Book Review

Review of *Authenticity in the Music of Video Games*. By Stephanie Lind. Lexington Books, 2022, 194 pp, $100 hardback).
Reviewed by Will Farmer.

Stephanie Lind's debut monograph is a compelling and exciting exploration of music and sound in video games. A worthwhile read for both researchers and musically literate gaming enthusiasts, *Authenticity in the Music of Video Games* promises an in-depth discussion of a particularly nebulous concept, and readers can be assured that this volume delivers on the undertaking with clarity, nuance, and flair. Of immediate importance is the swift acknowledgment of multiple player perspectives existing for the same game. This is at the heart of Lind's discussion of authenticity (a label that can encompass historical accuracy, imagined assumptions, emotional response, or frequently a combination of all three) and is a driving force behind music's complex relationship with player expectations and enjoyment.

Building on the substantial web of existing authenticity and immersion literature, Lind considers the reciprocal relationship between player expectations and music; in her own words, engaging with "an infinite variety of different factors from our own personal histories" (1). Resultingly, the book seeks to consolidate (or at least consider the compatibility of) the different modes of authenticity and is certainly successful in bringing new degrees of understanding to music's methods and positioning within video games. An approach rooted heavily in music theory is particularly notable, with detailed observations of case studies and thoughtful interpretations encouraging a discussion on how and why players might *feel* the way they do about the score and, more pressingly, the narrative world. Lind notes her "frustration" (1) with the rather mundane reputation of the music theory discipline, and though the book's level of musical detail (and prerequisite theoretical knowledge required) might intimidate a more casual reader, the well-argued interpretations and unbridled enthusiasm for the topic dispels any concerns that this text might fall into the category of a tedious analytical artifact.

The book offers a detailed introduction that primes the reader with extensive theoretical and analytical frameworks, before the subsequent chapters reward this knowledge with in-depth applications of these ideas. The first chapter primarily explores "objective authenticity" with a comparative study of two games set in Ancient Greece, before the second chapter moves to "constructive authenticity" and refocuses on medieval music and tropes in fantasy games. Chapter 3 shifts to a discussion of thematic representation (and the various distinctions therein), primarily addressing continuity across in-game experiences (with a wide array of examples mentioned). The final chapter considers "existential authenticity" (alongside constructive authenticity) and explores ideas of nostalgia and congruity in "retro" gaming, with the conclusion encapsulating the overarching importance of authenticity and player expectations.

The opening remarks of the book make clear Lind's awareness of her own intertextual influences, alongside a desire to question her "analyses and assumptions" (xv) regarding musical approaches. A brief discussion demonstrates how Lind's students view a game differently from herself, touching on ideas of nostalgia, stereotyping, and the balance between "historical reenactment" and "a new creative work in a niche genre" (2). Beyond simply framing the text, the introduction encourages us to question our own perceptions and experiences. Building on an extensive bed of scholarship, Lind provides an overview of existing concepts that offers an instructive and accessible summary for readers who may not be familiar with the literature, while also serving as a welcome reminder for those who are well-acquainted with core ludic ideas. Work by van Elferen, Summers, Reale, Juul, and Zimmerman are explored before arriving at Nina Wang's three-part framework for understanding authenticity (objective, constructive, and existential), which forms the foundation of Lind's subsequent analysis. This is cited through Michał Mochocki's 2021 publication,[1] though a reference to the original 1999 text by Wang (which explores tourism experiences) would also be beneficial to the reader.[2] This discussion provides some initial clarity on the emerging construct of authenticity alongside exemplifying its inherent complexity, throwing the multifaceted construct of player engagement into sharp relief.

Consideration is given to the theoretical lens through which the examples will be assessed, with an acknowledgment of the difficulty transcriptions create when attempting to pin down nonlinear music with subtle performance nuances. The limitations of an overly reductive analysis are outlined in favor of broader structural considerations (for example, cadences being moments of arrival with multiple components rather than harmonic motion alone), a hierarchy of repetition, and the implications of timbral/instrumentation choices, supported readily by Huron. Some of this material might have been more conveniently placed appearing where the examples are first encountered, however, as readers may wish to delve into chapters out of order, a necessary balance has been struck with outlining broad analytical thoughts in this abstract way at the start.

1. Michał Mochocki, "Heritage Sites and Video Games: Questions of Authenticity and Immersion," *Games and Culture* 16, no. 8 (2021): 954.

2. Nina Wang, "Rethinking authenticity in tourism experience," *Annals of Tourism Research* 26, no. 2 (1999): 349–370. doi:10.1016/S0160-7383(98)00103-0

This introductory chapter provides as clear an overview of the research landscape and the understanding of "authenticity" as one could hope for and is a valuable resource for comprehending the terminology and construct.

Chapter 1 explores three core functions of video game music: establishing time and place, creating narrative inflection, and cueing. Each of these contributes to the authentic feeling of a gameworld, and though they are addressed separately, Lind highlights that it is a combination of these components which creates an engaging virtual space. Using *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* (Ubisoft Entertainment, 2018) as a case study, detailed musical analysis and interviews with the composers reveal how the music was written to evoke the flavor of Ancient Greece. Despite the presence of anachronistic instrumentation (the bouzouki being a surprisingly late addition in Greek culture), precise musical detail demonstrates that there are features aligned with how historians believe Ancient Greek music sounded (additive meter) alongside sonic inaccuracies designed to "signal Greekness" (34). Herein lies the core authenticity debate: even if the music is historically accurate (objective authenticity), will this influence the player experience for those with their own imaginings of Ancient Greek culture (constructive authenticity)? Going a stage further, given there are few surviving records of how Ancient Greek music *actually* sounded, surely the best estimations of historians are well-researched assumptions (bordering somewhere between objective and authentic authenticity)? Lind suggests that players are perhaps listening for "elements of difference" (41) in the score that align with their imaginings of how things sound—even if the trigger is just the music *sounding different* or hinting at their (mis-)remembered ideas. This balance between player expectation and accuracy is one that Lind explores in depth to ascertain how authenticity is constructed.

The second chapter continues this thread with the focus turned to musical tropes. Lind acknowledges the wide-ranging scholarship (including Hatten on "topics"), before blending the concepts to better understand the experience gamers might have. A particularly important observation highlights that these tropes can become fatiguing if overused and are at the mercy of negative associations a player might bring from their own life experiences. Attention is turned to *medievalisms* and how "the reality of European medieval life and culture do not necessarily correspond," alongside the "larger functions for historically referential sound" (71). This observation forms the basis of the detailed musical analysis where techniques such as plainchant, modes, voice leading, and lyrics demonstrate "anachronisms" that "suggest that the game developers were more concerned with evoking a general sense" of a time period than true accuracy (78). Importantly, this leads to a discussion on how importance is given to constructive authenticity and existential authenticity over objective authenticity. Consideration is given to the social implications of "cultural flattenings" where parallels are drawn to the homogenization of distinct Latin American cultures in games of the 1990s (88). An issue that might be explored further is whether applying objectively musically authentic performances to a fictionalized world might in itself be problematic through inadvertent appropriation, however this goes beyond the scope of this chapter. Lind's overarching and convincing summary makes it clear that

"there is a significant gap between the real world and our gameworld fantasies" of which music is an undeniable factor (90).

Chapter 3 is focused on thematic representation and the nuanced ways music can make connections beyond a direct leitmotific statement. Consciously avoiding a list-like approach of describing occurrences of motif, the musical analysis is detailed and provides ample links to player experience, demonstrating how techniques such as instrumentation, orchestration, repetition, and structural adjustment can benefit the player engagement in a world. Though not directly addressed, the analysis does raise questions around the utility of "existential authenticity" as a label when applied *in isolation* to existing techniques. As Lind acknowledges, the term has a "tantalizing similarity" (118) to how we already understand thematic writing; across the chapter it is demonstrated that motific scoring draws upon ideas of internal continuity, player expectation, and intertextuality. Regardless of whether the term "existential authenticity" has a level of redundancy when used independently, Lind's argument remains at its best when comparing this to objective and constructive authenticity, demonstrating that its strength might lie in providing a way of discussing the *feeling* of something belonging to a particular gaming moment. The case studies range from music linked to characters and worlds, to examples where neither are present, covering obvious thematic statements to ones too subtle for players to easily recognize. The player experience remains at the heart of the discussion, with thematic representation "engaging with emotion in ways that suggest existential authenticity" (108) in order to benefit the gaming experience.

The fourth and final chapter explores two contemporary games for their retro and nostalgic qualities and the resulting feelings of authenticity. The examples make use of "pastiche, referencing, and superimposing" (126) whereby the music incorporates idiomatic elements of the 1980s (repetition, limited instrumentation, timbre, writing style), however the scores are frequently unfaithful to original approaches. Repeated passages now have variation, and there are changes to harmonic languages and scale degrees, demonstrating a constructed authenticity of the sound of the past. There are situations where a game "intentionally evokes moments of disruption and subversion" in order to support narrative or visual moments (136). As Lind suggests, 'The game's evocation of retro is not objectively authentic, but rather highly dependent upon constructive authenticity by meeting players' expectations of the style" (136). Further to this, there is an awareness of retro game status and how this can be manipulated to alter player engagement during play: "thus positioning retro authenticity not as a default state that the game is aiming for, but rather as a metric for how the player should engage with the narrative components of the game" (147). It is clear that the musical decisions go beyond a simple homage and into the realm of supporting the player, with games not acting as crude replications, but rather as a complex combination of reused features and deliberate changes. Resultingly, the authentic feeling of the game is a combination of constructive and existential authenticity rather than objective.

The book's conclusions firmly remind us of the core arguments; authenticity's importance to player engagement and experience, alongside understanding that the authentic *feeling* is a result of many factors, of which music and sound are contributing parts. Lind

acknowledges the fluidity of the objective/constructive/existential model and reminds readers that individuals playing a game will bring their own perceptions to the experience. She suggests that constructive and existential authenticity might be more closely related, with the latter relying on the former to have a solid foundation. That authenticity is not generated by one unified route through the media, but rather by assimilating knowledge from all experiences (including the game being played) is central to the individualistic way that people enjoy and become immersed in video games. Beyond this, "authenticity is ultimately about linking to this global digital culture and effectively interpreting its cues" (168), an apt demonstration of why Lind's book will not only be of immense value to ludomusicologists, but to anyone looking to understand the modern multi-media landscape and our place within it. ■

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