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A CROSS-CULTURAL COMPARISON OF VIDEO GAME MUSIC COMPOSERS IN THE
UNITED STATES AND JAPAN

By

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A capstone project submitted for Graduation with University Honors

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ABSTRACT

In the world of video game music (VGM), certain stereotypes have arisen regarding the social media use of American and Japanese composers. American composers are characterized as more enthusiastic about using their social media accounts to give insight into their creative process and personal lives, while Japanese composers are characterized as more tight-lipped. Questioning this trend, along with my recent encounters with labor studies, has led me to the following project: a cross-cultural examination of American and Japanese VGM composers, especially regarding their public presentation and workplace cultures. This research paper first uses sources from YouTube and social media to describe the public interactions of two individual American composers and one group of Japanese composers commonly assumed to have a single public persona. Then, this paper synthesizes these interactions with writings about the video game industry and entertainment labor more broadly in each country to understand how these interactions exemplify, or diverge from, typical relationships between media ecosystems, workplace cultures, and public presentation in the video game industry. At its core, this paper aims to provide examples of VGM composers negotiating public personas in the context of media ecosystems and workplaces undergoing change across borders in the age of social media, which will hopefully serve as a springboard for future research into the social aspects of VGM production.

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Introduction

With the advent of social media, artists face another dimension of public scrutiny. Not only are their work and most sensational aspects scrutinized, but millions can potentially view the most mundane aspects of their private and professional lives. Some artists have embraced this, using their social media accounts to give insight into their creative process and personal lives, while others are comparatively more tight-lipped. In the world of video games, American music composers generally exhibit behaviors of the former, while Japanese composers are often characterized as the latter.

A representative story illustrates the basis of these characterizations. In 2015, Netflix and College Humor were in talks with Nintendo to develop shows based on the Zelda and Star Fox properties respectively. A leak by a Netflix employee revealed the former project while it was still early in development. At the time of the internet leak, Netflix, an American company, saw it as a great PR opportunity, while Nintendo, a Japanese company, was horrified and canceled its part in the project (Conditt 2021). While not specific to music, this feeds into the characterization of American and Japanese media companies as relevant to the video game industry.

Questioning this trend, along with my recent encounters with labor studies, has led me to the following project: a cross-cultural examination of American and Japanese Video Game Music (VGM) composers, especially regarding their public presentation and workplace cultures. I conduct this cross-cultural examination through three case studies: one composer based exclusively in the English-speaking world, one composer born in the US with an interesting case of working in Japan, and one team of Japanese composers. While this is more limited than a cross-industry survey, it allows for more specific analysis while employing archival research

methods. Through these case studies, I hope to gain a more comprehensive understanding of differences in VGM music production across countries and, more importantly, differences in media ecosystems between countries in the age of social media.

This paper takes as its basis the structural differences between video game production companies and will elaborate on how these operate in video game music. Japanese video game studios tend to have policies that restrict public access to their inner workings. While there are exceptions (for example, freelance Japanese composers need to make a presence known on social media), there are few active accounts for Japanese video game composers under contract. The work atmosphere in the United States tends to be more welcoming of social media activity by video game creatives, as evidenced by recording sessions and even officially released scores of various kinds shared publicly on social media, examples of which will be detailed in this paper.

Literature Review

Thankfully, there is a wealth of existing literature in the relevant fields, though a few key gaps remain. I mainly draw my understanding of value chains in media industries, and what I will refer to as the “production-reception cycle,” from the work of Aphra Kerr, most prominently her book *Global Games: Production, Circulation and Policy in the Networked Era*.

In that book, Kerr critiques traditional value chain models as not properly applicable to the gaming industry in the social media age (2016, 44-7). She instead suggests a model consisting of a band of “a range of value added services and developing digital infrastructures that support a range of interactions with game players” (ibid., 47). While this band appears linear, it actually allows for feedback in multiple directions at specific points, forming what I call the “production-reception cycle.” Social media is the most prominent such means of “convergence and de-convergence” (ibid., 46) today, which is why I focus on it for this project.

Tom Hoover's book *Keeping Score: Interviews with Today's Top Film, Television, and Game Music Composers*, Melanie Fritsch's chapter in *Women's Music for the Screen* (edited by Felicity Wilcox), Winifred Phillips's book *A Composer's Guide to Game Music*, and Stefan Strötgen's chapter in *Music and Game: Perspectives on a Popular Alliance* (edited by Peter Moormann) are strong starting points for understanding the working processes of VGM composers. More specifically, Fritsch (2021) examined the "brick wall" facing research on women involved in VGM from the perspective of both traditional and critical media studies, providing us with strong methodological (as well as conceptual) insights. Meanwhile, Phillips is a VGM composer, so she generally focused more on the artistic side, but she contrasted in-house composers (who experience "constant and direct supervision from other members of the development team" (2014, 132)) with external contract composers (who are usually teleworkers who "need to be able to work well and productively without close supervision, finding personal fulfillment without the need for the diverse social interaction found in a public workplace" (ibid., 133)) and regularly alluded to systems of labor. Strötgen (2013) explored VGM composers' places within these systems of labor more thoroughly. Timothy D. Taylor's ethnographic book *Working Musicians: Labor and Creativity in Film and Television Production* (which, despite its title, also includes interviews with musicians working in video games and streaming services) is also useful, both for its specific insights into VGM and for its comparison of music production between video games and other forms of mass entertainment. Speaking of such comparisons, the relationship between film music and VGM in the United States means that Gianluca Sergi's chapter in *The Palgrave Handbook of Sound Design and Music in Screen Media* (edited by Liz Greene and Danijela Kulezic-Wilson) can provide insights into American VGM production, albeit historically limited ones.

Moving away from VGM and approaching labor in the video game industry more generally, we find a much richer literature. Kultima's dissertation draws upon 10 years of ethnography across 19 studies of game designers to highlight "issues that frame creation practices," asserting that game design practice is "value pluralistic" and "natured and nurtured by the surrounding ecosystem" (2018, v). While she did not place the same level of emphasis on media ecosystems that Kerr did, they still shaped her findings. Legault and Weststar's book focused on video game developers from a labor studies perspective, "by mapping the influence of project management on working conditions and establishing a general portrait of citizenship at work" (2024, 16). Citing workplace difficulties, they raised questions about "workers' citizenship" and the need for renewed labor market institutions. Peuter et al. added to this with their exploration of a specific type of workspace: co-working spaces, "where a growing number of independent workers share desks and office amenities, escape the isolation of working from home and seek contacts for paid work" (2017, 687). In these spaces, they examined workers in the media industries, including game development, to "survey meanings attached to coworking... address subjectivity formation... [and consider] coworking's political potential as a platform for collective action" (ibid.). Speaking of Peuter, in 2019, he collaborated with Chris J. Young to write the introduction to a special issue of *Television & New Media* "critically investigating contemporary formations of digital game labor, with a focus on the political-economic forces, social inequalities, and technological dynamics mutually shaping these formations" (747). While primarily an introduction, it lays a strong foundation for video game labor studies, especially those examining workspaces within media economies. Something to note is that all of these scholars were working within specific geographical frameworks that exclude Japan, and sometimes the United States. For example, while Kultima did include

multiple American interlocutors and people she met at a pan-Asian gaming conference, she admitted that her data collection had a bias towards European developers because it originally began as a Nordic study. This will be a recurring trend, as the English-language academic world is simultaneously more accessible to American scholars like me and, when multiple countries are compared, is more likely to focus on inter-European or American-European comparisons than comparisons between Japan and other countries.

Of special note is Helen Mitchell's chapter in *The Oxford Handbook of Interactive Audio* (edited by Karen Collins, Bill Kapralos, and Holly Tessler), which provides invaluable insights into the work of video game audio mixers, including their traditional processes, relationships with other game workers, and reactions to new pressures from both within and outside the industry. Among these insights is the comment that "audio always comes at the end of the line. Often what ends up happening is that the people that are upstream from the audio... will continue tweaking and changing their materials past the point where the audio people need to be doing their work... So as a result, during the time when the sound designers and audio directors should be mixing their game, they may very well be altering sounds to be able to fit revised animations or fielding change requests from their creative directors and other people on the project" (Mitchell 2014, 487-8). While this is intended as a complaint against creative directors' lack of consideration for people working on audio (which is still relevant to my work), it also exposes that the sound department works within a "production-reception cycle" even when the only "receivers" impacting their work are people working on the same project. This is accentuated by Mitchell's assertion that "the tastes and expectations of potential gamers and game developers have been shaped by *current conventions* of sound for film and television" (ibid., 480, emphasis added). Since these workers are involved in the implementation of music

(and are frequently “in the same room” as composers in Japanese studios), these insights are invaluable, although Mitchell heavily relies on interviews from American and Canadian audio mixers.

There have also been a few scholars who have directly written on the “production-reception cycle” in video game production. In addition to Kerr’s writing, there are four notable sources in the academic literature. John Banks’s book *Co-Creating Videogames* asks the same questions I do regarding the production-reception cycle of American and Japanese composers, but for the Australian video game industry as a whole. Its main caveat is that it is devoted solely to the Australian video game industry, so its conclusions may be specific to the national context. Mia Consalvo & Andrew Phelps’s chapter in *Game Production Studies* (edited by Olli Sotamaa and Jan Švelch) examines cases of game developers livestreaming their work on Twitch, and finds that this work serves both as “co-creation” and as “education.” Matthew E. Perks’s article “How Does Games Critique Impact Game Design Decisions? A Case Study of Monetization and Loot Boxes” applies the same sociological and labor questions that I will be asking to case studies regarding American developers trying to implement in-game monetization. Lies van Roessel and Christian Katzenbach’s article “Navigating the Grey Area: Game Production between Inspiration and Imitation” does the same for twenty workers across the German gaming industry, although the same caveat about Banks’s book applies here. Additionally, Browne and Schram extend the production-reception cycle to those who manage co-working spaces, arguing “that directors of [these spaces] act as cultural intermediaries, whose role in development practices extends beyond the simple provision of desk space, implicitly subsuming labours related to mentorship, business development, networking, maintenance, brokerage, and emotional upkeep” (2021, 85).

As previously mentioned, there is a stronger emphasis on companies working outside Japan than within, despite that country's dominance of mainstream VGM for most of gaming history. This is somewhat alleviated by Hiro Izushi and Yuko Aoyama, who conducted a phenomenal cross-cultural comparison of the evolution of the video game industry in Japan, the US, and the UK. While primarily utilizing the methodology of economic geography to create a historically-oriented study, their insight that "the creation of industry-specific skills... juxtaposes social and economic forces" (Izushi and Aoyama 2006, 1846) shows the importance of cultural differences in the evolution of the games industry in different countries.

Methods

Rather than conducting a survey of VGM production and reception across the entirety of the American and Japanese industries, which would require an outsized effort to have sufficient depth, or an ethnography of many VGM composers active in both countries, which would be far more concrete but could obscure some ways in which reception manifests, I shall be analyzing four case studies. As previously mentioned, these case studies are split between two American composers and two groups of Japanese composers. I am choosing individuals for the American case studies and groups for the Japanese ones because I believe that the groups of Japanese composers demonstrate greater insights into VGM production in Japan than any individual composer I have found, and there are comparatively few groups of American VGM composers who work so closely together. Some may object that this creates an inherent imbalance between the cases, and I will grant that. However, as I shall demonstrate, none of these cases are completely "standard" for their nationality. Rather, I hope to elaborate on similarities and properly analyze differences so that the "unusual" way each of them interacts with the production-reception cycle can be placed in its proper context.

This is an archival study, not an ethnography. More specifically, it is an archival study that primarily uses what I call “mainstream internet sources,” though I draw on scholarly sources when relevant. While the exact sources I shall draw upon vary from case study to case study, in general, there are four types of sources I will be using: YouTube videos, posts on Twitter (or X), blog posts (both by composers and fans), and official promotional material. From these, I will draw insights into the production and reception of VGM, and then synthesize these insights into a comparison of differences in the media economies surrounding VGM in the United States and Japan.

Case Study #1: Austin Wintory

Austin Wintory (born 1984) is an American composer who writes for a variety of visual media, but is best known for (and will be analyzed here) video games. His VGM career began in college, when he started scoring student projects. It was around this time that he met Jenova Chen. Wintory would collaborate with Chen on two games: *Flow* (Thatgamecompany, 2007, based on an earlier thesis project) and *Journey* (Thatgamecompany, 2012). The latter received a Grammy nomination in the category of Best Score Soundtrack for Visual Media, making Wintory only the second composer to be nominated for VGM and the only one to be nominated in the 2010s (one decade after his nomination, the category of Best Score Soundtrack for Video Games and Other Interactive Media was created, which Wintory has been nominated for three times). Since *Journey*, Wintory has been a prolific VGM composer. His notable VGM soundtracks include, but are not limited to, *Monaco: What's Yours Is Mine* (Pocketwatch Games, 2013), *Leisure Suit Larry: Reloaded* (N-Fusion Interactive, 2013), *The Banner Saga* trilogy (Stoic, 2014-2018), *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* (Ubisoft Quebec, 2015), *Abzû* (Giant Squid, 2016), *Erica* (Flavourworks, 2019), *The Pathless* (Giant Squid, 2020), *Aliens: Fireteam Elite*

(Cold Iron Studio, 2021), *Stray Gods: The Roleplaying Musical* (Summerfall Studios, 2023), *Towerborne* (Stoic, 2024), *Eternal Strands* (Yellow Brick Games, 2025), and *Sword of the Sea* (Giant Squid, 2025).

As this list exemplifies, he works across a variety of genres, almost exclusively for Anglophone small-to-medium-sized developers who are either self-publishing or rely on smaller publishers (*Syndicate*, as a game made for the French corporation Ubisoft, is a notable exception). As such, he provides a good perspective on the broad cross-section of freelance American VGM composers, who typically work for such developers.

With this in mind, let's look at Wintory's social media activities, primarily on YouTube and Twitter. His YouTube channel has a description that is quite useful for our purposes: "This channel has 2 goals: under the hood of my work + shining a light on the inspiring work of my friends/colleagues" (YouTube 2026). These goals are fulfilled through a diverse and prolific catalog of videos, including full score videos for excerpts of his soundtrack, vlog-style video essays highlighting the work of other composers in film, television, and video games, "raw B-roll" (ibid.) from recording sessions, podcasts with others in the gaming industry (on both his channel and others), and curated behind-the-scenes videos. I will use an example from this last category to explain why Wintory exudes a "friendly and casual" public persona.

"How to Write One Minute of Music - THE PATHLESS" portrays the creative process as iterative and collaborative, in which both iteration and collaboration are essential to refining music from "raw ideas" into the polished soundtrack heard in-game. The video begins with Austin explaining that he began this video at the beginning of 2020, when he only had a few cues left to write for *The Pathless*, and that he "thought it would be fun" to record the process of writing a cue from the black page "to something you can play on Spotify or in the game"

(Wintory 2020a, 0:00-0:22). He then portrays the process of generating musical ideas as a trial-and-error approach. Already, he is acting with some self-deprecating humor, exaggerating how many different melodies he tried out on his piano before coming up with a one-measure ostinato with which he was satisfied (ibid., 0:52-1:06). I won't go through every part of the video, but I will note that every part of the process after the initial "coming up with ideas" phase is mediated by digital technology, from the Digital Performer DAW and samples used for composition, to the Sibelius music notation software used for MIDI transcription and the orchestration process, to the unspecified software used to prepare the parts (either Sibelius or a program that links with Sibelius), to the recording technology used by Abbey Road, Austin's personal studio, and the FAMES recording stage, to the Pro Tools software used for mixing, to the Wwise software used for implementing the music into the game engine. I will also note the various collaborators visible in the video, who are given even more of a spotlight than the technology. These are Mike Miller (who is "responsible for turning all of Austin's computer-based recordings into human-readable sheet music" (ibid., 4:53)), Susie Seiter (who is credited as "co-orchestrator" alongside Austin on most of his soundtracks (VGMdb 2025a)), Nick Fevola (the copyist at Steven Juliani Music (Wintory 2020a, 7:12)), Andrew Leonard (the bass clarinetist featured in this particular cue and given a personal recording session in Austin's personal studio (ibid., 8:44)), Steve Kempster (Austin's preferred mixer (VGMdb 2026)), and Steve Green (sound designer at Giant Squid responsible for implementing music into the game (Wintory 2020a, 11:22)). While Austin gives the most iterative attention to himself, all of these collaborators are depicted as creatives who help shape the music while remaining in direct conversation with Austin. I would also like to note that this video is structured like an intimate vlog, with humor and informal settings, but it contains high production values. The recording

sessions in London and Skopje are filmed by camera operators who are clearly not Austin (even more obviously in the case of the latter, as Austin states in the video that he was not physically present in Skopje but was giving suggestions via a phone call from LA (ibid., 9:49)). Despite this, the viewer always feels like Austin is honest about showing the intricacies of VGM music production. This is evident in the comments section, which is filled with people showing appreciation to Austin for demystifying his process. From this video alone, we can see that Austin Wintory uses detailed behind-the-scenes videos to curate a public persona of intimacy and an image of VGM production as collaborative, technologically mediated, and filled with equal parts passion and hard work.

Wintory's YouTube channel conveys a sense of directness, typically associated with full-time YouTubers rather than VGM composers. He uploads frequently and provides extensive detail on most projects he works on. This, combined with the fact that these behind-the-scenes videos are managed by Wintory himself rather than an employer or PR manager, contributes to a persona that is energetic and passionate, making every time he promotes his work feel authentic. He also does vlogs and podcasts, bringing in other people in the industry as a way to "spread the love," a theme reinforced by the Spotify playlist of 365 tracks by colleagues and acquaintances he made for his 40th birthday (ibid. 2023a). Lastly, Wintory has used his YouTube channel to connect with potential collaborators, hosting three competitions whose winners have worked with him on various game soundtracks (ibid. 2020b, 2021, 2023b). These three points show that Austin Wintory uses YouTube and social media to make the technological and collaborative aspects of VGM production as open to the public as possible.

Case Study #2: Carlos “insaneintherainmusic” Eiene

Carlos Eiene began his career in VGM quite early. He began his career early on in high school, uploading jazz arrangements of VGM to YouTube under the name “insaneintherainmusic,” making him quite the early starter. After graduating from the Berklee College of Music, he started getting ad-hoc requests for jazz arrangements in albums from gaming companies like Studio Theophilus, Hidden Variable Studios, and Wizards of the Coast, while also performing saxophone on Lena Raine’s acclaimed soundtrack to *Chicory: A Colorful Tale* (Wishes Unlimited, 2021). These connections helped him get noticed, and in 2021, he was hired by Diamondhenge Entertainment to co-compose, with fellow YouTube VGM cover artist Shady Cicada, the soundtrack to *Tyrion Cuthbert: Attorney of the Arcane*, a courtroom-based visual novel released in 2023. The connections he made online, often with other Americans, then helped him launch into the indie game space. He wrote the soundtracks for *Infinite Guitars* (Nikko Nikko, 2023) and *Battle Suit Aces* (Trinket Studios, 2025), two games that were well-received by players but did not make much of a splash in the American indie gaming scene.

Then, on October 15, 2025, Eiene released a 30-second-long video on his YouTube channel titled “I Worked on Music as an Arranger for 『Pokémon: Legends Z-A』!” In it, he announced that he worked as an arranger on the soundtrack for *Pokémon: Legends Z-A* (Game Freak, 2025), which was released on the following day. Due to his longtime love of the Pokémon franchise (in 2021, he released a *Diamond, Pearl & Platinum* tribute album titled *Sinnohvation*), he says that having his name in the credits for one of the games “still feels like a dream” (insaneintherainmusic 2025, 0:20). He then asks those playing to “enjoy your journey through Lumiose City” (ibid., 0:24) before ending the video. The video description, which usually is dense with information on this channel, is completely empty, and the comments section contains

no replies from Eiene, despite containing comments from esteemed Pokémon YouTubers such as Nathaniel Bandy, GlitchxCity, and TrueGreen7. His Twitter account (@insanerainmusic) only comments on his involvement in four posts from the same day. One is an upload of the same video he uploaded to YouTube, two are rephrases of things he said in the video, and the last one is a photo of him holding a Nintendo Switch 2 containing *Legends: Z-A*'s title screen, captioned with “I can’t believe I’m saying this... but I am so incredibly grateful to announce that I worked on music as an arranger for 『Pokémon: Legends Z-A』!”

The video and the Twitter posts, together with available information about the development of *Legends: Z-A*, suggest that Eiene worked for Game Freak, the Japanese company primarily responsible for the Pokémon games, rather than Nintendo of America or another intermediary in the US. I state this because the use of 『』brackets is extremely common in Japanese typing, and Game Freak is the only company credited with development. Prior to *Legends: Z-A*, the only Americans Game Freak hired for music in their Pokémon games were Toby Fox (for *Sword/Shield*, *Scarlet/Violet*, and arrangements in the latter’s DLC (downloadable content)) and Ed Sheeran (for *Scarlet/Violet*’s end credits song), both of whom were far more famous than Eiene when they were hired by Game Freak. This leads to the following question: how did an American VGM composer mainly involved in the American indie gaming scene become an arranger for one of the biggest Japanese games of 2025?

Despite extensive research, I have been unable to find a definitive answer, primarily because Eiene has remained silent on the matter, but I have found sufficient evidence to support plausible narratives. Under a post on r/NintendoSwitch (dated to October 17, 2025 at 2:05 pm) reacting to the announcement of Eiene’s work on the soundtrack, user Lousy_Username commented (the same day at 3:43 pm), “I did see him have a little exchange with Tsukasa

Tawada recently, who responded saying he was impressed with his covers. So he's certainly been noticed by people with influence." For context, Tsukasa Tawada is a Japanese VGM composer, best known for his work with Enix prior to its merger with Squaresoft (resulting in today's juggernaut Square Enix), who worked on a few Pokémon spin-off games not developed by Game Freak. Tawada is far more active on YouTube and social media than his Game Freak counterparts, and has collaborated with both Japanese and American musicians on covers of his own VGM (Tawada 2025). As such, he is a perfect "bridge" between the Japanese and American industries. Additionally, Tawada made a post to his Twitter account (@TsukasaTawada) on May 27, 2021 (at 3:34 am), taking credit for James Turner, a British character artist who worked at the same company that developed the aforementioned Pokémon spin-offs, getting a job at Game Freak. However, it should be noted that Tawada does not appear to be in touch with Game Freak after 2015. Another hypothesis was put forward under the same Reddit post by user "asperatology," who, on the same day as the original Reddit post (at 2:36 pm), hypothesized that Eiene got the job due to "networking. His works are related to Toby Fox (*Undertale* covers) and thus caught the attention of Game Freak." What "asperatology" did not properly explain was that Eiene did not merely cover *Undertale* themes on his YouTube channel: he got approval from Toby Fox in 2016 to compile and release them as *Live at Grillby's* (VGMdb 2022a), significantly contributed to Toby Fox's pop collaborations with Itoki Hana (ibid. 2022b, 2023a), and had three of his *Undertale* arrangements played during Toby Fox's livestream in honor of the game's 10th anniversary (ibid. 2025b).

Both narratives are plausible given the information listed above, but they suggest curious things about how both Eiene and Game Freak are adapting their traditional work cultures. For Eiene, who usually emphasizes performance as a key part of his music and goes into great detail

in that area, the lack of information provided about his arrangements or the recording sessions for the *Legends: Z-A* soundtrack is curious. Conversely, Game Freak's hiring of a freelance arranger through connections from other freelancers marks a departure from traditional Japanese video game labor practices, which privilege connections made during periods of contract work. What may be happening here is that Game Freak is expanding its methods of hiring for VGM production, but seeks to maintain continuity by enforcing practices relating to public persona, typically limited to in-house employees, upon freelancers.

Eiene's work relates to the overall question asked in this thesis because, listening to his arrangements, I understand a level of emotional involvement in video game music. Specifically, listening on YouTube, where the comments felt like part of a community, even if it was just a bunch of people coming together to listen. It felt to me like a communal listening experience. I then wondered how a platform like this, an online communal listening space, could launch him into being successful not just as a fan arranger but for official compositions for a Japanese game. It made me wonder about the relationships between fan music and the gaming franchise business. The question of moving from being an American composer working in American games to an American working in Japanese games is an interesting one for me. My analysis is limited by the available data, notably the fact that individual names of game composers are not always made public by Japanese game companies. I do hear a change over time: his aesthetics have become cleaner, and the sounds of the accompanying instruments without melodies, especially rhythmic instruments, are recorded more clearly. Also, some arrangements are simpler in the original fan music than in the versions he later published for games. Future research could explore this more with a larger set of attributions under Game Freak.

Carlos Eiene generally cultivates a friendly persona but typically only shares insights into VGM production through recording session videos, though he did release a video discussing the composing process for *Tyrion Cuthbert*. Then, for *Pokémon Legends: Z-A*, he went completely silent on the process, implying that working for Game Freak forced a less outspoken persona. This “less outspoken persona” is typical of Japanese VGM production, which tends to adopt a more linear approach to the production-reception cycle.

Case Study #3: FromSoftware Music Team

This case study concerns the team responsible for composing the soundtrack to almost every FromSoftware game since 2011, most of which have been published by Bandai Namco. The team's composition has changed over time, but its five most prominent members are Motoi Sakuraba, Yuka Kitamura, Tsukasa Saito,¹ Shoji Miyazawa, and Tai Tomisawa. Before we can explore their public persona, however, we must answer the following question: is this team a group of freelancers, in-house composers, or a combination of the two? At first, this questions seems to be answered by an IGN article describing Kitamura “exiting from FromSoftware” to become a freelance composer (Yang 2023), but the situation is more complicated than that, as Sakuraba wrote music for games developed by companies with no connection to FromSoftware around the same time that he was composing music for the Dark Souls trilogy and *Steel Battalion: Heavy Armor* (FromSoftware, 2012).

Initially, I was stuck. For the past 15 years, FromSoftware has rarely released information about its internal work processes. However, thanks to a GDC talk (Fowler et al. 2016) regarding American collaboration with FromSoftware on *Bloodborne* (FromSoftware, 2015) and a post on r/fromsoftware on December 11, 2021 (at 10:16 am) regarding FromSoftware’s in-house rock

¹ His surname in Japanese is spelled サイト, and thus should be transcribed as “Saito.” I have seen official press releases transcribing it as “Saitoh,” and once called him that myself, but for the sake of consistency I shall keep it accurate to a direct Romaji transcription, which also appears in some official press releases.

band, I was able to determine that, up to 2019, FromSoftware grouped its in-house sound designers and composers into a team called “FreQuency,” which was also the name of the aforementioned rock band. FreQuency was only credited on two soundtracks (VGMdb 2024a), but I was able to infer that all composers who were listed as members of FreQuency between 2011 and 2019 were FromSoftware’s in-house composers. Sakuraba is not listed as a member of FreQuency, and that aforementioned single soundtrack is *Steel Battalion*, which is credited as a collaboration between Sakuraba and FreQuency (ibid. 2023b). Therefore, FromSoftware uses its in-house sound team for its music, but supplements it with freelance composers, some of whom, like Motoi Sakuraba, are frequently employed by FromSoftware, creating a fluid team of in-house and freelance musicians who collaborate closely.

To accommodate this fluid structure, FromSoftware employs fluid methods to promote its game soundtracks. For example, on September 9, 2022, FromSoftware promoted the release of the soundtrack album of *Elden Ring* (the game had been released over 6 months prior) by releasing two pieces of behind-the-scenes media in association with PlayStation.² The first was a video on the official PlayStation YouTube channel, titled “Elden Ring - Behind the Scenes with The Budapest Film Orchestra | PS5 & PS4 Games.” From a musician’s perspective, the video offers little, consisting of a recording of the battle theme “Erdtree Knights,” as it would be heard on the soundtrack, over a montage of professionally recorded game footage and Budapest Film Orchestra recording sessions, clearly not synchronized to the music (PlayStation 2022). However, as far as I can tell, this was the first confirmation that the Budapest Film Orchestra recorded the soundtrack. The other media release, which was more notable, was Tsukasa Saito's post on the official PlayStation Blog (Saito 2022). In this post, Saito promotes the soundtrack,

² It should be noted that *Elden Ring* was not published by Sony Interactive Entertainment but by Bandai Namco internationally and FromSoftware themselves in Japan.

provides links to the aforementioned video and specific tracks on Spotify, and spends five short paragraphs describing the composition process. Saito describes the process as one initiated by auteurist director Hidetaka Miyazaki, who provides briefs describing “the mood and imagery desired for the piece, including information about a character’s background, or the location/situation envisioned for battle music.” The composers then work from this brief, as well as “concept designs and in-game screenshots,” while composing each piece (ibid.). Each piece is iterated upon via feedback between Miyazaki and the composers before it gets final approval and is sent to the “orchestrator and performers” (it should be noted that no specific orchestration or arrangement credit is given for any official release of this game’s soundtrack, so the identity of this orchestrator is unknown). The involvement of the composers does not end there, as Saitoh describes how the composers revised the performance directions for “Song of Honor” during the recording process to make the track more fitting as a “warriors’ song.” It should be noted that Saito exclusively uses the plural second-person when describing the work of the composition team, sublimating his identity to the group effort, except for when he describes his pride in composing the game’s main theme, which he describes as the “song I’m the most emotionally attached to” (ibid.).³ This indicates that, despite the blog’s more informal setting, Saito is operating here not as an individualist composer in the American vein but as a spokesman for the FromSoftware music team, while his personal connection to composing a specific track still comes through.

However, this description does not adequately capture the public persona of the entire FromSoftware music team, especially in the case of Yuka Kitamura, who ended her contract with FromSoftware in 2023 (Yang 2023, Carter 2023). After formally leaving the company, she

³ While Japanese native speakers can sometimes mix up English-language pronouns, the clear difference between “watashi” and “watakushi” in Japanese, which are pretty close to “I” and “we” in English, combined with Saito’s very intentional distinction between uses of “I” and “we,” indicate that was not the case here.

contributed to *Elden Ring: Shadow of the Erdtree* (FromSoftware, 2024) and *Elden Ring: Nightreign* (FromSoftware, 2025) as a freelance composer (and music programmer for the latter (VGMdb 2024b, 2025c)). In 2025, Kitamura gave an interview with the independent French publication PlayStation Inside (Clause 2025). In this interview, she goes into detail about her experience in the industry and her personal approach to VGM, bringing in specific examples from multiple FromSoftware soundtracks. While I do not have the space to cover every fascinating insight from this interview, I would like to draw attention to the moments when Kitamura emphasizes her individuality within the team. She reflects on writer's block, highlights part of her personal composition style, goes into music theory to explain how she composed "Abyss Watchers" from *Dark Souls III* (FromSoftware, 2016), describes experimentation with traditional Japanese instruments during development of *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* (FromSoftware, 2019) as a personal process, and much more. This personal emphasis strongly contrasts with Saito's emphasis on the team in his blog post. The impression given by these two online publications is that Kitamura speaks for herself, while Saito speaks for the FromSoftware music team, or even the company as a whole. This is supported by the fact that Saito does not discuss future plans (Saito 2022), likely because it would be against company policy to discuss development on unannounced projects, while Kitamura discusses her first experiences composing for anime, which would not be viewable by the public until after PlayStation Inside published the interview (Clause 2025).

Admittedly, this too is an oversimplification of Kitamura's public persona in relation to FromSoftware. One of Kitamura's earliest PR interactions with an English-speaking audience was a Game Informer feature video published on their YouTube channel two months before the release of *Sekiro* (Game Informer 2019). In this 5-minute-long video, Kitamura answers

questions from a Game Informer journalist about the music production process for *Sekiro*. She answers questions in Japanese, but a voiceover provides her responses in English, and the offscreen interviewer's questions are presented in English (although I suspect they were originally in Japanese, with the English-language questions added in post). Occasionally, the video cuts to footage of the office space where Kitamura works and *Sekiro* gameplay. Compared to her responses in the PlayStation Inside interview, Kitamura is more team-oriented here, using “we” while describing much of the production process and acting as a spokesperson for the team. Interestingly, she implies at one point that she is acting as a spokesperson for FreQuency, rather than the FromSoftware music team as a whole:

Interviewer: What's it like working with external partners on this soundtrack, then? Is it much different from what you've done in the past?

Yuka Kitamura: It's really interesting working with external composers as well. For *Bloodborne*, we had this approach, for the *Dark Souls* series, we worked with Sakuraba-san, and for *Sekiro* as well we have this collaborative composition. It's really interesting, while we're making music for games they have a unique take on it as well, and they provide new stimulus, and they provide a different level of warmth for the melody or a different baseline or a different drum beat that can help us reflect our own ideas.

(ibid., 2:39-3:13)

Kitamura's reference to “external composers” is interesting for multiple reasons. First, it indicates that (at least at the time) Kitamura considered FreQuency to be the core of the FromSoftware music team. This is definitely true from a legal and business perspective, but I will later posit that Motoi Sakuraba is considered just as core to the musical identity of the *Dark*

Souls series as the in-house composers. Secondly, despite Kitamura's use of plural pronouns while describing FreQuency's interactions with freelance composers (ibid.), the only other composer credited for *Sekiro* is Noriyuki Asakura (VGMdb 2022c). Asakura was never a member of FreQuency and, as far as I can tell, was never under contract with FromSoftware, although he frequently composed for them in their pre-*Souls* days and is still a common collaborator with Bandai Namco (ibid. 2021). Thirdly, FreQuency is not directly credited on the *Sekiro* soundtrack album, which has notes emphasizing Kitamura and Asakura's collaborations with sound engineers and session musicians (ibid. 2022c). Given this context, Kitamura's use of plural pronouns while indirectly referring to FreQuency is enigmatic. However, one possible explanation, supported by footage showing Kitamura working in an office space with multiple other composers, is that FreQuency's professional framework, which encourages expression through a team persona, remained intact throughout 2019 even as it started *de facto* disappearing. Therefore, in 2019, Kitamura viewed her status as the sole in-house composer on *Sekiro* as meaning that she was the spokesperson for FromSoftware's in-house composers on the company's biggest project at the time. This might explain why this feature is her first appearance of such length to be published by English speakers, something reflected by a commenter who wrote that the video was "rare footage of yuka kitamura (sic) existing."

When examining the relationship between FromSoftware's in-house and freelance composers, *Bloodborne* stands out as an especially relevant case. *Bloodborne*'s score was composed by three members of FreQuency and three American composers hired by Sony Interactive Entertainment (then Sony Computer Entertainment), with orchestration done by two British arrangers. According to Peter Scaturro, senior music producer for Sony Computer Entertainment America (SCEA), it was the idea of the in-house composers to bring in freelance

composers they had not collaborated with before, and it was Hidetaka Miyazaki who selected Ryan Amon to join the team (Fowler et al. 2016, 1:30-2:45). After SCEA hired Amon, they hired the rest of the freelance composers and arrangers for the *Bloodborne* soundtrack (ibid., 5:57). Despite the composers working on two continents (and the orchestrators working on a third), a consistent sound was achieved on the soundtrack. As Scaturro tells it, this was due to all composers having access to Miyazaki's "audio design doc" and 20 temp tracks⁴ assembled by audio producers at Sony's various offices in Japan, the US, and Europe (ibid., 6:40-7:32), as well as an agreement early on in production to use a specific orchestration (ibid., 8:47-9:17) containing a 44-piece string orchestra, 10 brass instruments, and a 32-piece SATB choir (plus timpani, chimes, and "novelty instruments" like cimballo and berimbau). Interestingly, Penka Kouneva, one of the two aforementioned arrangers, says that she enhanced the size of the brass section for some tracks and kept some orchestral FX samples (used in DAW mockups to imitate stabs or extended techniques) alongside the recorded orchestral parts, partially to help the soundtrack stand apart from the diegetic combat sounds and partially as the result of conventions "in orchestrating fantasy, horror, and science fiction games and Hollywood movies" (ibid., 18:56-19:22). Kouneva notes in the talk that she received feedback from all six composers (ibid., 34:06-34:25), so it seems that, despite their compositional collaboration process directly engaging with orchestration, both Japanese and American composers were willing to acknowledge the orchestration and recording phases of this soundtrack's production as separate from their collaborative framework (albeit still influenced by their feedback in a process of iteration). While I have not been able to find further specifics on the collaborative process for

⁴ Temp tracks originate from film and TV music production, where pre-existing pieces of music are used while editing the picture component and potentially as a guide to the composer as they score specific scenes. In video games, where music has a more flexible relationship with image, "temp tracks" can refer to pre-existing music used during production either in a similar manner to films and TV or as part of a "sonic moodboard" for composers to refer to while composing original music.

Bloodborne, what I have already told you demonstrates that the FromSoftware music team is willing to initiate collaborations across borders when supported by non-Japanese companies.

Therefore, it appears that FromSoftware is very enthusiastic about assembling both in-house and freelance collaborators for its music team. How unusual is this for a Japanese studio? Well, it is not entirely unheard of. For example, every Super Smash Bros. game from *Brawl* (Sora Ltd., 2008) onwards has featured freelance composers in addition to those employed by companies with various relationships to Nintendo (Nintendo 2007), and every mainline Pokémon game with American musicians working on the soundtrack uses this setup (Lee 2019). However, Super Smash Bros. games have enormous soundtracks, and Game Freak usually considers its freelance composers as guests rather than collaborators (ibid.). FromSoftware, on the other hand, places great emphasis on the importance of its “external composers.” Let’s take the example of the Dark Souls trilogy. For the first game in the trilogy (FromSoftware, 2011), Motoi Sakuraba was the lead composer and wrote every cue in the soundtrack except for the character creation theme “A Moment’s Peace,” which was written by in-house composer Yuji Takenouchi (VGMdb 2022d). While no executive at FromSoftware expected *Dark Souls* to be such a massive success, it is still notable that they had an in-house composer on hand but let a freelancer take the lead. What is even more notable is what occurred during the development of *Dark Souls II* (FromSoftware, 2014) and *III* (FromSoftware, 2016). For the former, Yuka Kitamura played a larger role on the soundtrack than Takenouchi did for the first game, but Motoi Sakuraba was still lead composer (ibid. 2022e). For the latter, however, Sakuraba and Kitamura’s roles were reversed (Greening 2016). From an aesthetic perspective, the style of each game’s soundtrack marks an evolution from jagged and dissonant dark fantasy with some grand moments to epic tragedy with some disconcerting moments. In light of the shifting workplace

relations, the careful and thoughtful execution of this evolution could only have occurred if the collaboration between Sakuraba and Kitamura was closer than is normal between an in-house composer and a freelance musician in a Japanese studio.

From just these short analyses of the interactions of various members of the FromSoftware music team, we can see how these interactions serve as negotiations of group and individual personas within the Japanese gaming media ecosystem and FromSoftware's workplace culture. We can also see that the FromSoftware music team is willing to tie VGM production into audience reception, as evidenced by Tsukasa Saito's blog post and Yuka Kitamura's statements, but in a manner more overtly controlled than the YouTube videos of Austin Wintory or Carlos Eiene, without the sense of audience intimacy engendered by the personalities and actions of those composers. The FromSoftware music team's nature as a combination of in-house and freelance musicians, combined with the differences in openness between Saito and Kitamura, raises questions about how the positionality of Japanese VGM composers affects their public persona and, by extension, their relationship with the production-reception cycle.

Synthesizing the Case Studies

These three case studies contain many internal complexities, as well as salient points to compare and contrast. Together, they illuminate how national media ecosystems and workplace cultures shape the public personas of VGM composers and, crucially, how those shapes are neither rigid nor uniform.

To see this statement reflected in American VGM, we only need to look at Austin Wintory. His use of YouTube and Twitter to demystify his creative process and emphasize his personality is, in some ways, emblematic of freelance American VGM composers, who cultivate

visibility to attract clients and often view “behind-the-scenes work” as good promotional material. However, Wintory goes beyond his colleagues by hosting competitions, spotlighting colleagues, and narrating his compositional process in detail. All of these acts highlight the “reception” side of the production-reception cycle, and therefore imply a strategic awareness of the public’s role in the media ecosystem of the American video game industry.

The FromSoftware music team represents a contrasting mode. Their output is shaped by a corporate structure that discourages individualism in favor of collective identity. This is most noticeable in Tsukasa Saito’s blog post, where he primarily uses plural pronouns, using “I” only for a single moment of personal emotional attachment (Saito 2022). FreQuency’s institutional framework, even as it dissolved after 2019, continued to shape how in-house composers presented themselves publicly. The team’s engagement with the production-reception cycle is largely unidirectional: official promotional material, such as the PlayStation Blog post and the Budapest Film Orchestra video, arrives fully formed, without the iterative, behind-the-scenes quality that characterizes Wintory’s media presence. This can be primarily attributed to Japan’s media ecosystems and workplace culture, which encourage company loyalty. In Japan’s entertainment industries, the idea of “company loyalty” often manifests as the sublimation of employees’ public personas to the marketing department of their employer. These marketing departments, in turn, reinforce a unidirectional approach to the production-reception cycles. However, things are not always so cut-and-dry in the Japanese video game industry. All the way back in the 1980s, Nintendo R&D threw out the rulebook for what a game development workplace was supposed to look like (Sheff 1999, 39-40). Today, FromSoftware encourages its in-house composers to collaborate with freelance musicians, some of whom become closely associated with the company. The story behind *Bloodborne* even indicates that the in-house

composers have a high level of input into the structure of audio labor for each FromSoftware project. Even though Kitamura's 2019 interview generally shows a sublimation of her public persona to that of FreQuency, she still takes the time to talk about her personal involvement in recording sessions, and her free-spirited nature from 2023 onwards (exemplified in Clause 2025) did not prevent her from continuing to collaborate on FromSoftware's soundtracks. Therefore, even though the FromSoftware music team's approach to the production-reception cycle is one where the "reception" side is addressed through official channels and carefully timed promotional releases rather than ongoing, informal engagement, complexities in their approach to workplaces, employment, and composer personas indicate that FromSoftware is willing to experiment within the industry's media ecosystem.

Carlos Eiene sits between these two poles in an instructive way. As an American composer working primarily in the indie space, he follows conventions closer to Wintory's model, cultivating an online community through performance videos and a warm, approachable persona. Yet his engagement with Game Freak disrupts this pattern. His announcement of his work on *Pokémon: Legends Z-A* is conspicuously spare (insaneintherainmusic 2025). In its sparsity, it is consistent with the practices of Game Freak, a Japanese company that tightly controls information about its internal processes. This suggests that Game Freak, in hiring Eiene, applied its in-house norms to a freelancer from outside its usual labor ecosystem. Eiene's case thus functions as a fascinating cross-section of two national media ecosystems: an American composer, shifting his public persona to conform to the expectations of a Japanese employer, even as his broader career continues to operate according to American conventions.

The Japanese studios investigated here are notable for their use of "bridges" who connect the American and Japanese VGM ecosystems. Toby Fox is perhaps the most prominent such

“bridge,” having made connections in the American indie game space (including Carlos Eiene), who he then connected to Japanese media ecosystems once he started composing for mainline *Pokémon* games and even *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* (Sora Ltd., 2018). To hire lesser-known Americans, Game Freak seems to rely on American “bridges” (e.g., Toby Fox) and Japanese ones (e.g., Tsukasa Tawada) to make use of their American connections. This creates an interesting contrast with *Bloodborne*, where musicians outside of Japan were originally considered due to the encouragement of people at FromSoftware, but ultimately hired in a more professional manner by companies in the US and UK. This shows that Japanese studios, while generally retaining a unidirectional approach to the production-reception cycle and a restrictive approach to composer personas, are willing to experiment with Japanese video game labor conventions, complicating my model and highlighting an area for further research.

What unites all three cases is the centrality of the production-reception cycle as a structuring force driving every comment (most of which are posted on social media) about VGM production. Whether a composer chooses to make that cycle visible (as Wintory does), to manage it through the framework of a particular workplace culture (as FromSoftware does), or to selectively suppress it at a particular employer’s behest (as Eiene does with Game Freak), different approaches to the cycle shape not only how music is received but how composers construct and present their professional identities. Each approach reflects the national media ecosystem and workplace culture in which the composer (or company) operates, and how they navigate their particular context in the age of social media.

Conclusion

In this paper, I set out to examine how public personas of American and Japanese VGM composers reflect differences in each country’s media ecosystems and workplace cultures. After

analyzing the public presentation of VGM production by Austin Wintory, Carlos Eiene, and the FromSoftware music team, I have come to the conclusion that differences between American and Japanese VGM production, including composers' approaches to the production-reception cycle, go beyond matters of personal temperament or corporate policy to reflect the media ecosystems and workplace institutions that structure relationships between composers, corporations, and audiences.

However, we must resist the temptation to treat American and Japanese VGM production as solidly distinct national categories. Each case study introduced complications. Wintory is far more transparent than other American composers, indicating that his public persona might be a reaction to Anglophone workplace cultures as much as it is a reflection of his status as an American freelance composer. Eiene's career, which has taken him to both sides of the Pacific, demonstrates that the norms governing public persona are not intrinsic to composers but are adaptable depending on the institutional context in which a composer works. And the FromSoftware music team, often treated as a monolith by fans and journalists alike, turns out to be a fluid assemblage of in-house and freelance composers whose public presentations vary considerably depending on their employment status and the platform on which they are speaking.

Taken together, these complications point toward a broader conclusion: the gap between American and Japanese VGM production cultures is real, but it is a gap that is traversable, and increasingly so. The careers of figures like Toby Fox and the existence of "bridges" like Tsukasa Tawada suggest that the cross-cultural movement of composers, aesthetic influences, and labor practices is accelerating. Game Freak's hiring of Eiene (however it came about) marks a departure from traditional Japanese studio hiring practices that would have been difficult to imagine a decade ago. Kitamura's post-employment candor in the PlayStation Inside interview

suggests that even the norms governing what in-house Japanese composers may say publicly are beginning to shift, at least once the institutional constraints are removed.

This paper is limited in scope. As an archival study relying on publicly available internet sources, it cannot access the internal deliberations of companies, the private communications between composers and employers, or the experiences of the many musicians and sound designers whose names never appear in official credits (more likely in Japan) or online discussions (or only as footnotes). The scholarly literature remains weighted toward European and American contexts, leaving significant gaps in our understanding of Japanese VGM labor that future ethnographic work could begin to fill. The cases examined here are also, partially by design, atypical: Wintory's community involvement, Eiene's unusual path into a Japanese franchise, and FromSoftware's global cult following all make them outliers as much as representatives of their respective industries.

Despite its limitations, this research paper shows how understanding national workplace cultures and the production-reception cycle can provide new insights into the public personas of American and Japanese VGM composers and how they position their social media use within national media ecosystems. The similarities, differences, and internal complexities of the cases discussed in this paper are ripe for further research, and the questions asked here have yet to be applied to many American and Japanese composers. What is apparent from my findings is that national differences in media ecosystems and workplace cultures, along with particular reactions to changes in those frameworks caused by globalization in the age of social media, affect how American and Japanese VGM composers formulate their public personas.

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