

The Business of Music in Video Games and Animation

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Multimedia develops faster and faster every day, with technology and styles that are core in today's world and are drastically different from a century ago. More unique and creative avenues are emerging in the music industry, particularly compared to what is considered the norm. Generally when people think about music in the media, they usually think of music videos (both for individual songs and concert performances), music in live-action films or TV, or even music in advertising, such as the "Nationwide is on your side" jingle. But what is overlooked and is becoming a breakthrough especially recently is music in video games and animation.

A variety of examples come to mind. One of the most notable companies that have continued to surprise audiences everywhere is Riot Games. Best known for their games *League of Legends*, Riot Games had their biggest expansion to mainstream music with their virtual k-pop music group K/DA based on four characters of *League of Legends*. K/DA released their single "POP/STARS" in 2018, which was highly successful and was noted for its ability to reach an audience beyond *League* and an audience beyond the k-pop genre itself. Today, two relevant illustrations of Riot's musical impact are their works with well-known artists, such as Imagine Dragons' "Enemy," Lil Nas X's "STAR WALKIN'," and New Jeans's "GODS," and their recognition for the music and sound design of their Emmy-award winning adult animated Netflix series *Arcane*.

Just last month, the adult animated musical comedy *Hazbin Hotel*, whose pilot episode was posted on YouTube in 2019 and was picked up by A24 for a full first season, not only became Amazon Prime Video's largest debut for an animated series and the #1 series on the platform for weeks, but also became the #1 soundtrack on the Billboard charts, surpassing *Barbie: The Album*; it has maintained that position for three weeks now and still does today. *Hazbin Hotel* features a Broadway cast, and the music features a variety of genres, holistically

possessing a Broadway sound. The series was featured in Times Square and the *Playbill* magazine theater programs. *Hazbin Hotel* is one of the first, if not the first, of its kind to have these casting and advertising aspects associated with the *theatrical* industry.

With these complex ventures, it is becoming increasingly more important to understand these realms of the music industry. In particular, one must not only emphasize the differences between music in games and animation compared to other subfields of the music industry, but also learn how it has evolved and will continue to evolve in a technologically developed world of both good and bad change.

For a video game, it is important to note that they are enjoyed electronically by a customer. Therefore, many audio positions in the game industry require a technical and specific skill set. While it may not be so necessary for a game music composer,¹ it is almost absolutely required for audio programmers and sound designers, as those positions entail game engines and middleware. In addition, video games are interactive, meaning a sound designer needs to modify the soundscape based on the player's environment and integrate audio responses from the player's actions. As with most jobs in art disciplines, businesses expect a portfolio of candidates' works. However, many game audio positions expect not just music production experience, but also works that showcase experience in software development (a programming language, debugging, etc.), familiarity with game design, and even actual games they have made or contributed to. It is a competitive industry with a steep learning curve.

Music composers are usually freelance and work with music supervisors for specific games,² however this may be different for larger companies. In this case, composers can be contractual or full-time employees. Technical game audio positions are usually full-time, similar

¹ David Baskerville, Tim Baskerville, and Serona Elton, *Music Business Handbook and Career Guide*, 13th ed. (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE, 2023), 403.

² Baskerville, 403.

to programmers, however they can also be contractual or freelance. In addition, especially if the company utilizes other multimedia works that involve music, the company may have a large music department for audio production, video production, and legal affairs. Some examples of multimedia may include animation, esports, concerts, and even radio broadcasts. As a result, music pieces become a part of the video game's identity and, in turn, are usually original.³

Moreover, composing fees have grown substantially, as audiences expect video game music to be found on streaming platforms, including the scoring.

Music in video games is usually original as it usually becomes a staple of the games to players.⁴ Generally video game producers need a synchronization license *and* a master-use license for the composition and master recording respectively from whoever owns those rights (creator, publisher, record label, etc.).⁵ This also applies if music was *not* originally created for the video game. Other licenses may be necessary if music is used for more interactive games and the work is modified by the player, as that is under the author's right to create derivative works. However, if the composer is an employee of the video game company, it is a work for hire and the company owns it (same for, say, a recording engineer). If a composer of a video game company collaborates with a different artist, they would need to make additional agreements to ensure the company can legally utilize the music in the game.

Animation has evolved more than people realize. Animation is traditionally associated with Walt Disney. Disney found the value of sound films, or "talkies," from the audio synchronization of Warner Bros.' *Don Juan* (1926) and *The Jazz Singer* (1927). Rather than marketing the two animations he created prior, he added sound to the in-progress animation that

³ Baskerville, 403.

⁴ See note 3 above.

⁵ "How to License Music for Video Games," ICON Collective Music Production School, accessed February 22, 2024, <https://www.iconcollective.edu/license-music-for-video-games>.

marked Mickey Mouse's first appearance, *Steamboat Willie* (1928).⁶ In addition, he understood what audio synchronization quality meant, as animations at the time would have not only poor lip syncing, but music that sounded like noise and plain dialogue. While not revolutionary, he had the custom of creating the music before the animation, which is still common to this day. Disney built animation around music, rather than the other way around, and the music “[spoke] to... the child within.”⁷ The music would also be integrated into the story, instead of being secondary to it. These are all, while trivial now, essential parts to animated works that have contributed to their musical development; a few examples of this development include upgraded sound systems for movie theaters and electronic music.

The business of music in animation ultimately depends on the form of media that it is featured on. Generally, it is similar to the music industry of non-animated forms of media, which include films, television shows, music videos, advertisements, etc. The composer will generally charge a flat fee and count it as a work for hire. Producers of the animated work tend to pay to cover all tasks that the music may entail, such as its composition, recording, or editing. The composer is not particularly expected to be familiar with Western classical music concepts due to music's diverse nature, and are instead expected to have strong *computer software* and creative skills, as well as other miscellaneous workplace facets.⁸ What is different in animation is the music's role and how it is created for the media work. As described before, there were many customs that Walt Disney had that have carried onto animation music today. Generally, music is one of the most important, if not the most important, aspect of animation. Animation has a slight advantage because it can consist of a variety of unique sounds that accompany it that would not

⁶ Laura Lazarescu-Thois, “From Sync to Surround: Walt Disney and Its Contribution to the Aesthetics of Music in Animation,” *The New Soundtrack* 8, no. 1 (March 2018): 61, <https://doi.org/10.3366/sound.2018.0117>.

⁷ Lazarescu-Thois, 66.

⁸ Baskerville, 406.

be found or utilized in a live-action work, allowing for more creativity.⁹ Animation and music can be synchronized in a unique way without constraints purely because of animation's fantasy nature. This is only furthered by the technological advancements in creating digital worlds and art and technology's natural interdependence.¹⁰

Animation in particular has seen drastic changes musically for two main reasons. For one, animation for adult audiences has not only changed the landscape of animation, but has allowed for music no one has ever heard of before. The aforementioned animated television series, Riot Games' *Arcane* and A24's *Hazbin Hotel* have gained worldwide attention for both their outstanding animation and their charted soundtrack albums. A different but also well known animated series is *Attack on Titan*, which is known as one of the best series of Japanese anime. The show has various adult themes and graphic scenes, and has become well-known for its music. There is a clear and abrupt contrast between the traditional Disney animations for children and these adult-themed media works. Not only has animation broken its reputation for being for kids, but it has allowed for music that is mainstream, has deep meaning, and even contains adult language at times. Secondly, video games and animation have demonstrated more intersections than ever with animated advertisements for games and video game adaptations. Riot Games in particular has continuously advertised in-game purchasable skins via animated music videos, including the K/DA (who released an EP titled *ALL OUT*) and Star Guardian (which featured music artist Porter Robinson) skin lines. Besides *Arcane*, there is also *The Super Mario Bros. Movie* adaptation, which of course incorporated music from the games of the Mario franchise. The trend of franchise adaptations continues to grow, especially from the *Barbie*

⁹ "The Importance of Incorporating Animation Music and Sound," *Business of Animation*, January 19, 2023, <https://businessofanimation.com/the-importance-of-incorporating-animation-music/>.

¹⁰ Lazarescu-Thois, 70.

movie, which has pushed companies to follow in its footsteps. It will be intriguing to see how music of *animated* adaptations branch out from how the film industry is currently.

Working with music in video games and animation (more so video games) is my dream, hence my fascination and knowledge with this topic. As an individual studying computer science and music with a concentration in music technology as a combined major, I have been tailoring my studies to focus on the game industry. I have been taking game-related courses and working on the programming and audio aspects of various game projects. I would like to work on the more technical aspects of this industry, that is, utilize my programming skills. I will not go too in-depth regarding what I have been doing academically to prepare to enter the industry, as that would be tangential to this paper. I have been seeking a lot of opportunities to meet people in the game industry and have actually had conversations with people in the positions I discussed in this paper regarding their journey and advice for students like me. Naturally, I have researched and understood this career path for a while now. I am seeking a co-op opportunity with a game company right now, and I will be finishing up the candidate process this weekend. There is still a long road ahead of me regarding preparation for this competitive industry, most of which entails technical skill development, but also general knowledge of the game and music industry, as well as networking. There are a lot of musical works that I left out from this paper. However, every one of them has contributed to the development of the game and animation music industry, so much so that I am fortunate to see them showcased in my music technology classes, such as “Termination of Desires” of the game *Genshin Impact*. It is such a surreal experience being present in a musical environment that has evolved to go beyond traditional classical music which was considered the norm for so long. I am curious more than ever to see the evolution of the music industry, good or bad, in a world of rapid technological change.

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