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Enter Hallownest: How the Music Assists the Narrative in Hollow Knight

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Enter Hallownest: How the Music Assists the Narrative in *Hollow Knight*

Annotated Bibliography

1. Ofner, Claudia Susanne. "Play Me a Story: Storytelling in the Metroidvania Game "Hollow Knight." Master's thesis, Institut für Amerikanistik, 2021. Unipub Publikationsserver.

Beginning with an overview of how video games in general tell stories, Ofner's Thesis delves deeply into how *Hollow Knight* specifically utilizes different techniques and methods. Ofner refers to every aspect of the game, from the minimally-available blatant storytelling to small bits of flavor text attached to collectible the player finds throughout the game. Unfortunately Ofner does not communicate with any other sources I have yet found, but does hold a unique place of authority as the only academic research as of yet available on this particular game. There are a couple of paragraphs discussing the audio in the game, but the most she specifically references how the music assists the narrative is when she mentions that a few characters have a theme in common, though that theme is not described in any way. This source is the best way to summarize the story of the game and lays a good map for which story beats would be most relevant to investigate the music related to.

2. van Elferen, Isabella. "Analysing Game Musical Immersion: The ALI Model." In *Ludomusicology: Approaches to Video Game Music*, edited by Michiel Kamp, Tim Summers, and Mark Sweeney, 32-52. Bristol, CT: Equinox Publishing, 2016.

Van Elferen provides in this essay a model useful for analyzing the immersive capabilities and effects of video game music, focusing on *affect*, *musical literacy*, and *musical interaction*. At the intersection of these three aspects, she explains, you find how the music impacts immersion. Frequently referencing various publications from Karen Collins, notably *Game Sound: An Introduction to the History, Theory, and Practice of Video Game Music and Sound Design*, Van Elferen explains how combinations of sound and silence can help bring the player into the immersive space of the game. Though her essay uses examples from horror games, the model itself is applicable to any and all games and helps to keep non-musical sounds in mind. Van Elferen herself has a PhD in Musicology and focuses in her classes on film, TV, and video game music as well as Gothic theory and subcultures, explaining why so much of her published academia focuses on the soundscapes of horror games.

3. Hart, Iain. "Semiotics in Game Music." In *The Cambridge Companion to Video Game Music*, edited by Melanie Fritsch and Tim Summers, 220-37. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021.

One of the fields within the study of communication is semiotics, the study of signs. Hart, a member of the editorial board for the *Journal of Sound and Music in Games*, has specialized his research largely into semiotics within the scope of video game music. In this essay, Hart provides a framework for identifying signs, or indirect communication techniques, within game

music. One of the more obvious is combat music, which he only briefly touches on in this essay. Most of his analysis in this essay is instead on the title themes of three games within the *Elder Scrolls* franchise, which share a common theme that they all have variation on. This work, along with another article by Hart in this bibliography, helps provide a window into the world of communication studies by which we can analyze themes and leitmotifs within the *Hollow Knight* score.

4. Kamp, Michiel. "Autoethnography, Phenomenology and Hermeneutics." In *The Cambridge Companion to Video Game Music*, edited by Melanie Fritsch and Tim Summers, 159-75. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021.

Within the world of ludomusicology, there are 5 names that carry weight above the rest, the names that have contributed the most to and laid the groundwork for the field of study itself. Michiel Kamp, professor of Musicology in his university's Department of Media and Culture Studies, is one of those names and co-founder of the Ludomusicology Research Group. In this essay, Kamp details three frames of reference into interpreting games and their music, using the introduction to indie game *Bastion* as an example. The first, hermeneutics, is the frame most research into the topic is done through and brings to mind, through its different frames of reference, the concern of if we are studying the music from the perspective of a player or just observing the soundtrack as an observer. Both forms of interpretation have value. The second perspective to look at music through is autoethnography, applying the recounting of your own experiences to the entire culture. His detailing on this school of thought is more of a cautionary one, advising the researcher on what they must keep in mind before assuming their experience universal. Finally he delves into phenomenology, the study of the experience itself. In reference to video game music, this is the study of how one experiences a situation and then considers what caused those experiences. This is useful largely for any time that the intent of the composer or developer is unclear and the researcher has nothing to focus on but their own personal experience. Throughout this essay he references directly Van Elferen's studies, along with Tim Summers, one of the other "Big 5" of the field, who you will see later in this bibliography. These frames of reference are important for anyone doing research into a game score, partially to keep an objective stance about it and partially to maintain the perspectives of both player and audience necessary for strong analysis.

5. Summers, Tim. "Analysing Video Game Music: Sources, Methods and a Case Study." In *Ludomusicology: Approaches to Video Game Music*, edited by Michiel Kamp, Tim Summers, and Mark Sweeney, 8-31. Bristol, CT: Equinox Publishing, 2016.

In this essay, Tim Summers focuses on the question of the process of analyzing game music. One of the first things he brings to mind is the similarity between game music research and jazz research, where the written score is not the definitive work itself for research. He even talks about a similar situation within the classical music world known as the "Bruckner Problem," where multiple of Bruckner's works have multiple different, yet equally valid, versions available. Within the world of game music, though, since it is designed specifically with the context of the gameplay in mind, even listening to an official soundtrack is of limited value. Yes, indeed, Summers states that to truly analyze game music, one must start by playing the

game in question. This essay details a step-by-step guide for analysis that starts with analytical play and ends all the way with satellite sources such as reviews and transcriptions. He uses experiential evidence from his own gameplay for his example game, *Halo: Combat Evolved*, where he started by playing the game and recording both the gameplay and audio involved, interacting with the world and seeing how the music responded. Eventually he went to direct quotes from the team responsible for the music in interviews as well as score transcriptions that he himself did to analyze exactly what was occurring. While he himself does not cite many of the other sources seen here, he provides a framework for analyzing game music that almost every source refers to. Again, Summers is one of the founders of the field of study and one of the “Big 5” names within, as well as the one of the editors of this particular collection. The guide for the process of analysis will prove crucial to the methods used to analyze *Hollow Knight* for this paper and indeed proves crucial to researching any game score.

6. Cook, Karen M. “Medievalism and Emotions in Video Game Music.” *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies* 10, no. 4 (2019): 482-97.
<https://du.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/medievalism-emotions-video-game-music/docview/2342373290/se-2?accountid=14608>.

Karen Cook is a professor of Music History with focuses on medieval aesthetics and has been published in several musicology journals. In this particular article, she discusses the ways that video game music uses certain timbres to give impressions in line and contrast with associations we have in our minds with regards to medievalism. She gives several examples for each, from bells being both holy and ominous to wordless choirs having a similar effect. She provides historical context as well, as explanations for why we generally have the associations we do with those timbres. This article helps contextualize quotes from *Hollow Knight* composer Christopher Larkin on his choices for instrumentation along with other sections on the game he did not specifically mention but fall in line with the timbres Cook mentions.

7. Hart, Iain. “Meaningful Play: Performativity, Interactivity and Semiotics in Video Game Music.” *Musicology Australia* 36, no. 2 (2014): 273-90,
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08145857.2014.958272>.

Making his second appearance in this bibliography, Hart delves this time specifically into the idea of interaction being a performative act itself. He equates the use of a game controller as being similar to playing a piano; you press a button (or key) and it has an expected result on your way towards achieving a goal, be that exploring an area or playing a sonata. Much like Summers, he stresses that you must actually play a game to study its music or you are missing an important part of the experience. As with his other paper cited here, Hart focuses a lot on the semiotics of gameplay, but takes for a large portion of the article a more general approach on the idea of game theory and philosophy before even diving into the music. When he does reach musical discussion, however, he returns to the world of *Elder Scrolls* for a detailing on the ways that battle music starting communicates different messages in different situations based largely on how you first experience it. His detailing of the set of “experience potential” that any game

includes helps to consider the different ways and orders that people might experience different aspects of any given game and derive different meanings from their experiences.

8. Phillips, Winifred. *A Composer's Guide to Game Music*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014.

Winifred Phillips is an award-winning game composer, with three of those awards being for the score she uses as an example in the chapter that is the most useful for this research, chapter 4. This chapter focuses on the importance of themes and the difference between leitmotif and ideè fixe. Through the chapter she provides musical examples not only from game music but also from the classical canon. In the musical examples she provides from her game score, she shows and explains how and why she wrote variations on a few particular themes to draw connections between ideas for the player to experience. While she doesn't directly communicate with any of the other sources listed within the chapter this paper will most focus on, her framework for understanding how and why composers modify themes to convey connection will be integral to the overall analysis of *Hollow Knight*.

9. Larkin, Christopher. *The Sound Test*. Season 2, episode 5. "Hollow Knight (w/Christopher Larkin) [Composer Interview/Podcast]" Premiered November 2019 live on YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9bFWUn3DhBk&ab_channel=TheSoundTest.

This interview with the *Hollow Knight* composer Christopher Larkin is likely the best source of information available for how he made decisions throughout the writing process. In the interview he discusses his thought processes, often in regards to instrumentation and how the music grows throughout the game. One example he mentions is that the first music the player hears in the game is solo piano, but by the time they reach the final boss, they are faced with a grand orchestral score befitting battle with an ancient god of light. What is most interesting about his process is that he mentioned all of the pieces in the score began as solo piano tracks that he then expanded with further instrumentation after they had been written. This lends credence to the one officially available score, a collection of piano arrangements, as a window into his process. Of course, as mentioned by Summers, the written score is not the definitive version of a video game score, but having this can make understanding his process a more approachable task. Being the composer himself, there is no higher authority for this particular score.

10. ——— "Hollow Knight Soundtrack Interview" Published February 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cB4zw0DgVbk&ab_channel=ChristopherLarkin.

This brief video from Larkin gives a brief overview of how he got the job and a few of his compositional ideas for the game. One aspect he mentions is his choice of instrumentation being intentional – piano and viola are the instruments intended to bookend the story. All evidence presented within is oral primary evidence, as with the Sound Test interview. He discusses very briefly his methods for utilizing themes, not only melodically, but texturally as well. This source will likely not be the most integral to the research, but might provide a little polish on certain aspects.