeolian cadence fails to manifest, the inclusion of the descending lament bass is fascinating. The lament bass in the operatic tradition is typically associated with tragedy, while laments themselves are typically (but not always) reserved for female characters.⁴⁴ In this case, the lament bass represents the fallen hero. Gwyn the character is a former savior of the world, but his meddling actions have caused a decline in the world, making him a tragic hero. His music still uses \flat VI and \flat VII, but the traditional heroic aeolian cadence is inverted, musically marking the tragic descent of his character arc.

Subverted Harmony

Now that common feminine and masculine harmonic tropes have been exposed, in what ways can these norms be subverted? Through several examples, I contend that several recent role-playing games displace harmonic norms through alternate conventions of descending root progressions, shifting notions of feminine softening and masculine heroicism and a switching of gendered harmonic roles relative to the gender of the characters that specific musical cues represent.

⁴⁴ McClary (1991, 46).

Returning to *Nier: Automata*, we see these forces in action in “Peaceful Sleep.” Figure 2.7 gives a transcription of this song that plays when the player enters the in-game Resistance Camp location.⁴⁵ This music is strongly associated with the female Android Anemone, who leads the residents of the Resistance Camp in their war against the Aliens. The music is orchestrated fairly intimately, and like many of the songs in *Nier: Automata*, uses female vocals in solo and in a choir. In relation to the previous discussion, several harmonic techniques bear mentioning. All chords appear in root position, both in the piano and guitar parts. Functionally, an initial diatonic descent begins the second phrase, much like in the lament bass found in “Gwyn’s Theme.” This descent by root movement is what Arnold Schoenberg (1969, 7) would call a “superstrong progression.” A Superstrong progression paradoxically is not associated with harmonic forward drive, but instead has a kind of floating quality. Harmonic roles typically reserved for male characters make their appearance in this musical cue.

That is not to say that feminine softening does not occur. However, the softening expresses itself in a different manner and creates a different musical effect. Figure 2.8 shows a network of the first two phrases of “Peaceful Sleep” from *Nier: Automata*. Here, I utilize Steven Strunk’s (2016, 51) extension of the traditional **P**, **L**, **R** neo-Riemannian operations on triads by adding the chordal seventh.⁴⁶ This first phrase is diatonic and

⁴⁵ The lyrics of “Peaceful Sleep” and many of the other songs are in a made-up language created by vocalist Emi Evans specifically for *Nier: Gestalt/Replicant* and *Nier: Automata* called “Chaos Language.” While the textual meaning of the words may be absent, the sounds created by them certainly carry aural significance.

⁴⁶ Additionally, Julian Hook (2007) defines transformations of dominant and half diminished seventh chords to their respective triads contained within. The mathematical superset symbol \supset induces the transformation that drops the seventh from the chord. In this case \supset **RLP** means to drop the seventh from B-flat M7 and then do the operation

features straightforward functional harmony. The subsequent phrase begins largely the same way but features an alteration. The phrase begins with diatonic major and minor seventh chords, but chromaticism is introduced halfway through with the F major seven chord. A slide transformation connects E minor seven and E-flat major seven, which gets transformed into the dominant-functioning D major triad with suspensions. The softening occurs with the slide transformation. While not strict mode mixture, the slide transformation from a minor seventh chord to a major seventh chord features a sort of natural gravitational pull with its two descending half steps featured in the $P_{2,0}$ relation. This type of feminine softening sounds different from the softening in “Tifa’s Theme,” for example. Considering the root position initial diatonic descent, the gendered harmonic tropes “Peaceful Sleep” have been skewed slightly.

Other examples from *Nier: Automata* serve to demonstrate my argument. At one point, 2B must fight So-Shi, a boss-type Machine enemy. The boss fight uses the track “Possessed by Disease.” This track represents the procedures of boss music used in *Nier: Automata*. Textures and ensembles applied in this track subvert the gendered expectations in the RPG genre discussed earlier. The track utilizes an ensemble consisting of solo vocals by Nami Nakagawa, a high voice choir, acoustic guitar, percussion, and a string contingent. Beginning with an intimate ensemble featuring digitally processed solo vocals, violin, and cello, textural buildup continues through measure 20, shown in figure 2.9. A texture shift occurs at measure 21 with the introduction of a choir, full string section, and guitar. At measure 38 the texture dissipates for a moment, rather than

RLP on the resultant triad. The inverse, the mathematical subset \subset , means to add the seventh back in. This is a useful analytical way for navigating progressions that are not based solely on seventh chords.

Figure 2.7. Transcription of “Peaceful Sleep” from *Nier: Automata*.

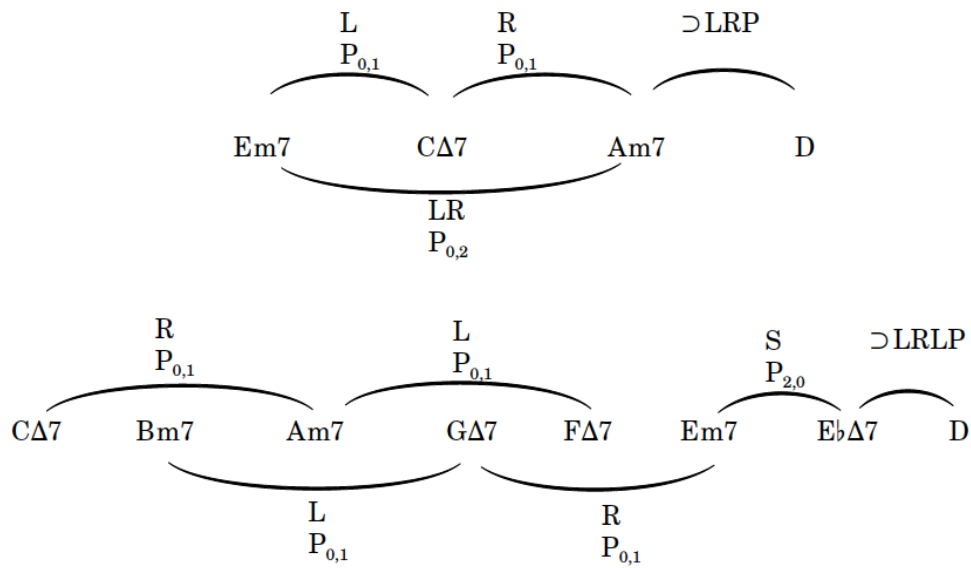


Figure 2.8. Networks of first two phrases from “Peaceful Sleep.”

continuing to build the energy that had been previously established. However, the developing textures of the previous section return at measure 47, this time even fuller with a choir supporting the solo vocals, and more rhythmically active string parts. The main harmonic movement constitutes a shuttle between i and IV, an opposite take on mode mixture feminine softening utilizing the Dorian mode. Figure 2.10 shows this moment.

A textural climax of the track appears in measure 71. Solo vocals harmonized in parallel fourths alternate with rhythmic punctuation in the choir and string section. After this long buildup, the track loops back to measure 37 for as long as it takes the player to defeat the boss.⁴⁷ Figure 2.11 demonstrates this.

Several discoveries stand out in these observations of “Possessed by Disease.” First, the inclusion of several intimate textural moments of just a few solo instruments is not typical of RPG music. More often, RPG boss music features bombastic dense textures and orchestration. Second, other RPG soundtracks eschew the long and complex textural buildup that marks “Possessed by Disease.” Typical RPG boss music involves a single textural trajectory established almost right away and continues for the duration of the musical cue. And perhaps most obviously, “Possessed by Disease” abandons the typical sound of the “elite” orchestra that punctuates most RPG music, opting instead for a smaller string section that provides rhythmic accompaniment, and solo vocals that work in tandem with a choir.⁴⁸ Considering all these points, in terms of texture and

⁴⁷ Nathan Baker (2013) carefully attends looping aspects of musical form in games. Elizabeth Medina-Gray (2019) considers seams existing between musical cues.

⁴⁸ Choir sections in *Nier: Automata* were recorded by just a few vocalists who were multitracked in the production process. See Taro (2019).

13

Vo. ko ro - sto le - hi eh

20

Vo.

Ch. Ah Ah Ah Ah Ah

Guitt.

Vln. 1

Vln. 2

Ve.

Cb.

Detailed description: This figure shows two systems of musical notation. The first system (measures 13-18) features a vocal line with lyrics 'ko ro - sto le - hi eh', a violin 1 part with a continuous sixteenth-note tremolo, a violin 2 part with a similar tremolo, a cello part with a steady eighth-note bass line, and a double bass part with a steady eighth-note bass line. The second system (measures 19-24) features a vocal line with 'Ah' exclamations, a violin 1 part with a tremolo, a violin 2 part with a tremolo, a cello part with a steady eighth-note bass line, and a double bass part with a steady eighth-note bass line. The guitar part in the second system consists of sustained chords.

Figure 2.9. Transcription of measures 13–24 from “Possessed by Disease.”

38

Vo. Kus - ta des le - ko - r In - kore de e - h oh Ish -

Guitt.

Ve.

47

Vo. ko ro -

Ch. Ah Ah

Guitt.

Vln. 1

Vln. 2

Ve.

Cb.

Detailed description: This figure shows two systems of musical notation. The first system (measures 38-46) features a vocal line with lyrics 'Kus - ta des le - ko - r In - kore de e - h oh Ish -', a guitar part with sustained chords, and a cello part with a steady eighth-note bass line. The second system (measures 47-48) features a vocal line with 'ko ro -', a cello part with 'Ah' exclamations, a violin 1 part with a tremolo, a violin 2 part with a tremolo, a cello part with a steady eighth-note bass line, and a double bass part with a steady eighth-note bass line.

Figure 2.10. Transcription of measures 38–48 from “Possessed by Disease.”

The image displays a musical score for measures 71-76 of the piece "Possessed by Disease." The score is arranged in two systems, each containing seven staves. The instruments are: Voice (Vo.), Chorus (Ch.), Guitar (Guit.), Violin 1 (Vln. 1), Violin 2 (Vln. 2), Viola (Vc.), and Cello (Cb.).

Measure 71: The vocal line begins with the lyrics "Fu - re - ma - sa - a". The chorus line has a rest followed by "Is - ka - he - te". The guitar plays a series of chords. The violin and viola parts feature a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, while the cello part has a long note.

Measure 74: The vocal line has a rest followed by "Ib - un - sa - re -". The chorus line has "Is - ka - he - so" followed by a rest. The guitar plays chords. The violin and viola parts continue with their rhythmic patterns, and the cello part has a long note.

Figure 2.11. Transcription of measures 71–76 from “Possessed by Disease.”

orchestration “Possessed by Disease” subverts what we expect for gendered boss music in RPGs.

At another point in the game, 2B must fight Simone, a Machine whose quest for beauty has led her to attach all sorts of modifications to her body and devour Machines

and androids alike. The boss fight makes use of the track “A Beautiful Song.” In similar fashion to “Possessed by Disease,” the ensemble includes two solo vocal parts performed by Emi Evans and J’Nique Nicole, a high voice choir, strings, and select woodwinds and brass.⁴⁹ The harmony in a particular section of the song deserves comment. During J’Nique Nicole’s solo vocals starting at measure 43, the bass begins a diatonic descent. During the antecedent eight-bar phrase, the bass descends through the D minor tetrachord (the song is in D minor, but the previous section concluded a modulation to G minor). The harmony above the bass is iv–i6–vii6–i. A transcription is given in figure 2.12. The consequent phrase features the same diatonic bass descent but with a notable alteration. The bass begins the same descent from G to D. Similar harmony from the antecedent phrase appears over the first two bass notes. When the bass reaches E, the harmony shifts to a supertonic minor chord. Instead of resolving to tonic, an internal phrase expansion shifts the bass down to E-flat for four measures, supported by an E-flat major triad, before finally resolving to D minor in measure 61. In neo-Riemannian terms, this harmonic shift is a slide transformation. As demonstrated in figure 2.8, a slide transformation preserves the third of the minor triad while the root and the fifth move down by half step. Measures 56 and 57 express the parsimony of this efficient voice leading on the musical surface, wherein the horn holds the common tone G while the bass moves down by half step from E to E-flat. The music of *Nier: Automata* employs this

⁴⁹ Like “Possessed by Disease,” the lyrics of “A Beautiful Song” are in the “chaos” language.

type of harmonic move frequently. Numerous tracks utilize diatonically-descending bass lines with a slide transformation before either a half cadence or an imperfect cadence.⁵⁰

How does the harmony of *Nier: Automata* compare with the standard set by games like *Final Fantasy VII* and *Dark Souls*? The typical procedure in *Nier: Automata* is not nearly as chromatic as we saw in *Dark Souls*. And while *Nier* includes borrowed chords such as \flat II from the Phrygian mode, *Nier: Automata* does not utilize any Aeolian cadences as seen in the *Final Fantasy* series. In terms of harmony, I contend *Nier: Automata* defies the gendered stereotypes of the RPG genre. It eschews the masculinized victory cadence and nineteenth-century chromaticism popularized first by film music.⁵¹

My final example considers swapped gendered harmonic categories. Figure 2.13 gives a transformational network of the two phrases of the verse of “Found a Light” from *Persona 5*. This music is directly associated with male character Yusuke Kitagawa.⁵² The two phrases are in antecedent–consequent relationship. The key of the song, confirmed in the chorus, is E-flat major. The antecedent phrase uses primarily functional harmony. However, an alteration occurs in the consequent phrase. A slide transformation interrupts the movement from G minor seven to C minor seven, introducing G-flat major seven. On the musical surface, voice leading parsimony is identical to pitch class parsimony at this

⁵⁰ Certainly slide transformations have a broad use in other multimedia such as film music. My comments about slide transformations in this chapter are based on their historical use specifically within video games. See Lehman (2013) for a deeper discussion on the effect of slide transformations in film music.

⁵¹ For an in-depth consideration of the connections between nineteenth-century chromaticism, film music, and video games, see Summers (2014).

⁵² While “Found a Light” only appears in the anime adaptation of *Persona 5*, the same musical team that worked on the video game worked on this track, and the harmonic techniques described here apply to many of the musical cues in *Persona 5*.

43

Vo. 2
Neh - zi tol - we wro Zi zi - ze

B♭ Tpt.

F Hn.

Vln. 1

Vln. 2

Vc.

Cb.

49

Vo. 2
he rea Gyal - ge to - ze ne ma mee - te La

F Hn.

Vln. 1

Vln. 2

Vc.

Cb.

56

Vo. 2
dri - te - e re ze Eh Ul-men a - sa wa ra - re

Ch.

F Hn.

Vln. 1

Vln. 2

Vc.

Cb.

Figure 2.12. Transcription of measures 43–63 of “A Beautiful Song.”

point. As in the antecedent phrase, an **RL** transformation takes the G-flat major seven to its subdominant C-flat major seven.

As with “Peaceful Sleep,” a slide transformation is employed in “Found a Light” as a type of feminine softening. But in this case, this softening occurs for a male character. This swapped gender role opens up the range of musical expression afforded by the stereotyped feminine and masculine harmonic tropes outlined before. Several masculine harmonic traits still persist, such as root position chords and ii–V7–I full authentic cadences. But like “Peaceful Sleep,” the full picture of gendered harmonic tropes remains somewhat displaced due a to a confluence of gendered elements.

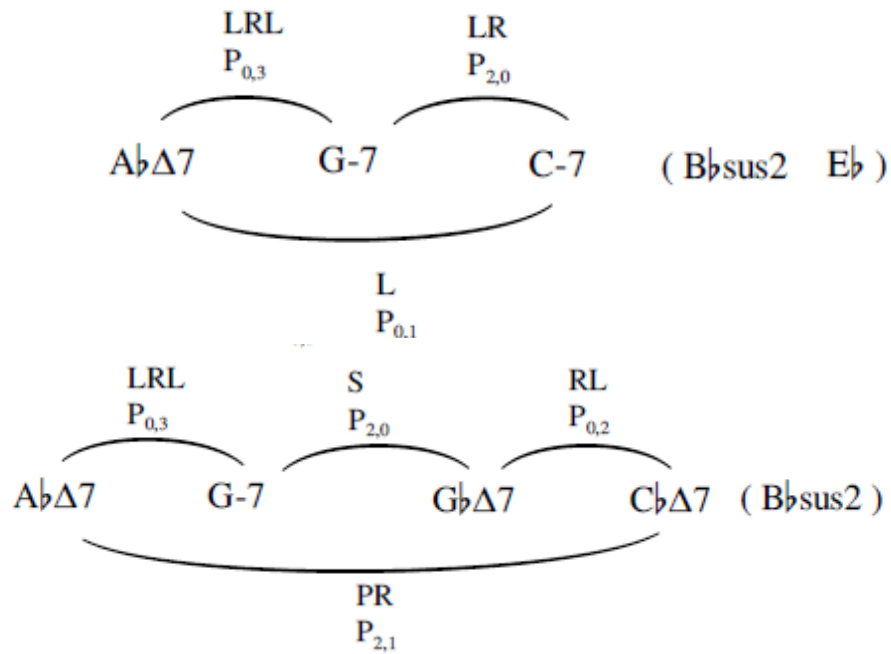


Figure 2.13. Networks of first two phrases in “Found a Light” from *Persona 5*.

Conclusion

Composers of role-playing game music have historically utilized harmony in different ways for female and male characters. Female characters typically receive harmonic progressions that use mode mixture for sentimental effect, chordal inversions often as part of neighbor motions, and cadences typically perceived as somewhat “weaker.” On the other hand, music for male characters uses root position progressions, “stronger” full cadences, and mode mixture used in “heroic” ways such as the aeolian cadence.

However, methods exist to subvert stereotypic feminine softening and masculine heroicism found in role-playing game music. Tropes can be mixed and matched, leading to conflicting gendered harmonic implications. Different approaches to chromaticism in game music, such as slide transformations, can complicate meanings of softening or heroicism. And gender roles can be swapped entirely, leading to a full range of harmonic musical expression that can begin to move past a binary category of harmonic gender tropes.

Video games and gaming spaces have a long history of being masculinized.⁵³ This masculine frame makes its way into video game music as well, leading to negative feminine musical connotations, as well as a limited range of expression of masculinity in music. Recognizing how music in the role-playing game has historically gendered harmony in the ways outlined can lead to changes in gendered perceptions in future games. Examples of subverted harmonic expectations, such as in *Nier: Automata*, offer

⁵³ See Amanda Cote (2020) for a detailed breakdown of gendered stereotypes existing in video game culture outside of the games.

hope that the masculine frame can be dismantled and lead to a broadening of acceptable expressions of gender in game music.

CHAPTER III

THE (UN)TEXTED FEMALE VOICE IN ROLE-PLAYING GAMES

Introduction

Male voices can be reproduced better than female voices. The female voice easily sounds shrill—but not because the gramophone is incapable of conveying high tones, as is demonstrated by its adequate reproduction of the flute. Rather, in order to become unfettered, the female voice requires the physical appearance of the body that carries it. But it is just this body that the gramophone eliminates, thereby giving every female voice a sound that is needy and incomplete.⁵⁴

So writes Theodor Adorno, in reaction to the disembodied female voice created by changes in audio recording and transmission technologies. This passage by Adorno reveals the simultaneous fascination and anxiety caused by such acousmatic voices. In this chapter, I engage with a specific disembodied female voice: the non-diegetic female singing voice in role-playing video games.

I seek to answer the following questions. What roles does this voice participate in? How are songs that contain the untexted female voice utilized in-game? What changes when a text is added into the mix? In essence, the larger question I seek to answer is what are some of the functions of texted and untexted songs in role-playing games and how do these functions relate to visual representations on the screen?

There has been a great amount of recent interest in singing voices as they appear in video games. William Gibbons examines transitions from spoken dialogue to diegetic song in “part-talkie” Japanese role-playing games.⁵⁵ Yvonne Stingel-Voigt discusses

⁵⁴ Adorno (1928, 54).

⁵⁵ Gibbons (2020).

some of the ludic and narrative functions of singing voices in adventure games.⁵⁶ And John Maenhout analyses the various semantic meanings of the diegetic female voice in games from the *Fire Emblem* series.⁵⁷

My contribution proposes several categorical contexts under which the non-diegetic female singing voice in role-playing games typically falls, using musical cues from three different games as case studies. I begin by examining the wordless female voice used in “Aria of the Soul” from the *Persona* series of games, part of a category of what I call the “Ah” song. Then, I turn to the texted song “Eyes on Me” from *Final Fantasy VIII* which exemplifies the category of the cinematic and leitmotivic romantic pop song. Finally, I look at “Voice of no Return” from *Nier: Automata* as an example of a song that assimilates and expands the previous categories, forming a new context for the non-diegetic female singing voice. Continuing the trend discussed throughout this thesis, *Nier: Automata* goes beyond the boundaries for female and male characters set by music in games that came before it.

Female Voices and the “Ah” Song

Certainly, wordless song has a rich history in the Western Classical tradition. This can be traced from the vocalises of Jean-Baptiste Lully in the seventeenth century to orchestral works in the twentieth century that incorporate the wordless female voice, such as Heitor Villa-Lobos’ *Bachianas Brasileiras No.5*. What meanings can we draw from setting the untexted voice in motion? William Cheng describes the singing voice as a

⁵⁶ Stingel-Voigt (2020).

⁵⁷ Maenhout (2018).

force that can obscure or pull attention away from the text, transcending speech, and materializing as a “pure cry unfettered by verbal particularities.”⁵⁸ In discussing opera, Carolyn Abbate claims that we rarely hear the voice both unaccompanied and stripped of text—but when we do, the sonority is disturbing, because vocalizing so pointedly focuses our sense of the singing voice as one that can compel without benefit of words.⁵⁹

But what happens when the female voice is presented without a text?

Commenting on women’s agency in art, Susan McClary says that women’s bodies have historically been set in motion for the pleasure of the masculine gaze.⁶⁰ A similar argument could be made concerning women’s voices. Maenhout argues that feminine voices often have their texts rendered meaningless—or are stripped of text altogether—to render them as voice objects, non-agential figures forced to emit asemantic sound to satisfy the erotic desires of the male viewer. However, the very practice used to silence these women gives them a different order of power, demonstrating that the wordless voice is a powerful phenomenon even if it does not ascribe agency to those bodies emitting it.⁶¹ So why does a feminine voice without a body create senses of nervousness or anxiety, such as those expressed by Adorno seen at the outset of this chapter? Maenhout, along with Cheng, argues that the voice has legitimate power by virtue of its

⁵⁸ Cheng (2014, 61).

⁵⁹ Abbate (1991, 4).

⁶⁰ McClary (1991, 138).

⁶¹ Maenhout (2018, 39–40).

distance and separation from a physical body because we listen in search of a body that can be its source.⁶²

It is in this context of a bodiless feminine voice that we find what I call the “Ah” song in role-playing games. These are songs that utilize the untexted female voice, alone or with instrumental accompaniment. It vocalizes on a neutral syllable which is most often “Ah.” These songs are non-diegetic, although there are some instances where they are used diegetically. The “Ah” song is typically tied to a specific in-game location, acting as a sort of environmental auditory decor, although it can sometimes perform other narrative or ludic functions.

As an example, consider “Aria of the Soul” from the *Persona* series of Japanese role-playing games, composed by Shoji Meguro with vocals by Tomoko Komiya. This music always plays in a location called the “Velvet Room,” a metaphysical location appearing in every mainline entry in the *Persona* series that the player visits to train and create monsters utilized in turn-based combat, called personas. Collecting and training various personas is not unlike the *Pokémon* series of games.

Here, the untexted female voice is accompanied by piano and an orchestra of strings and some brass and winds. Video 2 shows how the song is encountered in-game in *Persona 5*.⁶³ “Aria of the Soul,” with its use of eighteenth century Western classical tradition notions of harmony, melody, and phrase structure, is a musical outlier when considering other music found in these games, which often incorporate hip-hop, j-pop, and jazz influences. The form of the song consists of three sections, arranged in an

⁶² Maenhout (2018, 33).

⁶³ Video example 2: https://youtu.be/ahENccy_j9I.

AABCCC pattern. Section A is in the key of D major, while sections B and C are in the relative key of B minor. After one rotation, the song repeats back to the beginning, completes another rotation, and ends with a Picardy third. A transcribed portion of the song appears in Figure 3.1.

The musical score is presented in three systems. Each system consists of a vocal line (S.) and a piano accompaniment (Pno.). The key signature is one sharp (F#), indicating D major. The time signature is 4/4. The vocal line is characterized by a series of 'Ah' syllables, with the melody moving in a stepwise fashion with some acrobatic leaps. The piano accompaniment provides a harmonic and rhythmic foundation, with the right hand playing chords and the left hand playing a steady bass line. The score is divided into three systems, with measures 7, 16, and 28 marked at the beginning of each system.

Figure 3.1. Transcription of “Aria of the Soul” from the *Persona* series, sections A and B.

Komiya vocalizes exclusively on a neutral “Ah” syllable. The vocal melody is a combination of diatonic stepwise motion with several acrobatic leaps, which are

demonstrated in the agile vocal delivery. How may we process this presentation of the voice? Michel Chion says that the unseen voice becomes invested with magical powers as soon as it is involved with image. Gibbons takes this statement quite literally and claims that an acousmatic voice, in the context of the role-playing game, can represent actual magic.⁶⁴ It should not be too large of a leap to consider that the vocals in “Aria of the Soul” represent this same magical or mystical quality, especially when placed alongside the ludic function of the in-game location the song is tied to.

What function does “Aria of the Soul” possess when considered in the context of the game? Stingel-Voigt writes that the singing voice in games can be humorous, fill the auditory space, shape the sound of an in-game environment, or signal ludic or narrative functions.⁶⁵ In this case, this “Ah” song clearly acts to shape the sound of an in-game location, which is the “Velvet Room.” Stingel-Voigt’s concept of *couleur locale* becomes useful here. *Couleur locale* means that a special music is always heard at the same location. Similar to a leitmotif, this allows a player to recognize an in-game location by listening to the soundtrack.⁶⁶ “Aria of the Soul” becomes tied to a specific location, and after playing the game, it can be challenging to not imagine that location upon hearing the song.

Other examples of the “Ah” song can be found throughout the repertoire of role-playing games. For instance, the *Dark Souls* series of games feature many “Ah” songs, including “Gwyndolin’s Theme” which was examined in the previous chapter. Many of

⁶⁴ Gibbons (2020, 13).

⁶⁵ Stingel-Voigt (2020, 39).

⁶⁶ Stingel-Voigt (2020, 26).

these songs are also tied to specific in-game locations, forming more *couleur locales*. Some songs are tied to static environments which the player explores, while others (“Gwyndolin’s Theme,” for example) are tied to boss encounters and thus form part of the boss-music topic. One of the earliest examples of an “Ah” song can be found in *Final Fantasy VI*. “Aria di Mezzo Carattere” uses synthesized MIDI vocals, due to technology limitations, to imitate the sound of a female opera singer.⁶⁷ Table 3.1 shows some other instances of “Ah” songs. While the “Ah” song is prevalent in many games, certainly things change when text is added to the feminine voice.

Table 3.1. Other examples of the “Ah” song.

Track	Game	Developer	Year
“Aria di Mezzo Carattere”*	<i>Final Fantasy VI</i>	Square	1994
“EVE	<i>Parasite Eve 2</i>	Square	2001
“Gwyndolin’s Theme”	<i>Dark Souls</i>	FromSoftware	2011
“Lost in Thoughts all Alone”	<i>Fire Emblem</i>	Intelligent	2016
	<i>Fates</i>	Systems	

*Uses a synthesized MIDI vocal sound.

Romantic Pop Songs

Innovations in technologies utilized to create games brought changes in the way audio could be implemented in games. Gibbons notes that the introduction of CD technology afforded the possibility of pre-recorded acoustic music. This led to the inclusion of popular song in Japanese role-playing games.⁶⁸ These pop songs form a category of what I call the “romantic pop song” in role-playing games.

⁶⁷ For more information about game music that uses synthesized sounds to imitate the human voice, consult Cheng (2014) and Summers (2018).

⁶⁸ Gibbons (2020, 13).

The romantic pop song in the role-playing game is a texted song sung by a female voice. Under Allan Moore's conception of the various personas found within pop song, song persona in a romantic pop song is typically the woman in a heteronormative coupling who addresses her male partner.⁶⁹ Using Matthew BaileyShea's terminology, the address is often intimate throughout the entire song, rarely using any shifts from distance to intimacy or vice versa.⁷⁰ Romantic pop songs are used non-diegetically at key moments in the narrative which feature the characters that the song is about. Often, thematic snippets of the romantic pop song are used both diegetically and non-diegetically throughout the score of a specific game.

"Eyes on Me" from *Final Fantasy VIII*, composed by Nobuo Uematsu with lyrics by Kako Someya and vocals by Faye Wong, provides a great opportunity for a case study of the romantic pop song in role-playing games. Released on the PlayStation in 1999, CD-ROM technology allowed for an expansive game contained in four discs that features plenty of pre-rendered full motion video, and the first instance of recorded acoustic music in the series.

Written in imperfect English, the song describes a singer's chance encounter with a frequent patron of the bar that she sings at. Table 3.2 presents the lyrics of the first two verses and the chorus. The song exists within the game world of *Final Fantasy VIII*. The

⁶⁹ Moore (2012). This heteronormative coupling that "corrects" proper gender roles is not unlike the "girl sport" tomboy described by Sentilles (2018). The girl sport appears in western dime novels and is a trope of a character who challenges gender and sexual norms, but has her gender and sexuality tamed by marrying a male romantic partner whose performative masculinity eclipses her own. Consult Sentilles (2018, 73–94) for more background on this topic.

⁷⁰ BaileyShea (2014).

character Julia, a piano player and aspiring singer who is unable to write convincing lyrics until her encounter with the character Laguna who inspires her to write the words to her song, “writes” “Eyes on Me.” The song is in an intimate address, conveyed by the first-person narrative and the arrival of “You” pronouns in the fifth line of the first verse. In the music, there are several intentional rests within lines, such as on “wishing they would be heard” or “on the stage on my own.” Figure 3.2 shows a transcription of the first verse.

Table 3.2. “Eyes on Me” lyrics.

Verse 1	Verse 2	Chorus
Whenever sang my songs	My last night here for you	Darling, so there you are
On the stage, on my own	Same old songs, just once more	With that look on your face
Whenever said my words	My last night here with you?	As if you're never hurt
Wishing they would be heard	Maybe yes, maybe no	As if you're never down
I saw you smiling at me	I kind of liked it your way	Shall I be the one for you
Was it real or just my fantasy	How you shyly placed your eyes on me	Who pinches you softly but sure
You'd always be there in the corner	Oh, did you ever know?	If frown is shown then
Of this tiny little bar	That I had mine on you	I will know that you are no dreamer

In the chorus, a series of appoggiaturas place metrical emphasis on the middle parts of the lines, such as on the words “there” and “on.” There are fewer intentional musical breaks within lines, in contrast with the verses. The chorus remains in an intimate address, confirmed by the plethora of “You” pronouns. Figure 3.3 gives a transcription of the chorus.

The image displays a musical score for the first verse of the song "Eyes on Me". It is organized into three systems, each containing a vocal line (S.), a piano accompaniment (Rd.), and a violin part (Vln.).

- System 1 (Measures 9-14):** The vocal line begins with the lyrics "When - ev - er sang my songs on the stage on my own When - ev - er said my words". The piano accompaniment features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes in the right hand and a more active bass line in the left hand. The violin part is currently silent.
- System 2 (Measures 15-19):** The vocal line continues with "wish-ing they would be heard I saw you smi-ling at me was it". The piano accompaniment maintains its rhythmic accompaniment. The violin part remains silent.
- System 3 (Measures 20-24):** The vocal line concludes with "real or just my fan-tas-y you'd al - ways be there in the corn-er of this ti - ny li-ttle". The piano accompaniment continues with the same accompaniment. The violin part remains silent.

Chord progressions are indicated above the vocal line: C, Am, F, G, C in the first system; Em, F, G, Am, Em in the second system; and F, C, Bb, Am, F in the third system.

Figure 3.2. Transcription of first verse of “Eyes on Me.”

“Eyes on Me” with recorded vocals appears non-diegetically in a scene involving main characters Squall and Rinoa, almost taking the form of a music video. The melody of the song is used in several key points in the game in both diegetic and non-diegetic contexts. For instance, a waltz arrangement is heard when Squall and Rinoa first meet. Julia playing her song on piano in-game is heard in a flashback sequence. The melody is

The image shows a musical score for three parts: Soprano (S.), Violin (Vln.), and Electric Bass (El. B.). The score is divided into three systems, each starting with a measure number and a key signature.

- System 1 (Measures 42-47):** Key signature: one flat (B-flat). Chords: C7, F, F, C, C, Bb. Lyrics: "Dar-ling so there you are with that look on your face as if you're ne-ver hurt".
- System 2 (Measures 48-53):** Key signature: one flat (B-flat). Chords: G, C, C7, F, F, Em. Lyrics: "as if you're ne-ver down Shall I be the one for you who pinches you soft-ly but".
- System 3 (Measures 54-59):** Key signature: one flat (B-flat). Chords: A, Dm, G, F, C, C. Lyrics: "sure If frown is shown, then I will know that you are no dream - er".

The score includes treble clefs for S. and Vln., and a bass clef for El. B. It features various musical notations such as triplets, slurs, and dynamic markings.

Figure 3.3. Transcription of chorus from “Eyes on Me.”

utilized in the score in several key moments between Squall and Rinoa. In another instance, the player has the option to “create” the song by choosing the correct set of instruments when planning a concert. Video 3 demonstrates some of these moments in-game.⁷¹

Other games in the *Final Fantasy* series have included a romantic pop song, such as *Final Fantasy X*. Gibbons gives several examples of other games that also include

⁷¹ Video example 3: <https://youtu.be/bQQ8y6Lhx14>.

popular song used both non-diegetically and diegetically, such as in *Grandia II* and *Lunar*.⁷² Cheng provides instances of games that have well-known recorded songs that play during opening cinematics, cutscenes, and/or credits, such as the title track “Snake Eater” from *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater*.⁷³ “Snake Eater” also falls into the romantic pop song category, although the song and the game take heavy inspiration from the James Bond genre of spy-action movies.⁷⁴ Table 3.3 summarizes other examples of romantic pop songs.

Assimilation and Expansion

Certainly, there are examples of songs in RPGs that use the female voice in ways that assimilate, expand, or break the previously discussed categories. “Voice of no Return” from *Nier: Automata* provides a great example of the ways in which a song may do this. The song involves the texted female voice, while also incorporating elements of the “Ah” song.

Composed by Keiichi Okabe, the lyrics for “Voice of no Return” were written by Emi Evans, who also performs all the vocals on this track. Table 3.4 gives the lyrics of the two verses and the chorus. Like most of the songs in *Nier: Automata*, the lyrics carry no discernable meaning. Evans describes her process for performing and recording the music of the *Nier* series as a matter of finding the right futuristic language that matches

⁷² Gibbons (2020, 14).

⁷³ Cheng (2014, 187).

⁷⁴ Certainly, there are many parallels between this phenomenon in games and in film. For an overview of how some of these same themes are seen in films (or even opera), see Bribitzer-Stull (2015).

Table 3.3. Other examples of romantic pop songs.

Track	Game	Developer	Year
“Wings”	<i>Lunar: Silver Star Story Complete</i>	Game Arts	1996
“Suteki da ne”*	<i>Final Fantasy X</i>	Square	2001
“Simple and Clean”	<i>Kingdom Hearts</i>	Square	2002
“Snake Eater”	<i>Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater</i>	Konami	2004

*Unlike “Eyes on Me” which was recorded in English for both the Japanese and Western versions of *Final Fantasy VIII*, “Suteki da ne” was recorded in Japanese for all versions of *Final Fantasy X*.

the melody written by Okabe, and then singing in made up languages and “letting the feeling of these unfamiliar sounds coming out of my mouth spark off additional inspiration to give the songs extra emotion and character.”⁷⁵ This approach to performance and composition makes sense within the aesthetics of the game, considering it takes place in a distant future. As much as language drastically changes within our lifetimes, surely thousands of years of the passage of time would render a language incomprehensible and nearly meaningless to our ears. Although the lyrics carry no meaning, they are based on pronunciations of real-world languages, and so “Voice of no Return” uses French based pronunciations to guide the sounds of the language.

“Voice of no Return” is a non-diegetic song that plays after the completion of various key side-quests involving main characters Androids 2B and 9S. Video 4 shows one instance of the song encountered in-game.⁷⁶ The use of the song falls into romantic pop song territory, but the function it carries is certainly different because of the text that

⁷⁵ Evans (2018).

⁷⁶ Video example 4: <https://youtu.be/YW3Qssn8tss>.

holds no linguistic meaning. While the female voice is stripped of texted meaning, like the “Ah” song (but in a different manner), it is not forced to project the same song persona as romantic pop songs.

Table 3.4. “Voice of no Return” lyrics.

Verse 1	Chorus	Verse 2
Fort ton fleur n'y sait A l'heure a sans abris	Et si l'ail Un peu coron Maintenir et en dormant	Contre hier balai A fait un nom premier
Meilleur contre un fil Tres doucement je tissa	Fialou c'est un abri que pleura	Homme catcheur draps sale Quois qu'il est ça dormait
Sa roumaine hache Et blanc dos grange a fluide	Coraly Contre ame Sera ti	Contre l'ane ses roues Si la fleur ça mon
Ouvre tes mains si Plus ça crie mais l'ane aussi es	Contre la s'ouvre la condor	Mia tragique Plus qu'un singe Je trois gencives Mais voui

The song directly incorporates some elements of the “Ah” song. For example, the chorus introduces a small backup vocal choir (also recorded by Emi Evans) vocalizing exclusively on “Ah” or “Oh.” A transcription of a portion of the chorus is seen in Figure 3.4. These voices support the main vocal melody which still uses the fictional French-based language. In the second verse, the backup vocals switch to vocalizing on “Tu,” which creates more rhythmic emphasis because of the plosive consonant. Unlike the female voice in the “Ah” song which acts as an object of décor, the backup “Ah” voices in “Voice of no Return” play a supportive role to the main vocal event.

While the lyrics may carry no meaning, we might be able to craft our own based on our interaction with the sounds. The musical trajectory of the entire song is one based on a linear path from intimacy to public address. With piano and guitar alone, the

The image displays a musical score for a portion of a chorus. It consists of two systems of staves. The first system (measures 24-28) includes parts for Voice (Vo.), Chorus (Ch.), Piano (Pno.), Guitar (Guit.), and Violoncello (Vc.). The second system (measures 28-32) includes parts for Voice (Vo.), Chorus (Ch.), Piano (Pno.), Guitar (Guit.), Violin (Vln.), and Violoncello (Vc.). The vocal lines feature lyrics in French, with some words in italics. The instrumental parts include piano accompaniment, guitar, and cello/violoncello. The score is written in a key signature of two sharps (D major or F# minor) and a 4/4 time signature. There are triplets marked with a '3' in several places.

Vo. 24 dor - mant *Fi - a - lou* c'est un ab - ri que pleu - ra Co - ra - ly Con - tre ame
 Ch. Ah - h O - ah O - O - ah - h
 Pno.
 Guit.
 Vc. 3

Vo. 28 *Se - ra ti* Con - tre la s'ou - vre le con - dor Con - tre hier ba -
 Ch. O - ah - h Ah - - - h Tu tu tu tu
 Pno.
 Guit.
 Vln.
 Vc. 3

Figure 3.4. Transcription of portion of chorus from “Voice of no Return.”

introduction is subdued and soft. The beginning of verse 1 adds in the solo voice with doubling at the lower octave with a cello, seen in Figure 3.5. Using Moore’s proxemic zone, this first verse represents an intimate or personal musical address.⁷⁷ The chorus

⁷⁷ Moore (2012, 187).

introduces more activity with the previously mentioned backup vocals, moving the proxemic to the social zone. Rather than retreating to a more personal zone for the next verse, as in “Eyes on Me” for instance, the address becomes completely public with the continuation of backup vocals, switching of the role of cello from octave doubling to harmonic support, and introduction of the violin doubling the vocal melody at the same octave (and later one octave higher in the second half of verse 2). Figure 3.6 shows the end of verse 2.

The image displays a musical score for the song "Voice of no Return." It consists of six staves, each representing a different instrument or vocal part. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The Solo Voice staff shows the vocal melody with the lyrics "Fort ton fleur n'y sait A" written below it. The Chorus staff is mostly empty, indicating backup vocals. The Piano staff features a complex accompaniment with eighth and sixteenth notes. The Acoustic Guitar staff has a rhythmic pattern with eighth notes and some slurs. The Violin and Violoncello staves are mostly empty, suggesting they are playing the vocal melody or providing harmonic support.

Figure 3.5. Transcription of intro and beginning of verse 1 from “Voice of no Return.”

How may we relate the text to this musical narrative? Because of the basis of the text in the French language, I hear the backup vocals in verse 2 as expressing “Tu,” or the French pronoun for “You.” Additionally, it is hard not to connote the “Je” sound in the last line of the verse with the French pronoun for “I.” With this evidence, we may be able

The image displays a musical score for the end of verse 2 from the song "Voice of no Return." The score is arranged in a grand staff format, featuring seven staves: Voice (Vo.), Chorus (Ch.), Piano (Pno.), Guitar (Guit.), Violin (Vln.), and Violoncello (Vc.). The music is written in a key signature of two sharps (D major) and a 4/4 time signature. The lyrics are in French. The first system (measures 44-45) includes the lyrics: "que Plus qu'un singe Je trois gen -". The second system (measures 46-48) includes the lyrics: "cives Mais voui". The Chorus part consists of a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, with the word "tu" repeated. The Piano part provides harmonic support with chords and a melodic line. The Guitar part features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The Violin and Violoncello parts provide additional harmonic support with sustained notes and chords. The score concludes with a double bar line and repeat signs.

Figure 3.6. Transcription of the end of verse 2 from “Voice of no Return.”

to label the textual narrative as one loosely based on BaileyShea’s model of distance to intimacy.⁷⁸ This appears to be in opposition to the musical narrative previously described:

⁷⁸ BaileyShea (2014).

one that moves from intimacy to distance. However, we can conceive the heightened musical texture towards the end of the song as supporting this projected intimate narrative, whatever the message conveyed by a text we cannot comprehend may be. Perhaps the text signifies some sort of spiritual message, since the context in the story is machines that threw themselves into the canyon and “found heaven.” Such an interpretation encompasses one of the core themes of the game having to do with freedom in death, a message that 2B understands at the end of the conversation when she walks away.

Conclusion

With all this discussion about feminine voices, one may wonder how male voices have been used in RPGs. Typically, male voices are used as part of a chorus, often cast in non-diegetic moments. *Skyrim* provides a great example of this, with its title track composed of a large male chorus and percussion. This use of male voices falls under what Winifred Phillips calls the “elite orchestra”: epic orchestral music that uses a choir.⁷⁹ However, this becomes a masculinized trope when one connects the epic scale of the music with the target male audience of games such as *Skyrim*.

In short, male voices are not used in the same ways as female voices in RPGs. I have not come across any “Ah” songs using masculine voices, or any romantic pop songs performed by (or personified from) the male perspective. The absence of male voices in these categories only strengthens the argument that *feminine* voices are solely treated as “voice objects” in the ways that I have described.

⁷⁹ Phillips (2014, 67).

In different ways, the agency of the feminine voice is challenged when considering the “Ah” song and the romantic pop song. In the first case, semantics are stripped from the female voice, yet attention is demanded by the power of the voice because often the voice can transcend linguistic meaning. Even without words, it conveys color and location. Romantic pop songs, on the other hand, still limit the agency of the female voice. With text, the voice is forced to project intimacy and a heteronormative coupling.

The categories I discussed demonstrate that the untexted and texted female voice in role-playing games is often used as a non-agential decorative device. Whether it decorates a location or a typical romantic narrative, the voice is often limited in its functional roles. So why have video game composers utilized the feminine voice in this narrow manner? Perhaps, as Adorno claims, it stems from the simultaneous anxiety and fascination caused by the disembodied female voice.

Songs like the one discussed from *Nier: Automata* demonstrate ways to incorporate and break past these narrow usages of female voice. Wordless feminine voices can be more than auditory décor. Texted female vocals can convey much more than heteronormative clichés, even in the absence of semantics.

CHAPTER IV

MUSICAL THEMES IN ROLE-PLAYING GAMES

Introduction

In this chapter, I look at musical themes. Following the method outlined by Jason Brame, I use reductive analysis to examine thematic material and draw semiotic and potentially gendered meanings. I seek to answer the question of what themes are associated with what characters and in-game settings, how are these themes musically constructed, what may these themes signify, and how they may be musically gendered. This chapter will primarily focus on the music of *Nier: Automata*. My tool for this task will be reductive analysis.

Many authors have commented upon the relationship between musical theme and game narrative. Steven Reale (2011) traces an *idée fixe* theme across several levels in the game *Katamari Damacy*, connecting it to narrative themes of relationships between father and son, analog and digital, and childhood and terror. The game's music is a great example of non-diegetic non-dynamic game music that can still have a profound effect on player interactivity. Reale argues that transformations of the *idée fixe* across several in-game tracks uncover a darker narrative initially couched in a cutesy aesthetic. In this case, a singular theme represents a variety of narrative functions.

Tim Summers (2020) argues that the video game *Mother* uses music, specifically qualities of musical style, to assert emotional-affective influence over the player. Ninten, the protagonist character, investigates supernatural occurrences related to objects or characters that produce short melodic phrases. The goal of the game is to collect eight of

these phrases and complete the melody. Itoi, the primary game developer, wanted to connect to audiences not through new RPG mechanics, but through a change in aesthetics. In many ways, players connect with the characters and the game world through narrative reliance on music. Summers claims that *Mother* employs a musical aesthetic of naivete. This style is mostly song-like legato melodic lines sitting within a comfortable tessitura for the human voice, produced by square waves. In *Mother*, musical theme is the goal of gameplay and takes on a primarily ludic role.

Julianne Grasso (2020) examines video game music as it exists through time and how the narrative organizes and controls events facilitated by play. In general, she shows how music mediates time and how that mediation helps us more generally conceptualize player engagement in the ludonarrative fictions of video games. Video games have two simultaneous timelines: the timeline of the player's interactivity and the timeline of the events and narratives taking place within the game. Music in games can signal events in the game narratives by marking those changes with musical cues (for example, exploration leads to a fight leads to victory leads to exploration again in *Final Fantasy IV*). Grasso's analysis of the music and narrative in *Final Fantasy IV* demonstrates that different theme types can facilitate different types of narrative temporality *and* ludic engagement.

A number of authors relate topic analysis to narrative functions in games. Wesley Bradford (2020) examines the narrative structure of *Breath of the Wild* while grouping various contrasting musical elements into emerging topics that are key elements within the game's narrative structure. Essentially, he shows that musical topics reveal a narrative conflict between machine and nature. Sean Atkinson (2019) explores the "soaring" topic

through multiple media and cultural sources and applies it to *Skyward Sword* and *Final Fantasy IV*. Topics are a correlation of music with specific occurrences in the story, while tropes are specific instances in which that correlation is made. The soaring topic features ascending fifths, running scales, and a preference for the Lydian mode. The uses of this topic in these games are a trope, Atkinson claims, since they go against these norms in some ways, allowing them to participate in the game's narrative. Stefan Greenfield-Casas (2017) traces the role of a recurring diegetic theme in *Final Fantasy X* which evokes a topic that has religious and spiritual connotations.

Other approaches exist for combining musical theme with game narrative. Megan Lavengood (2019) uses *Sonic the Hedgehog 3* to compare timbre across soundtracks for two different levels. She argues that timbre can evoke specific intertextual and extra-musical associations for a listener and attempts to show how timbre can enhance a narrative in game music. The polystylism in the soundtrack creates what Lavengood calls "genre-topics" which are defined by timbre, revealed through a spectrogram analysis. Genre-topics can aid in narrative and player engagement, even in a game like *Sonic the Hedgehog* that has minimal narrative elements.

Finally, Jason Brame (2011) uses modified Schenkerian analysis to demonstrate thematic continuity across the overworld themes from several *Legend of Zelda* games. His reductive analysis reveals common thematic treatment across many entries in the series. Intervals of fifths and thirds are prevalent, appearing through leaps and scalar outlines. Seeking meaning through semiotics, he claims that these themes represent the hero's quest. The themes are all tied to in-game exploration areas, and other themes that

use intervals of a fifth represent accomplishment, such as collecting in-game items that progress the narrative.

Pausing for a moment on Brame's analysis, an important point needs to be added. Brame claims that overworld exploration themes, the signifier, represent the hero's quest, the signified. Whose quest, and what that quest entails, deserves some comment. In every mainline entry in *The Legend of Zelda* series, the player-controlled hero Link is tasked with saving the world. Along the way, he must also save the princess Zelda, who depending on the narrative, is either sleeping because of a magical spell, captured, or hiding in exile. Thus, I would argue that the hero's quest signified by the music that Brame identifies is actually a masculinized phenomenon. This falls into the narrative trope of the masculine hero who saves the feminine lead who has been stripped of most of her agency. Brame's analysis reveals that music can participate in this trope as well.

My contribution to the conversation about the role of musical theme in game narrative will mostly follow along the lines of Brame's approach. Through reductive analysis, I will show that the music of *Nier: Automata* contains many of the same techniques described by Brame: melodic reoccurrence between themes and a structural preference for the interval of a fifth. However, the fifths in the music of *Nier: Automata* do not signify the same thing that Brame claims, or at the very least, the signified object is cast in a different context due to narrative differences between *Nier: Automata* and *The Legend of Zelda* series. As I will show, the fifths and fourths in *Nier: Automata* represent a different version of the hero's quest, specifically 2B's quest. The musical treatment of theme through unique harmonic settings, which changes the context of a typical masculine trope in video games, supports her quest.

But first, an explanation is required as to why I am using prolongational analysis for this task is required. Philip Ewell (2020) recoupled the link between Heinrich Schenker's racist beliefs and his music theories. Thus, Schenker's hierarchical view of music can be tied to his hierarchical view of people.⁸⁰ Though this is problematic, it does not mean music theorists should stop using Schenker's theories, as Ewell writes. Let me offer some justifications for using Schenker's theories in the repertoire under study. First, I intend to directly compare my analysis with Brame's work, in which he uses a modified prolongational analysis consisting primarily of middleground sketches. My graphs are all middleground structures, albeit with some added details compared to Brame's reductions. Second, I do believe that this tool is best suited for the task at hand. Prolongational analysis is quite effective at revealing motives at different structural levels and showing how they interact with the harmony. Finally, as Christopher Segall (2020) recommends, I opt to refer to Schenker's technique of analysis as *prolongational analysis* rather than *Schenkerian analysis*. I do not intend to completely dissociate a problematic figure from his contributions to music theory, as that would be in direct opposition to Ewell's recommendations. However, it is odd that we still refer to prolongational analysis using Schenker's name, but roman numeral analysis is generally not called "Weberian analysis" (after Gottfried Weber and other nineteenth-century scale-step music theorists). As Segall argues, this renaming may shift our attention to the bigger picture of what prolongational analysis contributes for listeners, musicians, and analysts.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Ewell (2020, 4.3.7).

⁸¹ Segall (2020, 185).

Musical Themes in *Nier: Automata*

“City Ruins,” from *Nier: Automata*, is an exploration-type theme. This cue (or several variations of it)⁸² plays when the player explores and completes quests in the City Ruins zone of the in-game map. Because of the size of the zone and the number of narrative events that take place there, this is a track the player encounters quite frequently.

The loudest dynamic version of this track is scored for solo female vocals, piano, acoustic guitar, percussion, and a small string orchestra. Two sections (with an introduction) comprise the form of the track. This can be described as either a simple binary form, or as a verse-chorus form because of the inclusion of texted vocals. In either case, the form endlessly loops because of the looping nature of music cues in video games that are not tied to narrative events. I will opt to refer to each section as A and B.⁸³

A middleground prolongational graph of section A is given in figure 4.1. Several important points are seen in this reduction. First, $\hat{5}$ is prolonged through alteration of i and VI^7 chords. Melodically, that prolongation occurs through leaps of fifths from and to the tonic. These melodic fifths occur over both the i chord and the VI^7 chord. In measures 17 and 18, another melodic fifth leap occurs over a VI^7 . Second, section A is essentially a descent from $\hat{5}$ to $\hat{3}$. This ties into the open nature of the form which is a continuous

⁸² Many of the tracks in *Nier: Automata* have two or three different dynamic versions that play under different in-game circumstances. These tracks typically vary texture, orchestration, and melodic presentation of the same theme. For more details about adaptive music as it relates to worldbuilding, see Smith (2020).

⁸³ From a formal and structural viewpoint, the fundamental line of “City Ruins” does not ideally fit into either category of simple binary or verse-chorus. This is due to the isolated motivic material in each section as well as the looping aspect of this cue.

repetition of sections A and B. As we will see in section B, there is no melodic closure coinciding with $\hat{1}$ supported by tonic harmony. Finally, the harmony in this section is diatonic relative to the B-flat minor scale. There are two versions of the sixth scale degree, creating both VI^7 and IV^6 chords. But iv and v^7 chords support the descent from $\hat{4}$ to $\hat{3}$, which would suggest a Dorian mode throughout this section.

Figure 4.1. Middleground structure of section A from “City Ruins.”

Section B continues some of these same ideas. A middleground reduction is seen in figure 4.2. There are fewer leaps of fifths in this section, as the melody reduces to a mainly stepwise motion. In measures 30–31 there is a melodic leap of a fourth over the III^7 chord. Measures 35–37 melodically outline the tonic triad through descent by thirds, while measures 38–39 melodically outline the secondary dominant of V^7 through ascending thirds. Section B is a melodic descent from $\hat{3}$ to an implied $\hat{2}$. Together with section A, the entire melodic descent can be read as an incomplete five-line.

Harmonically, section B descends by alternating major and minor seventh chords which are diatonic for the most part (excluding measure 33). In summary, “City Ruins” melodically consists of ascending and descending fifths, presented both through leaps and triadic thirds.

The image shows a musical score for section B of "City Ruins". It consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The key signature has three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat). The time signature is not explicitly shown but appears to be 4/4. The score is divided into measures 25 through 40. Above the treble staff, there are melodic lines with slurs and ties. Above the bass staff, there are harmonic lines with slurs and ties. Below the bass staff, there are chord symbols: VI⁷, v⁷, iv⁷, III⁷, bII⁷, i, ii^{ø7}/V, V⁷/V, and V⁶⁻⁷. Above the treble staff, there are two accents: a 3/3 accent over measures 36-37 and a 2/2 accent over measures 38-39. The score ends with a double bar line at measure 40.

Figure 4.2. Middleground structure of section B from “City Ruins.”

“Machine Village” is another track tied to a specific location, the in-game Machine Village. This cue plays when the player enters the village and interacts with the Machine denizens. As discussed in Chapter III, “Machine Village” forms a *couleur locale*. The track is sparsely scored for marimba, two acoustic guitars, and child’s voice which is often doubled by a heavily processed robotic child’s voice. The form of the track, like “City Ruins,” is divided into two sections which I refer to as A and B.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ The fundamental line of “Machine Village” resembles *da capo aria* form because the A section features a complete descent and the B section prolongs $\hat{5}$. However, like “City Ruins,” “Machine Village” loops constantly until the player leaves the in-game area.

A middleground reduction of “Machine Village” is seen in figure 4.3. Section A has a clear descent from $\hat{5}$ to $\hat{1}$ supported by tonic and dominant harmonies. Section B prolongs $\hat{5}$ with alternating i and VI^7 chords. Melodically, leaps of fifths and fourths support the prolongation of $\hat{5}$ in both sections. As shown in “City Ruins,” the leaps of fifths and fourths occur on i and VI^7 chords in the A section. Measures 29–32 melodically leap from C to the lower G, while measures 37–40 melodically leap from C to the upper G. In section B, $\hat{5}$ is prolonged by a leap of a fifth down from G to C. Keeping in mind that these fifths occur in the solo child voice, many of the melodic techniques described here are similar to the fifths occurring in the solo female voice in “City Ruins.”

The figure displays two musical staves. The upper staff, representing Section A, spans measures 25 to 53. The treble clef contains a melodic line with notes C4, B3, A3, G3, F3, E3, D3, C3, B2, A2, G2, F2, E2, D2, C2. Above the staff, scale degrees are indicated: $\hat{5}$ above C4, $\hat{5}$ above G3, and $\hat{4}$, $\hat{3}$, $\hat{2}$, $\hat{1}$ above C3, B2, A2, and G2 respectively. The bass clef contains a harmonic line with notes C3, B2, A2, G2, F2, E2, D2, C2, B1, A1, G1, F1, E1, D1, C1. Below the staff, Roman numerals are provided: Cm: i, VI⁷, I, VI⁷, iv, v⁷, i, iv, v⁷, i. Measure numbers 25, 29, 33, 37, 41, 43, 45, 49, 51, and 53 are marked below the staff.

The lower staff, representing Section B, spans measures 57 to 71. The treble clef contains a melodic line with notes G4, F4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3, G3, F3, E3, D3, C3, B2, A2, G2, F2, E2, D2, C2. Above the staff, scale degrees are indicated: $\hat{5}$ above G4. The bass clef contains a harmonic line with notes C3, B2, A2, G2, F2, E2, D2, C2, B1, A1, G1, F1, E1, D1, C1. Below the staff, Roman numerals are provided: Cm: i, VI⁷. Measure numbers 57, 63, 65, and 71 are marked below the staff.

Figure 4.3. Middleground reduction of section A (above) and section B (below) from “Machine Village.”

“Amusement Park” is another exploration-type theme tied to the in-game Amusement Park location. The loudest dynamic version is scored for solo female vocals, guitar, percussion (including glockenspiel), and string quartet. The form is another two-part construction.⁸⁵ A middleground reduction of the A section is given in figure 4.4.

Figure 4.4. Middleground reduction of section A from “Amusement Park.”

The track is in the key of G minor, but modulates to the key of C minor at the end of section A. The first melodic material is a leap of a fifth from D to A before $\hat{3}$ is reached. Melodic leaps of fourths appear in measures 18–19. In measures 21–23, leaps of fifths and fourths appear over bII^7 and i chords. In measure 27, a fundamental line transference coincides with the modulation to C minor.

A middleground reduction of the B section of “Amusement Park” is given in figure 4.5. The previous tonic G is prolonged as $\hat{5}$ in section B. Melodic leaps of fifths to the lower C with ascending scale steps are the main way in which this prolongation is

⁸⁵ The fundamental line of “Amusement Park” most closely resembles typical structures of simple binary forms. Section A begins a process finished by section B. Although, the modulation to C minor would most likely appear at the beginning of the B section rather than the end of the A section in a typical simple binary. Again, “Amusement Park” is another looping form.

achieved. Harmonically, the bass descends by step in the manner of a lament bass. A modulation back to G minor at the end of the B section concludes the three-line started in section A. As with the previously discussed tracks, the melodic fifths and fourths are presented in the solo female voice.

Figure 4.5. Middleground reduction of section B from “Amusement Park.”

My final example from *Nier: Automata* is “Vague Hope (Cold Rain).” This cue takes on a more crucial narrative function since it appears several times in the various endings of the game. Like the other examples discussed in this chapter, the form of the song is in two parts, which I refer to as A and B. Figure 4.6 shows a middleground reduction of the second phrase of section A. The melody in this portion is mostly stepwise when reduced down, but there are a few leaps of fifths, such as in measure 29 where the fifth is harmonized by VI7 and iv9.

Figure 4.7 gives a middleground reduction of the entire B section. Both sections show complete structural descents. Measures 56–60 reveal a number of fifth leaps between the tonic fifth. However, the harmony utilizes chromatic and diatonic chords

built on the sixth scale degree. Yet again, the structural fifths are supported by non-tonic harmonies.

Figure 4.6. Middleground reduction of a portion of section A from “Vague Hope (Cold Rain).”

Figure 4.7. Middleground reduction of section B from “Vague Hope (Cold Rain).”

The four musical cues discussed here are not the only songs in *Nier: Automata* that feature melodic intervals of fifths and fourths against a variety of harmonic backdrops. Many other songs in the game employ this same technique, such as “Vague Hope” and “Memories of Dust,” as well as boss-battle music cues like “A Beautiful Song” and “Possessed by Disease.” So, what does this common approach to musical theme in *Nier: Automata* mean?

Brame argues that the fifths and fourths in *The Legend of Zelda* series are tied to the Overworld areas of the games and signify the hero's quest for that reason. A similar case could be made for *Nier: Automata*, as these songs I have discussed are similarly tied to important areas related to narrative progression or player exploration. However, the difference here comes down to the presentation of this common musical motive. The fifths and fourths in *Zelda* usually appear in brass instruments (or a MIDI equivalent sound) and occur on tonic or dominant harmonies. As I have shown, the fifths and fourths in *Nier: Automata* typically appear in solo vocals and occur on all sorts of tonic prolongational harmonies.

The fifths and fourths in *Nier: Automata* represent a different version of the hero's quest. Musically, the context has changed, and the usual presentation of a masculine heroic thematic structure is subverted. Like the comments made about texture, harmony, and orchestration, musical theme in *Nier: Automata* subverts the gendered musical stereotypes initiated by earlier RPGs. The hero's quest is 2B's quest, and the musical treatment of theme in *Nier: Automata* supports that quest.

CHAPTER V
GENDERED LUDOMUSICAL DISSONANCE

Introduction

In this final chapter, I combine my observations about musical representations of gender in RPGs from the previous four chapters and cast a critical lens on the totality of gender representation through three main modalities specific to video games: audio, moving images, and player interactivity. Drawing on women's and gender scholarship, masculinity studies in video games, and gendered tropes in video games, I examine visual and interactive gendered tropes in the *Final Fantasy* and *Dark Souls* series. Finally, utilizing Michiel Kamp's concept of "ludomusical dissonance," I examine the conflict between the various representations of gender in *Nier: Automata*.

A core tenet of women's and gender studies is the idea that gender is performance. Gender theorist Judith Butler (1999, 8) proposes, "whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally constructed: hence, gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex." Jack Halberstam (1998, 9) explores the concept of women performing masculinity. On female masculinity, Halberstam says, "I am using the topic of female masculinity to explore a queer subject position that can successfully challenge hegemonic models of gender conformity." Thus, gender is a performance that conforms to or subverts accepted cultural norms.

This concept of gender performance can be applied to representations of gender in video games too. In masculinities studies, Gregory Blackburn (2018) explores the ways in which the "soldier identity" in games is constructed in highly gendered ways that is

situated in our cultural understating of militarized masculinity. He examines how militarized masculinity is constructed in the series of *Call of Duty* games, how this construction supports the default conflation between military and masculine ideals, and how traditional entrenched aspects of masculinity are both reinforced and challenged throughout the series. Rebecca Waldie (2018) critically analyses the horror video game genre using an intersectional lens that considers the impact of hegemonic power dynamics on the representation of masculinity. She addresses conventional archetypes of masculinity such as the protector, the jock, and the nice guy as they relate to representations of hegemonic masculinity in *Until Dawn*.

Additionally, considering gender as performance reveals gendered tropes in regard to how characters are represented on screen in video games. Anita Sarkeesian created a YouTube video series titled *Tropes vs. Women in Games* which examines various gender tropes in video games. Eighteen episodes were released between 2013 and 2017. The series examines a variety of topics in detail. For example, “Damsel in Distress” (2013) explores the trope of the passive female that must be rescued by the male hero. “Lingerie is not Armor” (2016) examines sexualized outfits adorned by female characters and considers some differences between sexualization and empowerment. “Body Language & the Male Gaze” (2016) shows how character animations can sexualize female characters, and how some games are designed around the heterosexual male gaze.

As evidenced by the previous four chapters, I correlate music performance and gender performance in video games. As Christine Boone claims in the context of popular song mashups, “when one performs music, one is also performing gender simultaneously.

Both the gender expressed by the performer and the musical features of a song can impact this dual performance.”⁸⁶ Now, I wish to consider the interactions of simultaneous gender performance through music, images, and player interactivity in RPGs.

Analytic Framework

My framework for engaging with gender in video games will utilize the gendered tropes outlined by Sarkeesian, Blackburn, and Waldie. I seek to examine to what extent a specific game includes, engages with, or subverts these tropes. Often, the representation of gender is complex and multi-faceted. A specific game may utilize some tropes in a typical fashion but subvert others in various ways.

Additionally, I draw upon Michiel Kamp’s (2020) concept of “ludomusical dissonance.” A “ludonarrative dissonance” is when there is a contradiction between a game’s story and its mechanics and gameplay. A ludomusical dissonance is a contradiction between the music’s narrative function and the gameplay. Kamp examines the musical trope of two tutti long-held chords that signal a “horizon broadening” in video games. Specifically, in *Diablo III*, the player experiences these overly “epic” chords as out of place or inappropriate in relation to the repetitive gameplay loop. I expand this concept to include a gendered ludomusical dissonance, wherein there are contradictions between the functions of the music, gameplay, and moving images in terms of gender representation. Similarly, a gendered ludomusical consonance may be achieved when the functions of music, gameplay, and image coincide in regard to gender performance.

⁸⁶ Boone (2018, [2.2]).

In the next sections, I examine this concept in *Final Fantasy VII*, *Dark Souls*, and *Nier: Automata*. *Final Fantasy VII* engages with several standard tropes as described by Sarkeesian, and as demonstrated in chapter III, likewise engages with standard gendered musical tropes in RPGs. *Dark Souls* features a wide range of player-controlled gender performance through its character creation and armor customization systems, but like *Final Fantasy VII*, its music utilizes gendered music tropes as described in chapters III and IV. Finally, a gendered ludomusical dissonance is found in *Nier: Automata* because of its music that subverts previously established tropes and use of typical gendered visual and interactive tropes as outlined by Sarkeesian and Waldie. Table 5.1 visually summarizes the various configurations of visual, interactive, and musical representations of gender in these examples. The columns of the table summarize the degree to which each game conforms to or subverts gendered musical tropes as I have outlined in previous chapters. Similarly, the rows of the table describe the degree to which each game utilizes or subverts gendered visual and interactive tropes as described throughout the current chapter.

Table 5.1. Examples of configurations of ludomusical dissonance and consonance.

	Gendered Musical Tropes	Subverting Music Tropes
Gendered Visual/Interactive Tropes	<i>Final Fantasy VII</i>	<i>Nier: Automata</i> (Ludomusical Dissonance)
Subverting Visual/Interactive Tropes	<i>Dark Souls</i>	<i>Undertale</i> * (Ludomusical Consonance)

*Although not discussed in this thesis, I believe *Undertale* is a fine example of an RPG that subverts both visual and musical gendered tropes under discussion.

Gender in *Final Fantasy* and *Dark Souls*

Several character designs in *Final Fantasy VII* conform with gendered stereotypes. For example, an image of the female character Tifa standing in front of the male character Cloud is given in figure 5.1. Despite the low resolution of the polygonal graphics representative of the PlayStation era of gaming, one can still see the exaggerated physical features of the character. Additionally, for someone who uses martial arts to attack enemies in physical combat, Tifa does not have too much protective clothing, especially compared to Cloud who stands behind her with most of his body covered by some amount of armor. Sarkeesian notes that many female characters in video games are placed into impractical clothing compared to the dangerous situations they must encounter.⁸⁷ On the other hand, figure 5.2 shows the character design of Aerith from *Final Fantasy VII*. Aerith is dressed and designed far more conservatively than Tifa. Perhaps this reflects the differences between the backgrounds of the characters: Tifa was forced to survive on the streets of the city Midgar while Aerith lived a sheltered life with her mother. Additionally, the clothing differences between these characters may also come down to their character archetype. Tifa is a female heroine while Aerith typically offers spiritual guidance. It must be noted at this point that design choices regarding how a character, looks, dresses, and acts are completely left up to the game developers. Additionally, as outlined in chapter I, developers often develop their games for a specific target audience, which is usually heterosexual males for RPGs.

⁸⁷ Sarkeesian (2016).



Figure 5.1. Character designs of Tifa and Cloud from *Final Fantasy VII*.



Figure 5.2. Character design of Aerith from *Final Fantasy VII*.

At some point in *Final Fantasy VII*, Tifa takes a more active role in the story. Throughout the game, the player controls Cloud as they complete quests and battle enemies. However, Cloud becomes incapacitated due to past mental trauma and scientific experimentation, leaving Tifa to come to his rescue. Tifa helps Cloud accept his past and eventually leads him back on the path to vanquishing his rival Sephiroth. This might be considered a subversion of the damsel in distress trope wherein female characters are placed in perilous situations that they cannot escape from alone. Waldie discusses the protector, an archetypal character of hierarchal masculinity whose role is to safeguard his comrades.⁸⁸ In this case, Tifa may take on that role of protector as she becomes the one who protects him from danger. Additionally, this is a moment of the helpful Damsel described by Sarkeesian, who sometimes takes a more active role in aiding the hero on his quest.⁸⁹ However, the opposite take on an established trope only occupies a single narrative beat.⁹⁰

Dark Souls features a similar range of gender norms and subversions of typical tropes. The player is offered a wide range of gender expression through the use of character creation and armor customization systems. Seen in Figure 5.3, the player makes a variety of choices regarding how their character looks at the start of the game. Additionally, some options are controlled by a sliding scale existing along a continuum (such as “hormones”) rather than existing in a discrete binary choice (such as “gender”).

⁸⁸ Waldie (2018, 72).

⁸⁹ Sarkeesian (2013).

⁹⁰ Interestingly, Tifa’s outfit does not change during this in-game sequence of events.

The player chooses either male or female and can customize some aspects of body and facial features. Additionally, the player collects armor and outfits and can adorn the character with a variety of clothing. This interactive control over gender expression allows for many possibilities, including male characters wearing dresses and female characters adorning heavy plate armor. Furthermore, unlike the obvious difference in types of clothing for male and female characters seen in *Final Fantasy VII*, clothing sets initially are, and remain, the same regardless of the gender of the character chosen at the beginning of the game.⁹¹



Figure 5.3. An example of character creation at the start of *Dark Souls*.

⁹¹ Despite the wide array of player customization when it comes to character creation in *Dark Souls*, the reactions from the various non-player characters remains the same despite how a character looks or dresses. Non-player characters address the player character using pronouns that match the gender chosen at the beginning of the game, and no non-player characters ever comment on the clothing the player chooses to wear.

Some non-player character designs in *Dark Souls* reinforce gender stereotypes in video games, while others read against the grain. Figure 5.4 shows the design of the character and boss Gwyndolin, whose musical theme was described in chapter II. Seen in flowing robes and wielding the magic of the moon, the gender of the character is intentionally couched in ambiguity since the character was born a son but raised as a daughter. Figure 5.5 shows the design of the character Gwynevere, sister to Gwyndolin. With exaggerated physical proportions and the pose the character is placed in, Sarkeesian would argue that the design of Gwynevere is rooted in stylistic sexual pleasure rather than reality. With the male gaze, art manifests around a perceived straight male audience.



Figure 5.4. Design of Gwyndolin from *Dark Souls*.



Figure 5.5. Design of Gwynevere from *Dark Souls*.

As shown in these examples from *Dark Souls* and *Final Fantasy VII*, a wide array of gender representation exists in RPGs. These representations can be complex and sometimes contradictory, so it can be challenging to place these games in distinctive categories like I did in table 5.1. Nonetheless, the music of both games conforms to gendered stereotypes I outlined in chapters I–IV. The addition of music to these visuals renders the representation of gender even more complex.

Gendered Ludomusical Dissonance in *Nier: Automata*

How do the audio and visual elements compare in *Nier: Automata*? While the music subverts our understanding of gender representation in video games, the visual

elements conflict with that view. Consider video 5, which juxtaposes the introductions to the main playable characters 2B and 9S.⁹² Striking differences present themselves in the ways 2B and 9S enter their respective scenes, whilst showcasing differences in character design. 2B launches through the air because of her compromised Flight Unit, while 9S rescues 2B in his intact Flight Unit even though she did not need his assistance. This moment constitutes a clear demonstration of power dynamics in who-saves-who when 9S swoops in to “save the princess.”

Despite this, many moments in the game place 2B as the savior of 9S, flipping the damsel in distress trope on its head. A striking visual image of this subversion is seen in figure 5.6. Figure 5.6, the cover art of the game disc box, is one of the first images a potential player of the game sees when they go to buy it from a store or download it digitally. Here, 2B is seen carrying a limp 9S. The visual image is clearly meant to show the confidence and power of character 2B, as well as her relationship with 9S.

Hypersexualization of 2B’s design deserves comment. Hypersexualization occurs when character designed primarily for their sexual characteristics while other things about the character are often secondary. Sarkeesian discusses hypersexualization of female video game characters using the marketing of *Perfect Dark* as a case in point; the focus on the main female character lies on how she looks and what she wears, not on her role as powerful secret agent.⁹³ Similarly in *Nier:Automata*, 2B’s presentation in the game primarily consists of an object of sexual desire, not a deadly combat unit designed for war. Additionally, it seems questionable how an Android effectively fights in high

⁹² Video example 5: https://youtu.be/_zE93oiuLac.

⁹³ Sarkeesian (2016).



Figure 5.6. Box cover art for *Nier: Automata*.

heels and a skirt. In a published interview, when pressed about a tweet revealing he

designed 2B this way because he “likes sexy ladies,” game director Yoko Taro said:

Don't straight men like cute girls? Isn't that common knowledge? Before we released the game, on Twitter, because so many people were sending me 2B fan art, I said "Send me a zip file of all your erotic fan art!" When I tweeted that out, my number of Twitter followers jumped from 20,000 to 60,000 just with that one Tweet. I actually think it's because I did something that's more of a taboo in the western world where I talked about sexuality or gender that openly on Twitter, but that's actually...so, I do know that what I said did not just create positive buzz and there's some negative buzz around it as well, but I feel like it kind of has to do with the Japanese culture where we're not too strict about gender and sexuality and being more open about talking about those things.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Taro (2019).

Taro merely designed 2B this way to target a specific demographic, confirming arguments I outlined in this chapter and chapter I.⁹⁵ Can sexualization of female characters actually empower female characters? Often, the answer that question is no, since sexualization does not equal power: it reinforces harmful gender stereotypes (such as the value of women being determined by their sexual availability to straight men).⁹⁶ Additionally, the sexualization described here in video games is manufactured for and presumed for the straight male player.

Portrayals of male fantasy within interactive portions of the game remain more problematic. Video 6 demonstrates the Self-Destruct function in the game for 2B and 9S (**content warning**: sexual abuse, sexism/misogyny, voyeurism).⁹⁷ Contained within an interactive context specific to the medium of video games, this example perfectly exemplifies the male gaze described by Mark Cruea in the framework of the game *Bioshock Infinite*.⁹⁸ Just the plausibility alone, not even considering the application, of the actions seen in video example 6 reduce 2B to an object for the male gaze to sexualize and fetishize.

⁹⁵ Placing my interpretation of Taro's words in Japanese culture more broadly may be more appropriate, which may include Superflat art, "moe" character archetypes in anime, and critiques of otaku sexuality. Nonetheless, I still believe that these words reveal some of Taro's true intentions when it comes to 2B's design, and the game was localized for a worldwide market.

⁹⁶ Sarkeesian (2016).

⁹⁷ Video example 6: <https://youtu.be/8B3AUcWUOE8>. At one point in video 6, the camera attempts to pan up 2B's skirt, and she swats the camera away. This is actually a developer implemented "achievement" wherein the player must attempt this action ten times in a row to unlock a virtual trophy. Alternatively, at the end of the game the player may elect to spend in-game currency to unlock every trophy.

⁹⁸ Cruea (2018, 105).

My final example combines visual observations with a few of my previous musical observations discussed in chapter IV. Video 7 shows a clip of gameplay from one of the five possible main endings of *Nier: Automata* (**content warning:** violence).⁹⁹ The track that accompanies this section of gameplay is “Vague Hope (Cold Rain),” which I discussed in chapter IV. To recall, I claim this musical cue pushes back against gendered expectations specifically because of its structural fifths appearing on non-tonic harmonies, and more generally because of its approach to texture as well as inclusion of an intimate ensemble including solo female vocals. Certainly, “Vague Hope (Cold Rain)” is more subdued compared to comparable ending music of other RPGs, perhaps due to emotional content of the story. Yet the visual elements belie how I claim the music functions in this instance. 2B appears in shatters after the final battle, her outfit visibly torn to pieces, while 9S appears unscathed in terms of his clothing. Additionally, when the cinematic cutscene begins, the camera appears to pan more on 2B’s body than the scene involving both characters, again perhaps reducing her to a visual object and not a strong character with emotional depth. To me, this moment of gameplay perfectly captures the gendered ludomusical dissonance I claim *Nier: Automata* exhibits.

Conclusion

A conflict exists. While the musical elements of *Nier: Automata* subvert the gendered expectations in the RPG genre as described in chapters I–IV, the visual and interactive elements certainly conform to established norms in video games. Thus, we retain a complicated overall understanding of gender representation in *Nier: Automata*.

⁹⁹ Video example 7: <https://youtu.be/8-ogzaMyRio>.

While *Nier: Automata* is only a single example out of an endless sea of games, it remains a crucial case for study. It showcases what happens when a disjunct relationship exists between the audio, visual, and interactive elements in terms of gender representation. Moreover, *Nier: Automata* represents an impressive example of the complex ways we construct representations of gender in multimedia contexts, and how we might be able to (re)shape those representations in future media.

I hope these remarks lead to more conversation that engages with how we consume and construct music in video games and how we represent gender through audio and visual elements. These observations reveal that, like other musical genres, musically-gendered meanings, representations, and codes exist in video games. As Susan McClary notes, these codes are both “informed by the prevalent attitudes of their time” and “strikingly resilient.”¹⁰⁰ Uncovering, dissecting, and discussing these codes, in relation to the visual and interactive codes, provides continued scrutiny of representation of gender in video games which transforms unnecessarily gendered perceptions.

¹⁰⁰ McClary (1991, 8).

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

It is no secret that the video game industry codifies gendered stereotypes, which appear in marketing campaigns promoting games to specific audiences, in mechanics and visual illustrations of characters in games, and in various video game genres. In this thesis, I scrutinized the construction of gender in the musical elements of soundtracks in role-playing games. Expanding upon Michael Austin's work (2018) which examines gendered uses of instrumentation and orchestration in role-playing games, I examined how musical gender construction compares with the visual and interactive representations of gender on the screen.

Using *Nier: Automata* as the primary case, I employed a variety of techniques to demonstrate how many musical parameters subvert typical gendered expectations established by other role-playing games like *Final Fantasy VII* and *Dark Souls*. Chapter I laid out the basis of my arguments, demonstrating how many RPGs are marketed to and designed for a straight male audience. In chapter II, I examined how many boss-battle music cues in *Nier: Automata* showcase harmonic progressions employing slide transformations (for instance, E minor–Eb major). Moments like these replace the historically-masculinized aeolian “victory cadence” (bVI–bVII–I) first established in the original *Super Mario Bros.* and later adopted by the *Final Fantasy* series. In chapter III, I examined specific uses of female voices in the soundtrack of RPGs (such as the “Ah” song or romantic pop songs), and showed how *Nier: Automata* incorporates, comments upon, and expands beyond some of those trends. Finally, in chapter IV I looked at

specific themes from *Nier: Automata* to compare how musical motifs used in other games such as *The Legend of Zelda* series (such as melodic fifths) can be cast in new contexts.

However, a conflict exists when we contrast musical observations with the visual and interactive elements, a concept I explored in Chapter V. Hypersexualization of main character Android “2B,” portrayals of male fantasy, and hegemonic power dynamics comprise some of the gendered stereotypes experienced in-game. A gendered ludomusical dissonance sustains between the aural and visual images of the main characters. This specific disjunction characterizes only one of the various relationships between the gendered musical and visual elements in video games. In examining the gendered ludomusical dissonance in *Nier: Automata*, my thesis shows that dissecting musical representations of gender, in relation to the visual and interactive constructions, reveals the complexity inherent in the construction of gender in RPGs.

The research in this thesis expands upon the work done by Michael Austin and John Maenhout that combines ludomusicology with feminist music criticism. Furthermore, this research complements the visual and interactive observations of gender by Anita Sarkeesian, Rebecca Waldie, and Gregory Blackburn with similar observations about how music conveys gender in video games. More broadly, this research contributes to the growing body of feminist music theory and musicology scholarship started by Susan McClary and continued by many authors such as Christine Boone, Taylor Jodie, and William Cheng.

I hope this research can be useful for game developers and composers of game music. In light of the research presented in this thesis, I believe it is crucial for both developers and composers to be exceedingly cognizant of how they choose to design

characters and create the music associated with them. Additionally, I think game developers should be ever vigilant about who creates games, and who the games are intended for. Hopefully, these steps can reveal implicit and explicit biases which affect all aspects of a game's design.

I strongly believe that more work needs to be done in this area of ludomusicology. My study only examined one particular genre of video games (and mostly games made by Japanese developers). I believe that similar gendered musical tropes exist in other genres like first-person shooters, platformers, and indie games. Additionally, I believe these tropes exist in both Western and Eastern markets despite the fact that I primarily examined Japanese RPGs. Describing more examples that exemplify or subvert the tropes that I have outlined will continue the discussion of how gender is represented in video games. My hope is that this continued discussion leads to conversations about how we may avoid potentially harmful musical, visual, and interactive gendered stereotypes in video games.

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