

10 | Autoethnography, Phenomenology and Hermeneutics

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When studying a video game's musical soundtrack, how do we account for the experience of hearing the music while playing the game? Let us pretend for a moment that a recording of *Bastion* (2011) is not from a game at all, but a clip from perhaps a cartoon series or an animated film.¹ We would immediately be struck by the peculiar camera angle. At first, when 'The Kid' is lying in bed, what we see could be an establishing shot of some sort (see Figure 10.1). The high-angle long shot captures the isolated mote of land that The Kid finds himself on through a contrast in focus between the bright and colourful ruins and the blurry ground far beneath him. As soon as he gets up and starts running, however, the camera starts tracking him, maintaining the isometric angle (from 0'02" in the clip). While tracking shots of characters are not uncommon in cinema, this particular angle is unusual, as is the rigidity with which the camera follows The Kid. Whereas the rigidity is reminiscent of the iconic tricycle shots from *The Shining* (1980), the angle is more similar to crane shots in Westerns like *High Noon* (1952). It would seem easy to argue that the high angle and the camera distance render The Kid diminutive and vulnerable, but David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson warn against interpreting such aspects of cinematography in absolute terms.² The major difference between traditional action sequences in film and the clip from *Bastion* is that the latter is essentially one long take, whereas typical (Hollywood) action sequences are composed of fast cuts between shots of varying camera distances and angles. The camerawork of this short sequence, then, creates a certain tension that remains unresolved, because there is no 'cut' to a next shot.

From this film-analysis standpoint, the music in the clip is less problematic. The drone with which the scene opens creates the same air of expectancy as the camera angle, but it almost immediately fulfils that expectation, as The Kid rises from his bed, a moment accentuated by the narrator's comment, 'He gets up'. The Kid's frantic pace through the assembling landscape is echoed in the

¹ Author's video, Hearing VGM, 'Bastion Clip 1', 19 September 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=pnqRWbJQIy8.

² David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 8th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008), 192.



Figure 10.1 *Bastion*'s 'opening shot'

snare drum and bass that form a shaky, staccato ground under the masculine reassurance of the narrator's gravelly voice (whose southern drawl sounds like a seasoned cowboy, perhaps a Sam Elliott character). As The Kid picks up his weapon, a giant hammer (which the narrator calls 'his lifelong friend'), a woodwind melody starts playing (0'19" in the clip). This common progression in the musical structure – a single drone leading into rhythmic accompaniment, in turn leading into melody – follows the progression in the narrative: The Kid gets his belongings and his journey is underway. But why does the camera not follow suit by cutting to the next 'shot'?

Consider now a clip I made when playing the same sequence in *Bastion* on another occasion.³ We see The Kid lying in bed, a single drone accompanying his resting state. The drone creates an air of tension, in which we discern the distant sounds of gushing wind. These sounds draw our attention to the rising embers around The Kid's island high in the sky. Before we can start asking questions about the tension the drone creates – does it signify the emptiness of the sky, or the aftermath of the destruction that is implied in the ruined bedroom in the centre of the shot? – The Kid gets up, and a fast rhythm starts playing. As The Kid cautiously, haltingly, makes his way down a strip of land that starts forming around him in the sky (0'04" in the clip) – the camera following him step by step from afar – the frantic music suggests the confusion of the situation. The music heard in the first

³ Author's video, Hearing VGM, 19 September 2014, 'Bastion Clip 2', www.youtube.com/watch?v=7bklExk4PGI.

clip as underscoring the thrill and excitement of adventure now seems full of the anxiety and halting uncertainty of the protagonist. Yet the narrator suggests that ‘he don’t stop [*sic*] to wonder why’. So why does The Kid keep stopping?

Hearing Video Game Music

The questions that my analyses of *Bastion* prompted come from a misunderstanding of the medium of video games. The Kid stopped in the second clip because as my avatar, he was responding to my hesitant movements, probing the game for the source and logic of the appearing ground. I was trying to figure out if the ground would disappear if ‘I’ went back, and if it would stop appearing if ‘I’ stopped moving (‘I’ referring here to my avatar, an extension of myself in the gameworld, but when discussing the experience of playing a game, the two often become blurred). The camera does not cut to close-ups or other angles in the first clip because of the logic of the genre: this is an action-based role-playing game (RPG) that provides the player with an isometric, top-down view of the action, so that they have the best overview in combat situations, when enemies are appearing from all sides. So in order to accurately interpret the meaning of the camera angle, or of the actions of the characters, we need to have an understanding of what it is like to play a video game, rather than analyse it in terms of its audiovisual presentation. But what does this mean for our interpretation of the music?

In my example, I gave two slightly different accounts of the music in *Bastion*. In both accounts, it was subservient to the narrative and to the images, ‘underscoring’ the narrative arc of the first clip, and the confused movements of The Kid in the second. But do I actually hear these relationships when I am playing the game? What is it like to hear music when I am performing actions in a goal-oriented, rule-bound medium? Do I hear the musical ‘underscoring’ in *Bastion* as a suggestion of what actions to perform? I could, for instance, take the continuous drone at the beginning of the clip – a piece of dynamic music that triggers a musical transition when the player moves their avatar – as a sign to get up and do something. Or do I reflect on the music’s relationship to my actions and to the game’s visuals and narrative? While running along the pathway that the appearing ground makes, I could ask myself what the woodwind melody means in relation to the narrator’s voice. Or, again, do I decide to play along to the music? As soon as I get up, I can hear the music as an invitation to run along with the

frantic pace of the cue, taking me wherever I need to be to progress in the game. Or, finally, do I pay attention to the music at all? It could, after all, be no more than ‘elevator music’, the woodwinds having nothing particularly worthwhile to add to the narrator’s words and the path leading me to where I need to be.

The questions I asked in the previous paragraph are all related to the broader question of ‘what is it like to hear video game music while playing a game?’ The three approaches that make up the title of this chapter – autoethnography, phenomenology and hermeneutics – revolve around this question. Each of the approaches can facilitate an account based in first-hand experience, of ‘what it is like’ to hear music while playing a video game, but each has its own methods and aims. With each also comes a different kind of knowledge, following Wilhelm Windelband’s classic distinction between the nomothetic and idiographic.⁴ Whereas the nomothetic aims to generalize from individual cases – or experiences in this case – to say something about *any* kind of experience, the idiographic is interested in the particularities of a case, what makes it unique. As we shall see, whereas hermeneutics tends towards the idiographic and phenomenology towards the nomothetic, autoethnography sits somewhere in-between the two. The three approaches can be categorized in another manner as well. To loosely paraphrase a central tenet of phenomenology, every experience consists of an experiencer, an experiential act and an experienced object.⁵ Autoethnography focuses on the unique view of the experiencer, phenomenology on the essence of the act and hermeneutics on the idiosyncrasies of the object. These are very broad distinctions that come with a lot of caveats, but the chapter’s aim is to show what each of these approaches can tell us about video game music. Since this chapter is about methodology, I will also compare a number of instances of existing scholarship on video game music in addition to returning to the example of *Bastion*. As it is currently the most common of the three approaches in the field, I will start with a discussion of hermeneutics. Autoethnography has not, until now, been employed as explicitly in video game music studies as in other disciplines, but there are clear examples of authors employing autoethnographic methods. Finally, phenomenology has been explored the least in the field, which is why I will end this chapter with a discussion of the potential of this approach as a complement to the other two.

⁴ Wilhelm Windelband and Guy Oakes, ‘History and Natural Science’, *History and Theory* 19, no. 2 (1980): 165–8 at 167.

⁵ ‘The noetic-noematic structure of consciousness’, in Husserl’s terms. See, for example, Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000), 16.

Hermeneutics

Of the three approaches, hermeneutics is the one with the longest history within the humanities and the most applications in the fields of music, video games and video game music. As an approach, it is virtually synonymous with the idiographic, with its interest in the singular, idiosyncratic and unique. Hermeneutics is, simply put, both the practice and the study of interpretation. Interpretation is different from explanation, or even analysis, in that it aims to change or enhance the subject's understanding of the object. We can describe three forms of interpretation: functional, textual and artistic. First, interpretation, in the broadest sense of the word, is functional and ubiquitous. Drivers interpret traffic signs on a busy junction, orchestra musicians interpret the gestures of a conductor and video game players interpret gameplay mechanics to determine the best course of action. Second, in the more specialist, academic sense of the word, interpretation is first and foremost the interpretation of texts, and it derives from a long history going back to biblical exegesis.⁶ This practice of textual interpretation involves a certain submission to the authority of a text or its author, and we can include the historian's interpretation of primary sources and the lawyer's interpretation of legal texts in this form as well. In contrast, there is a third mode of interpretation, a more creative, artistic form of interpreting artworks. The New Criticism in literary studies is an important part of this tradition in the twentieth century,⁷ but the practice of ekphrasis – interpreting visual artworks through poetry or literary texts – is often seen to go much further back, to classical antiquity.⁸ A hermeneutics of video game music involves navigating the differences between these three forms of interpretation.

Of particular importance in the case of video games is the difference between functional and artistic interpretation. Players interpret video game music for a number of practical or functional purposes.⁹ The most often

⁶ See, for example, Rudolf A. Makkreel, 'Wilhelm Dilthey', in *The Blackwell Companion to Hermeneutics*, ed. Niall Keane and Chris Lawn (Chichester: Wiley, 2016), 378–82 at 378; Paul H. Fry, *Theory of Literature* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2012), 27.

⁷ In this tradition, 'The Intentional Fallacy' by Wimsatt and Beardsley is usually seen as an important manifesto for a kind of interpretation that denies the authority of an author. See W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley, 'The Intentional Fallacy', *The Sewanee Review* 54, no. 3 (1946): 468–88.

⁸ James A. W. Heffernan, 'Ekphrasis and Representation', *New Literary History* 22, no. 2 (Spring 1991): 297–316 at 297.

⁹ See also Tim Summers, *Understanding Video Game Music* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 41.

discussed example is Zach Whalen's idea of 'danger state music', or what Isabella van Elferen more broadly calls 'ludic music': music acts like a signpost, warning the player of the presence of enemies or other important events.¹⁰ But the drone in *Bastion* warrants functional interpretation as well: as a player, I can understand its looping and uneventful qualities as signifying a temporary, waiting state, for me to break out of by pressing buttons. Artistic interpretation can certainly begin from such functional interpretation (I will return to this later), but it moves beyond that. It is not content with actions – pressing buttons – as a resolution of a hermeneutic issue but wants to understand the meaning of such musical material, in such a situation, in such a video game, in such a historical context and so on. This process of alternating focus on the musically specific and the contexts in which it sits is what is usually referred to as the hermeneutic circle, which is alternatively described as a going back and forth between parts and whole, between text and context, or between textual authority and the interpreter's prejudices.¹¹

One of the most explicit proponents of artistic interpretation in musicology is Lawrence Kramer. First of all, what I referred to as a 'hermeneutic issue' is what Kramer calls a 'hermeneutic window': the notion that something in a piece stands out to the listener, that something is 'off' that requires shifting one's existential position or perspective in regard to it. In other words, something deviates from generic conventions.¹² Through this window, we step into a hermeneutic circle of interpretation, which navigates between two poles: 'ekphrastic fear' and 'ekphrastic hope'.¹³ In every artistic interpretation, there is the fear that one's verbal paraphrase of a piece overtakes or supplants it. The interpretation then becomes more of a translation, missing out on the idiosyncrasies of the original and driving the interpreter and their readers further away from the piece, rather than towards an understanding of it. Ekphrastic fear means that one's prejudices fully overtake the authority of the work: it no longer speaks to us, but we

¹⁰ Zach Whalen, 'Play Along – An Approach to Videogame Music', *Game Studies* 4, no. 1 (2004), www.gamestudies.org/0401/whalen/; Isabella van Elferen, 'Un Forastero! Issues of Virtuality and Diegesis in Videogame Music', *Music and the Moving Image* 4, no. 2 (2011): 30–9.

¹¹ The idea of interpretation as a circular process between parts and whole is usually associated with Friedrich Schleiermacher; the idea that interpretation involves working through one's preconceptions or prejudices of a text or object comes from Hans-Georg Gadamer, see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd ed. (London; New York: Continuum, 2004).

¹² Lawrence Kramer, *Interpreting Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 25.

¹³ Lawrence Kramer, *Musical Meaning: Toward a Critical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 17–18.

speak for it. Ekphrastic hope, on the other hand, is the hope that a paraphrase triggers a spark of understanding, of seeing something new in the artwork, of letting it speak to us.

Game music hermeneutics involve another kind of fear that is often held by researchers and that is at the heart of this chapter: are we still interpreting from the perspective of a player of the game, or are we viewing the soundtrack as an outsider? This fear is best articulated by Whalen when he suggests that

[o]ne could imagine a player ‘performing’ by playing the game while an ‘audience’ listens in on headphones. By considering the musical content of a game as a kind of output, the critic has pre-empted analysis of the game itself. In other words, taking literally the implications of applying narrative structure to video-game music, one closes off the gameness of the game by making an arbitrary determination of its expressive content.¹⁴

In a sense, Whalen’s ‘audience’ perspective is exactly what I took on in my introduction of *Bastion*. This kind of ‘phenomenological fear’ can be better understood and related to ekphrastic fear through an interesting commonality in the histories of video game and music hermeneutics. Both disciplines feature an infamous interpretation of a canonical work that is often used as an example of the dangers of hermeneutics by detractors. In the case of video games, it is Janet Murray describing *Tetris* as ‘a perfect enactment of the overtasked lives of Americans in the 1990s – of the constant bombardment of tasks that demand our attention and that we must somehow fit into our overcrowded schedules and clear off our desks in order to make room for the next onslaught’.¹⁵ In the case of music, this is Susan McClary’s conception of a particular moment in Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony as the ‘unparalleled fusion of murderous rage and yet a kind of pleasure in its fulfilment of formal demands’.¹⁶ These interpretations were made an example of by those unsympathetic to hermeneutic interpretation.¹⁷ Murray’s work was used

¹⁴ Zach Whalen, ‘Case Study: Film Music vs. Video-Game Music: The Case of Silent Hill’, in *Music, Sound and Multimedia: From the Live to the Virtual*, ed. Jamie Sexton (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 68–81 at 74.

¹⁵ Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, Updated edition (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2017), 178.

¹⁶ Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 128.

¹⁷ It is telling that one of McClary’s critics, Pieter van den Toorn, referred to an earlier version of McClary’s text which contains the even more controversial characterization ‘throttling, murderous rage of a rapist incapable of attaining release’, instead of the more nuanced, edited phrasing from *Feminine Endings*. See Pieter C. van den Toorn, ‘Politics, Feminism, and Contemporary Music Theory’, *The Journal of Musicology* 9, no. 3 (1991): 275–99.

by ludologists to defend the player experience of video games from narratological encroachment.¹⁸ McClary's work was used by formalist musicologists (amongst others) to defend the listener's experience from the interpretations of New Musicology – a movement also influenced by literary studies. We might say that there is a certain formalism at play, then, in both the idea of phenomenological fear and ekphrastic fear: are we not going too far in our interpretations; and do both the experiencing of gameplay 'itself' and music 'itself' really involve much imaginative ekphrasis or critical analogizing at all?¹⁹

There are two remedies to hermeneutics' fears of overinterpretation and misrepresentation. First, there are questions surrounding what exactly the player's perspective pertains to. Is this just the experience of gameplay, or of a broader field of experiences pertaining to gaming? That might involve examining a game's paratexts (associated materials), the player and critical discourse surrounding a game and ultimately understanding the place of a game in culture. For instance, it is difficult to interpret a game like *Fortnite Battle Royale* (2017) or *Minecraft* (2011) without taking into account its huge cultural footprint and historical context. A music-related example would be K. J. Donnelly's case study of the soundtrack to *Plants vs. Zombies* (2009).²⁰ Like Kramer, Donnelly opens with a question that the game raises, a hermeneutic window. In this case, *Plants vs. Zombies* is a game with a 'simpler' non-dynamic soundtrack in an era in which game soundtracks are usually praised for and judged by their dynamicity, yet the soundtrack has received positive critical and popular reception. The question of why is not *solely* born out of the player's experience of music in relation to gameplay. Rather, it contraposes a deviation from compositional norms of the period. Donnelly then proceeds to interpret the soundtrack's non-dynamicity, not as lacking, but as an integral part to the game's meaning: a kind of indifference that 'seems particularly fitting to the relentless forward movement of zombies in *Plants vs. Zombies*'.²¹ In other words, the soundtrack's indifference to the gameplay becomes an

¹⁸ Markku Eskelinen, 'The Gaming Situation', *Game Studies* 1, no. 1 (2001), accessed 20 October 2020, <http://gamestudies.org/0101/eskelinen/>.

¹⁹ Here, I am referring to another critique of hermeneutics in musicology by Carolyn Abbate, who gives the phrase 'doing this really fast is fun' as an example of what is in our minds when 'dealing with real music in real time'. See Carolyn Abbate, 'Music – Drastic or Gnostic?', *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 3 (2004): 505–36 at 511.

²⁰ K. J. Donnelly, 'Lawn of the Dead: The Indifference of Musical Destiny in *Plants vs. Zombies*', in *Music in Video Games: Studying Play*, ed. K. J. Donnelly, William Gibbons, and Neil Lerner (New York: Routledge, 2014), 151–65.

²¹ Donnelly, 'Lawn of the Dead', 163.

important part of the game's meaning, which Donnelly then places in the context of a long history of arcade game soundtracks. By framing the interpretation through historical contextualization, Donnelly lends an authority to his account that a mere analogical insight ('musical difference matches the indifference of the zombies in the game') might not have had: experiencing *Plants vs. Zombies* in this manner sheds new light on a tradition of arcade game playing.

The second remedy involves keeping the player's experience in mind in one's interpretations. Context is essential to the understanding of every phenomenon, and it is difficult to ascertain where gameplay ends and context begins.²² Even something as phenomenally simple as hearing the opening drone in *Bastion* as 'expectant' is based on a long tradition of musical conventions in other media, from *Also Sprach Zarathustra* in the opening scene of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) to the beginning of Wagner's opera *Das Rheingold*. However, it is important to note that an explicit awareness of this tradition is not at all necessary for a player's understanding of the drone in that manner, for their functional interpretation of it. In fact, the player's functional interpretation relies on the conventionality of the expectant opening drone: without it, it would have formed a hermeneutic window that drove the player away from playing, and towards more artistic or textual forms of interpretation. These examples suggest that while the kind of functional interpreting that the experience of playing a game involves and artistic interpretation are to some extent complementary – the hermeneutic windows of artistic interpretation can certainly be rooted in musical experiences during gameplay – they can be antithetical as well. If the player's experience is often based in their understanding of game-musical conventions, it is only when a score breaks significantly with these conventions that a hermeneutics of the object comes into play. In other situations, the idiosyncrasies of the player or their experience of playing a game might be more interesting to the researcher, and it is this kind of interpretation that autoethnography and phenomenology allow for. Playing a game and paying special attention to the ways in which one is invited to interpret the game as a player might reveal opportunities for interpretation that steers clear of generalization or mischaracterization.

²² This is essentially the same argument that Jacques Derrida makes in the case of text and context in his infamous aphorism 'Il n'y a pas de hors-texte' – 'there is no outside-text'; see Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, MD; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 158.

Autoethnography

If the three approaches discussed in this chapter are about verbalizing musical experience in games, the most obvious but perhaps also the most controversial of the three is autoethnography. It contends that the scholarly explication of experiences can be similar to the way in which we relate many of our daily experiences: by recounting them. This renders the method vulnerable to criticisms of introspection: what value can a personal account have in scholarly discourse? Questions dealing with experience take the form of ‘what is it like to . . . ?’ When considering a question like this, it is always useful to ask ‘why?’ and ‘who wants to know?’ When I ask you what something is like, I usually do so because I have no (easy) way of finding out for myself. It could be that you have different physiological features (‘what is it like to be 7-foot tall?’; ‘what is it like to have synaesthesia?’), or have a different life history (‘what is it like to have grown up in Japan?’; ‘what is it like to be a veteran from the Iraq war?’). But why would I want to hear your description of what it is like to play a video game and hear the music, when I can find out for myself? What kind of privileged knowledge does video game music autoethnography give access to? This is one of the problems of autoethnography, with which I will deal first.

Carolyn Ellis, one of the pioneers of the method, describes autoethnography as involving ‘systematic sociological introspection’ and ‘emotional recall’, communicated through storytelling.²³ The kinds of stories told, then, are as much about the storyteller as they are about the stories’ subjects. Indeed, Deborah Reed-Danahay suggests that the interest in autoethnography in the late 1990s came from a combination of anthropologists being ‘increasingly explicit in their exploration of links between their own autobiographies and their ethnographic practices’, and of “‘natives” telling their own stories and [having] become ethnographers of their own cultures’.²⁴ She characterizes the autoethnographer as a ‘boundary crosser’, and this double role can be found in the case of the game music researcher as well: they are both player and scholar. As Tim Summers argues, ‘[i]n a situation where the analyst is intrinsically linked to

²³ Carolyn Ellis and Art Bochner, ‘Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity: Researcher as Subject’, in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000), 733–68 at 737.

²⁴ Deborah E. Reed-Danahay, ‘Introduction’, in *Auto/Ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social*, ed. Deborah E. Reed-Danahay (Oxford; New York: Berg, 1997), 1–17 at 2.

the sounded incarnation of the text, it is impossible to differentiate the listener, analyst, and gamer'.²⁵

If the video game music analyser is already inextricably connected to their object, what does autoethnography add to analysis? Autoethnography makes explicit this connectedness by focusing the argument on the analyst. My opening description of *Bastion* was not explicitly autoethnographic, but it could be written as a more personal, autobiographic narrative. Writing as a researcher who is familiar with neoformalist approaches to film analysis, with the discourse on interactivity in video game music and with the game *Bastion*, I was able to 'feign' a perspective in which *Bastion* is not an interactive game but an animated film. If I were to have written about a less experimental approach to the game, one that was closer to my 'normal' mode of engagement with it, I could have remarked on how the transition between cues registers for me, as an experienced gamer who is familiar with the genre conventions of dynamic music systems. In other words, autoethnography would have revealed as much about me as a player as it would have about the soundtrack of the game.

This brings us to the second problem with autoethnography, namely the question of representation. Of course, my position as a gamer-cum-researcher is relatively idiosyncratic, but to what extent are *all* positions of gamers idiosyncratic? And to what extent is my position relevant at all to those interested in video game music? In other words: who cares what the musical experience of a game music researcher is like? Autoethnography occupies a somewhat ambiguous place in Windelband's distinction between nomothetic and idiographic knowledge. Most methodologies of autoethnography to a degree argue that the method is not merely idiographic: my account does not just represent my own experience, but to some extent that of a larger group, and from there it can derive some of its value. This is where the autoethnographic method, that of systematic introspection, plays an important role. Consider William Cheng's account of researching *Fallout 3* (2008).²⁶ While recording his playthrough, he finds himself pausing his progress through the game in order to sit back and enjoy a virtual sunrise, underscored by a Bach partita playing on the game's diegetic radio. This prompts him to wonder not just the extent to which the music influenced his actions, but the extent to which the fact that he was being recorded did as well. This reveals both his insider/outsider

²⁵ Summers, *Understanding Video Game Music*, 30–1.

²⁶ William Cheng, *Sound Play: Video Games and the Musical Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 52–3.

perspective as a gamer/researcher and the idea that playing along to music is a form of role-playing. While the former revelation is perhaps idiosyncratic, the latter is something relatable to other, or perhaps all, forms of player engagement with musical soundtracks.

One argument why autoethnography lends itself well to the study of video game music is the length and scope of some video games. In particular, classic RPGs like the Final Fantasy series take many dozens of hours to complete. Although a busy researcher might opt for less 'costly' approaches, such as analysing a cue, looking at textual, audiovisual or ethnographic sources of the games' reception or focusing on aspects of production, they would be missing out on the experiential aspects of devoting a not insubstantial part of one's life to these games. The biographical connotations of RPG soundtracks – when and where players were in their lives when they played through an RPG – are the lifeblood of their reception. Relatively small soundtracks for games of sprawling lengths ensure that melodic and repetitive cues lodge themselves in the brains and memories of players and inspire all manners of reminiscing, from YouTube comments to concert performances. An autoethnographic account based on the researcher's own reminiscing would then straddle the nomothetic/idiographic and insider/outsider divides that are central to the perspective. Not only does an approach like this recognize both the player's and researcher's role in the construction of the musical experience, but it provides access to the essential role that lived experience plays in the historical, musical significance of these games.

Phenomenology

Both hermeneutic and autoethnographic approaches can benefit from a more detailed and systematic account of not just the experiencer or the experienced music, but of the experience itself. Phenomenology has not been employed extensively in the field, so this final section should then be seen as an exploration of what this approach might offer the study of video game music, rather than a survey of existing studies. Whereas autoethnography takes the charge of introspection and wears it proudly, the origins of phenomenology lie in a scholarly context in which it was considered a dirty word. Edmund Husserl, generally considered the father of phenomenology, strenuously distinguished his approach from introspection.²⁷ Rather

²⁷ Edmund Husserl, *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy*, trans. Quentin Lauer (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 115. See also David R. Cerbone, 'Phenomenological Method: Reflection,

than an attempt at finding empirical aspects of experience by investigating one's own consciousness, phenomenology involves a reflection on conscious experience in order to find logical preconditions for those experiences. In other words, phenomenology deals not in empirical facts, but theoretical essences. It therefore aims to be closer in nature to logic and mathematics than to psychology and anthropology. It is unabashedly nomothetic, even if the experiential 'data' from which it starts are idiosyncratic to the experiencer. Husserl's intent was to follow through the line of philosophical thought that started with Descartes and continued through Kant, of finding absolute truths in non-empirical knowledge: if the existence of the world beyond its appearance to me is in doubt, then all I can do is study appearances or phenomena. This project neatly lines up with the problem of interpretation: if the meaning of a video game (score) as intended by its creators to me is in doubt, then I have to focus on my experience thereof. Where a phenomenological approach differs from hermeneutics is that it is ultimately not interested in the object of experience, but in the (player) experience itself – that is, what one might call 'hearing' or 'listening' to game music.

In order to study phenomena, one needs to suspend one's 'natural attitude', in which one assumes the existence of the world beyond our experiences of it. This is what is called the phenomenological *epoché*, transcendental reduction or simply 'bracketing'.²⁸ Our commonsensical, 'natural' ways of being in the world are so taken for granted that they 'pass by unnoticed', and so 'we must abstain from them for a moment in order to awaken them and make them appear' in a way as to understand them better.²⁹ In this mode, this *epoché*, we can begin to distinguish certain phenomena. For instance, in Husserlian terminology, all phenomena that we experience as existing outside our immediate consciousness (e.g., things that we perceive with our senses) are 'transcendent' phenomena; those phenomena that only exist in experience, such as imagined or remembered things, are 'immanent' phenomena. This leads to the insight that hearing a melody – a case of temporal perception – involves both transcendent objects, like a note C that I hear right now, and immanent objects, like a note D I remember hearing just a moment ago, and which informs my understanding of note C as being part of a descending motif.

Introspection, and Skepticism', in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Phenomenology*, ed. Dan Zahavi (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 7–24.

²⁸ Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 11–12.

²⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (London: Routledge, 2012), lxxvii.

After adopting the attitude of the *epoché*, the phenomenological method involves intuiting essences through imaginative variation, also known as the ‘eidetic reduction’.³⁰ By imagining variations on a phenomenon, and considering at what point those variations would cease to be instances of that phenomenon, we can identify its essential characteristics. Consider, for instance, the opening drone in the *Bastion* sequence, which I suggested carried with it an air of expectancy in my experience as a player. As long, held notes, drones in general might be seen to have a static quality about them; after all, they are melodically directionless, and often harmonically as well. The attribute of expectancy in this particular experience of a drone is constantly at odds with this static quality: it seems to make the music want to go somewhere else. By imagining the *Bastion* opening drone as sounding or appearing different, it is possible to work out the way in which this ‘expectantness’ is an essential quality of this particular experienced drone. For instance, I can imagine the drone being higher or lower in volume or pitch, but it would still carry with it this same attribute in the context of my experience in *Bastion*. Only when I imagine hearing certain very specific other musical events with very specific musical and cultural contexts against the drone – for example, the Celtic folk melodies that are often accompanied throughout by bagpipe drones, or the drone-like early polyphony of Pérotin – is this attribute lost. This suggests that in this experience, qualities like ‘static’ and ‘expectant’ have more to do with context than with musical parameters of the *Bastion* drone itself. Taken as an essential quality of my experience of the drone, ‘expectancy’ reveals this context, and further imaginative variation might reveal more about its nature: the way in which audiovisual impressions or game-generic expectations are involved as preconditions for the experience, for instance.

Based on subjective experience, the phenomenological approach is ultimately theoretical rather than empirical. I can never say anything in general about *actual* experiences of the opening drone in *Bastion* – those had by other players – based on an examination of my own experiences, but I can say something about *possible* experiences of the opening drone. This means that as an approach, phenomenology lends itself best to experiences widely shared, but not thoroughly understood. This is why it has mostly been employed in investigations into some of the most basic and universal concepts: perception, art, technology and even existence and being itself.³¹

³⁰ Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 11–12.

³¹ See Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*. See also Martin Heidegger, ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’, in *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1–56; Martin Heidegger, ‘The Question Concerning

Husserl did discuss music, but only as a means of elucidating our consciousness of time.³² Throughout the twentieth century, there have been more applied, sporadic attempts at investigating music in a phenomenological manner.³³ Scholars such as Alfred Schutz and Thomas Clifton have offered insights on music's relationship to time, from the experience of a musical work as an ideal, Platonic object, to the way a musical performance allows us to enter a 'flux' of inner time instead of outer 'clock' time.³⁴ All of these studies, however, are concerned with music as the exclusive object of attention, whether it be in the concert hall or at home on the listener's couch as they listen to a recording.³⁵ Video games offer varied modes of engagement with music, whether they be more attentive (such as in *Guitar Hero*, 2005) or inattentive (such as in *Bastion*).³⁶ While earlier phenomenologies of music therefore are not necessarily directly applicable to video games, they do offer useful starting points for interrogating and refining existing theories of game music.

For example, Elizabeth Medina-Gray, in her analysis of modularity in game composition, makes a distinction between musical and non-musical choices.³⁷ For instance, pressing a button in *Guitar Hero* to play a note or phrase is a musical choice, based on rhythmic timing; pressing a button in *Bastion* to 'get up' is a non-musical choice, based on our desire to get our avatar moving. In both instances, the music responds to our actions, but the qualitative difference between the ways in which we hear that musical response can be described phenomenologically. A cursory glance would suggest that in the case of *Guitar Hero*, we are firmly in the 'inner time' of a song, whereas in the case of *Bastion*, this temporal experience is at the

Technology', in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York; London: Garland, 1977), 3–35; Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans.

John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962).

³² Edmund Husserl, *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time (1893–1917)*, trans. John Barnett Brough (Dordrecht; Boston; London: Kluwer, 1991).

³³ See Thomas Clifton, *Music as Heard: A Study in Applied Phenomenology* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1983); Alfred Schutz, 'Fragments on the Phenomenology of Music', trans. Fred Kersten, *Music and Man* 2, no. 1–2 (January 1, 1976): 5–71; David Lewin, 'Music Theory, Phenomenology, and Modes of Perception', *Music Perception: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 3, no. 4 (1986): 327–92.

³⁴ Schutz, 'Fragments on the Phenomenology of Music', 43. See also Jerrold Levinson, *Music in the Moment* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

³⁵ See, for example, Schutz, 'Fragments on the Phenomenology of Music', 43. Schutz refers to this as 'pure' listening.

³⁶ Anahid Kassabian, *Ubiquitous Listening: Affect, Attention, and Distributed Subjectivity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

³⁷ Elizabeth Medina-Gray, 'Modular Structure and Function in Early 21st-Century Video Game Music' (PhD dissertation, Yale University, 2014), 31–2.

very least a function of musical and non-musical expectations. However, looking closer at the music in *Bastion*, what exactly is the inner time of the musical drone with which the soundtrack opens? Jonathan Kramer might suggest that this is a form of ‘vertical music’ that has no clear directionality to it,³⁸ but then a drone can be expectant as well, depending on its context (cf. the opening to *Also Sprach Zarathustra*). While it is undoubtedly the case that the expectancy created by the drone is a soundtrack convention – in part a non-musical expectation – it is also a musical convention going back before Strauss’ symphonic poem to, for instance, bagpipe playing. Moreover, to suggest that expectancy is an inessential attribute of *Bastion*’s opening drone is a misconstrual of my experience, of the phenomenon in question. Is ‘getting up’ in *Bastion* then a completely non-musical choice, if soundtrack conventions are so closely intertwined with video game and audiovisual narrative conventions?

To some extent, this kind of applied phenomenology resembles music theory in nature. It too attempts to abstract from empirical data – experiences as opposed to pieces of music – to find theoretical rules and patterns.³⁹ But as in music theory, these rules and patterns are historically and culturally contingent. And here lies the main challenge with phenomenologies of cultural phenomena such as video game music: it is hard to deduce when they stray from the universal and become ‘too applied’, because they are ultimately and inescapably rooted in subjective experience. As a critical complement to approaches such as hermeneutics and autoethnography, however, they can be an invaluable resource that helps us to unpack the specifics of what it is like to play a game and experience its music.

* * *

The three methods outlined in this chapter can be related to each other in a circular manner. Although an autoethnographic account of a game soundtrack can open up phenomenological questions, and these can be interpreted in a cultural-historical context, it is often a hermeneutic question or window that functions as the starting point of autoethnography: what is idiosyncratic about *this* particular experience, by this player, of this game? Although the player experience has been the central point of

³⁸ Jonathan D. Kramer, *The Time of Music: New Meanings, New Temporalities, New Listening Strategies* (New York; London: Schirmer Books, 1988), 375.

³⁹ Jonathan de Souza, for instance, also links phenomenology to music theory through the work of David Lewin. See Jonathan de Souza, *Music at Hand: Instruments, Bodies, and Cognition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 4.

concern for this chapter, it is by no means the exclusive object of investigation for these methods. David Bessell, for instance, autoethnographically approaches the creative process involved in designing the soundtrack to the unreleased horror game *Deal With the Devil*.⁴⁰ Moreover, in recent years, the lines between creation and consumption, between artists and audiences, have been blurred. Video game music is very much a part of participatory culture, as evidenced in the thousands of arrangements, covers and appropriations of popular soundtracks like that of *Super Mario Bros.* on platforms such as YouTube.⁴¹ Not only should an account of the player experience involve this complicated web of material beyond the game, but this material itself could be construed as a modern form of ekphrasis. Academic approaches to the understanding of player experience might then be considered as just another strand of this wider web of interpretative practices.

⁴⁰ David Bessell, 'An Auto-Ethnographic Approach to Creating the Emotional Content of Horror Game Soundtracking', in *Emotion in Video Game Soundtracking*, ed. Duncan Williams and Newton Lee (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 39–50.

⁴¹ See, for example, Melanie Fritsch, "'It's a-Me, Mario!' Playing with Video Game Music", in *Ludomusicology: Approaches to Video Game Music*, eds. Michiel Kamp, Tim Summers and Mark Sweeney (Sheffield: Equinox, 2016), 92–115.