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Loving the Monster: Musical Reimaginings of Race, Gender,
Queerness, and Disability in Indie Video Games

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Musicology

by

Hyeonjin Park

2026

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Loving the Monster: Musical Reimaginings of Race, Gender,
Queerness, and Disability in Indie Video Games

by

Hyeonjin Park

Doctor of Philosophy in Musicology

University of California, Los Angeles, 2026

Professor Timothy D. Taylor, Chair

In this dissertation, I focus on marginalized and intersecting identities—often perceived as monstrous by the dominant culture—and argue for alternative ways to understand identity formation through the lens of monstrosity by primarily analyzing the music and sound from four indie video games: *Undertale* (2015), *Night in the Woods* (2017), *Celeste* (2018), and *Hades* (2020). I turn to the monster as a site of possibility and a way of being for marginalized peoples, who, in response to being Othered, have created

something more for themselves that humans and the human category cannot offer. I blend interpretive analysis and ethnography to propose alternative ways in which the player/listener can hear and listen to the queer, gendered, racialized, and/or disabled monster, all the while embracing the complexities of their monstrosity. I am in dialogue with queer theorist Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick's theorization of reparative reading and argue that repair has its limitations. Instead, I inquire *why* the monster needs to be repaired and *who* actually benefits from repair. In this dissertation, I am not calling for an empathetic player/listener who will "humanize" the monster but, rather, I demonstrate how, when musically animated, monsters can refuse to follow the normative conventions by which the human category has been historically defined.

Chapter 1 explores how identity has been discussed in both academic and non-academic spaces, as well as how music and sound can be tied to identity, particularly in video games. Chapter 2 investigates the relationship between horror and the monster. Chapter 3 turns from horror to failure framed through the lens of different temporalities. Last but not least, Chapter 4 considers how, in spite of their associations with horror and failure, monsters make worlds for themselves that let them *be*, which I argue is frequently done through a disidentificatory practice.

The dissertation of Hyeonjin Park is approved.

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2026

TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS	v
LIST OF FIGURES.....	vi
LIST OF TABLES	viii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	ix
VITA.....	xvi
INTRODUCTION: FOR THE LOVE OF MONSTERS.....	1
The Monster and the Other, A Brief History.....	4
Musically Animating the Monster.....	16
The Promise of Monsters	29
Methodology and Chapters Overview	33
CHAPTER 1: FINDING IDENTITY AND REPRESENTATION	39
Players' Thoughts on Music and Identity in Video Games	53
Conclusion	77
CHAPTER 2: THE HORROR OF MONSTERS	86
The Distorted Self in <i>Celeste</i>	92
Monstrous Existence in <i>Night in the Woods</i>	107
Conclusion	122
CHAPTER 3: MONSTROUS FAILURES	123
The Failure's Lament in <i>Hades</i>	129
Repeatedly Failing in <i>Celeste</i>	148
Conclusion	165
CHAPTER 4: MAKING A WORLD FOR MONSTERS	167
Finding Queer Loves in <i>Undertale</i>	177
Alive and Well in Hell in <i>Hades</i>	201
Conclusion	223
CONCLUSION: THE MONSTER, REIMAGINED	228
WORKS CITED.....	239

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. A Tumblr user's post on the divine and monstrous.....	30
Figure 2. Ganondorf playing the organ in <i>The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time</i>	88
Figure 3. The sanity meter (top left) in <i>Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem</i>	90
Figure 4. Madeline looking at Badeline in the mirror in the second level.	93
Figure 5. Madeline having a panic attack.....	95
Figure 6. Transcriptions of Madeline's leitmotif (top) and its variation used for Badeline (bottom).	98
Figure 7. The multi-eyed swimming creatures found in the fifth level. When the monster cannot see Madeline, it will float idly (left). When Madeline is in view, though, the monster changes color and quickly chases after the player-character (right).	100
Figure 8. A closeup of the pride and trans flags on Madeline's desk, tucked behind her keyboard.....	104
Figure 9. Mae Borowski (center) and other notable characters around her from <i>Night in the Woods</i>	108
Figure 10. A transcription of the destruction leitmotif.....	110
Figure 11. Mae appears "normal" for most of the game, even when other characters remark that she seems more tired than usual (left). Near the end of the game, she appears unwell (right).	112
Figure 12. The members of the Deep Hollow Hollerers, who Mae must find in certain dream sequences.	114
Figure 13. Transcriptions of the decline leitmotif (top) and Possum Springs's two-part leitmotif (center and bottom).	117
Figure 14. Orpheus as depicted in <i>Hades</i>	131
Figure 15. A closeup of Orpheus (right) and Eurydice (left) in the oil painting, "Orpheus and Eurydice" (c. 1709) by French artist, Jean Raoux (1677–1734).	135
Figure 16. Orpheus in the oil painting, "Orfeo con la viola" (c. 1675) by Italian artist, Cesare Gennari (1637–1688).	136
Figure 17. A transcription of the first line from Orpheus's lament, with the descending lament "bass" noted in red boxes.	143
Figure 18. One area of the third level with a floating strawberry surrounded by squirming blobs.....	149
Figure 19. The cassette tape's location found in the fourth level of <i>Celeste</i>	155
Figure 20. The player is eventually asked to keep a feather floating as a breathing exercise that would lean to Madeline calming down.	160

Figure 21. Mettaton first appears to the player-character as a box-shaped robot (top), eventually transforming into a flamboyant humanoid later in the game (bottom).	179
Figure 22. A transcription of the melody of “Once Upon a Time.” The three sections of the leitmotif are marked as A, B, and C.	185
Figure 23. Flowey prepares to kill the player-character (represented by a red heart) with pellets.	186
Figure 24. Three events that the player-character can potentially experience with Papyrus (top), Napstablook (center), and/or Undyne (bottom).	190
Figure 25. Mettaton’s questions on his quiz show become increasingly and unnecessarily over-the-top. He eventually presents a long math problem that is evocative of standardized tests, of which players of certain age groups and nationalities may have unpleasant memories.	194
Figure 26. A closeup of Eurydice’s living space in Asphodel.	203
Figure 27. Eurydice as depicted in <i>Hades</i>	206
Figure 28. Eurydice in the oil painting, “Wounded Eurydice” (1868/70) by French artist, Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot (1796–1875).	208
Figure 29. A transcription of the final bars of “Good Riddance.”	223

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Every theme and leitmotif that appears in the track, “Bring It In, Guys!” in chronological order.....	198
Table 2. Excerpts of the English translations of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth as told by Plato and Apollodorus, with bolded text highlighting when Eurydice is mentioned.	210
Table 3. Excerpts of the English translations and the original Latin of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth as told by Ovid and Virgil, with bolded text highlighting when Eurydice says “farewell” (or “vale” in Latin).	212

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VITA

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2024	“Can the Pikmin Speak?” <i>Music and the Moving Image</i> 17, no. 1, 35–47. Co-authored with Jordan Hugh Sam.
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INTRODUCTION: FOR THE LOVE OF MONSTERS

Since childhood, I've been faithful to monsters. I have been saved and absolved by them, because monsters, I believe, are patron saints of our blissful imperfection, and they allow and embody the possibility of failing, and live.

— Guillermo del Toro¹

My earliest memories of monsters and related beings and creatures are not the ones found in Western media and mythologies, but, rather, from Korean folklore. Some often have malevolent motives like gumiho (구미호), a nine-tailed fox spirit sometimes taking the form of a beautiful woman; and gwisin (귀신), which are supernatural, ghostlike beings roaming the world of the living due to unresolved grudges and resentment.² However, there are also yong (용) (i.e., dragons), which vastly differ from European folklore in that they are closely tied to water and good fortune as opposed to fire and ruin; and haetae (해태), a one-horned scaled beast resembling a lion with a bell hanging around its neck that wards off fires and symbolizes justice.³ Then there are

¹ NBC, "Guillermo del Toro Wins Best Director at the 2018 Golden Globes," YouTube, January 7, 2018, video, 2:20, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ykv23HpruCo>, 0:13–0:33.

² One of the most common depictions of gwisin is cheonyeogwisin (천녀귀신), which is the spirit of a young and unmarried virgin woman with ghostly pale skin and disheveled hair, wearing a white hanbok (white being the traditional color worn for mourning in Korean culture).

³ It never really occurred to me until sometime in grade school that dragons could be considered truly evil. For sure, there were some depictions of dragons in Korean art that I found intimidating as a child, but it was not until closely engaging with Western media like Walt Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) or J.R.R. Tolkien's novel *The Hobbit* (1937) that I realized dragons could have such antagonistic roles.

dokkaebi (도깨비), which are goblin-like creatures known for being mischievous yet compassionate, terrifying yet endearing.

As a child, what drew me to these monstrous and otherworldly beings from Korean myths and folktales were the way many of them exist in spaces in-between, feel incomplete, and/or have complex traits. Gwisin reflect the lingering regrets and grief of humans who find themselves stuck between the worlds of the living and the dead; yong are born as imugi (이무기)—often considered “lesser” dragons that look like giant serpents—and long to become full-fledged dragons by obtaining a magical orb called a yeouiju (여의주); and dokkaebi are contradictory in nature, capable of harming and protecting humans, depending on the circumstance.⁴ Importantly, though, all these monsters—regardless of morals and dispositions—are considered powerful and divine.

Perhaps unfortunately, this dissertation is not about the monsters from stories read and told to us as children, but I *am* interested in how the monsters I focus on are similarly

⁴ There are a number of stories featuring dokkaebi that I recall from childhood, but the ones that have remained with me are the ones in which dokkaebi could either bless or curse humans, such as Hokburi Yeonggam (흑부리 영감), or, “The Old Man with a Lump.” In this tale, a kind old man with a lump on his neck got lost in the woods one day and found a hut to stay overnight in. To lessen his fears, he began to sing. Dokkaebi appeared, entranced by his singing, and they assumed the songs were coming from the lump and took it in exchange for gold. After this lifechanging moment, the old man returned to his village, where another old man with a lump saw this transformation, became jealous, and decided to go out to find this hut and the dokkaebi. To this old man’s horror, though, the dokkaebi discovered the lump they took from before could not sing, so they stuck it on the other side of the greedy man’s neck, leaving him to cry, empty-handed and with two heavy lumps. From this story comes the expression “흑 떼러 갔다가 흑 붙여 온다” (“one goes to remove a lump and returns with another attached”), which is used to describe a situation in which you try to resolve a problem, only to end up with a larger one.

as complex as the ones I grew up with. More specifically, I consider how monsters have been historically defined by the dominant culture in *society* to mean particular groups of people, along with the complications that come with being labeled a monster.⁵ I explore this idea through the medium of video games to not only consider how the monster is perceived but also *heard*. My investment in the monster is both personal and intellectual, especially to address questions about how the monster can serve as a site of possibility and a way of being for historically marginalized groups, why video games—particularly indie video games—are thought-provoking spaces to explore identity in relation to monstrosity, and, ultimately, how we benefit from understanding the monster similarly to how I did as a child: complex and divine.

The remainder of this dissertation’s introduction will begin with a discussion on existing literature and discourses on how the monster—and by proxy, the human—has been defined to provide a foundation for how I am approaching identity/ies in this dissertation. I will then cover how they have been depicted in music and the moving image. Next, I will further explain the crux of my argument, as well as the reason behind why I chose monsters and the music and sound in video games to explore the formation of identity. Finally, I will conclude this introductory chapter with my methodology and an overview of the remaining chapters of this dissertation.

⁵ In this dissertation, I use “society” to mean a Western one, particularly the United States.

The Monster and the Other, A Brief History

*I think the crux of the matter is the fear of not being able to be
“normal” and not belonging anywhere, which is shared across a
wide range of people regardless of their attributes.*

— Mokumokuren⁶

In this section, I will explain how I am approaching and understanding particular identities in relation to the monster for this dissertation. First, I must briefly explain what I mean by “identity,” which I expand on in greater detail in Chapter 1 of this dissertation. It is crucial to assert that I am approaching identity as a social construct, specifically one that is done through social interactions and understandings of how people are represented, whether they do so to represent themselves or others. Furthermore, identity is relational and prone to change, and it is shaped by a variety of contexts ranging from the social to the historical. A classic example that reflects this approach to identity is Judith Butler’s argument that gender is not something an individual *is* but, rather, something they *do*.⁷ In other words, someone is doing gender by repeatedly performing particular social behaviors and gestures associated with certain gender roles, thus, demonstrating that identity is an ongoing process. It is also the case that I am seeing the

⁶ モクモクレン/Mokumokuren (@mokmok-len.bsky.social), Bluesky, November 7, 2024, <https://bsky.app/profile/mokmok-len.bsky.social/post/3laebdfd5lz23>. The text has been translated from the original Japanese post, which is as follows: 属性を問わず様々な人に共通する「“普通”になれない、居場所がない恐怖」が肝だと思ってます。 It should be noted that while 属性 (zokusei) means “attribute,” it can also be used to refer to aspects of identity. Many thanks to Toru Momii for his help with the translation.

⁷ See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 1999).

monster in this manner for this dissertation, though “monster” undoubtedly comes with its own cultural baggage that I discuss further below.

I wish to begin with a definition of monster and its related words, “monstrous” and “monstrosity.” The first entry for “monster” in *The Oxford English Dictionary* is the general understanding of what a monster might be in today’s society: mythical and imaginary, often “large, ugly, and frightening.”⁸ However, I am particularly interested in the definitions that reference human/ness, as they imply that the monster is somehow *opposite* that. For instance, the fifth definition of “monster” mentions “a *person* of repulsively unnatural character, or exhibiting such extreme cruelty or wickedness as to appear *inhuman*.”⁹ The words “unnatural,” “cruelty,” and “wickedness” stand out as a way to reflect the aforementioned first definition but for a supposed human. Related is the fifth entry for “monstrous,” which similarly emphasizes an evil that is a result of lacking a human quality: “Like or befitting a monster; *inhumanly* wicked or depraved; atrocious, horrible.”¹⁰ The second entry for “monstrosity” presents a related definition, though it leans into the idea of what counts as “normal” and “right”: “Something

⁸ *Oxford English Dictionary*, “monster (*n.*), sense 1.a,” September 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/8403325122>.

⁹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, “monster (*n.*), sense 5,” September 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/8215189975>. Emphasis added.

¹⁰ *Oxford English Dictionary*, “monstrous (*adj.*), sense 5.a,” September 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/9293977486>. Emphasis added.

repulsively *unnatural*, an abomination; a thing which is outrageously or offensively *wrong*.”¹¹

These definitions of “monster” and its related words reveal that the monster can be seen as human but, ultimately, is *inhuman* for carrying particular traits that are opposite the human’s position as a morally good and normal figure. It is implicitly expressed, then, that the monster is not only opposite but also *less than* human due to its abnormalities. Michel Foucault further explored the monster’s abnormalities, explaining that what he calls the “human monster” is one of three key elements constituting “the domain of abnormality as it functions in the nineteenth century.”¹² He understood the human monster to be one that is defined by law, because “its existence and form is not only a violation of the laws of society but also a violation of the laws of nature.”¹³ Foucault also shared how the monster is defined is contingent with society’s ever-shifting definition of the human over time, though the modern understanding of the human monster (especially how it parallels the dictionary entries of “monster” and its related words) is one that developed at the end of the eighteenth and start of the nineteenth centuries. Ultimately, though, the monster will always be “the fundamental figure

¹¹ Oxford English Dictionary, “monstrosity (*n.*), sense 2.a,” September 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/8906413205>. Emphasis added.

¹² Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France 1974–1975*, ed. Valerio Marchetti and Antonella Salomoni, trans. Graham Burchell (Verso, 2003), 55.

¹³ Foucault, *Abnormal*, 55–56.

around which bodies of power and domains of knowledge are disturbed and reorganized,” reflecting Foucault’s extensive research on the functions of knowledge and power in society.¹⁴

Relatedly, Jack Halberstam argues, “Monsters have to be everything the human is not” in Gothic fiction, stating that these novels “make way for the invention of human as white, male, middle class, and heterosexual.”¹⁵ I would add cisgender and abled, as they equally contribute to the upholding of a violent status quo that births unrecognized traumas to be carried by those who have been deemed inhuman. Additionally, Alexa Wright argues that the monster is a “representation of the other [that] is always linked to [a] representation of self.”¹⁶ Society’s understanding of the monster will always have some relation to their/our selfhood and reveal power relations that lead to the creation of an us versus them, resulting in the punishment of those who deviate and transgress from what is considered “normal.” Those labeled as monsters are meant to hold little to no power, due to a human fear of what would happen should they be given power and, ultimately, freedom and autonomy.

¹⁴ Foucault, *Abnormal*, 62.

¹⁵ Jack Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Duke University Press, 1995), 22.

¹⁶ Alexa Wright, “Monstrous Strangers at the Edge of the World,” in *The Monster Theory Reader*, ed. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 180.

Literary scholar Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock follows Foucauldian thinking and defines the monster to mean “a socially constructed category reflecting culturally specific anxieties and desires.”¹⁷ There are desires for a forbidden intimacy with the monster that simultaneously causes anxiety and arousal, all of which relate to power relations established by the dominant culture in society. To completely give in to these desires is to (un)intentionally tip the scale away from human/normalcy and toward monster/abnormality. It is the case that the human will do what they can to avoid this situation and maintain dominance in their intimate and twisted relationship with the monster. In order to avoid the abnormal, the dominant culture will normalize violence against monsters, as well as oppress them to, ultimately, refuse giving them voices.

In such spaces where humans have marked their opposite as monsters, the latter will find that they may have ways to negotiate their respective identities. As opposed to strictly assimilating or outright rejecting what is offered by the dominant culture, though, I suggest for this dissertation that the human monster turns to a third option, what queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz describes as “disidentification,” where they do not quite do either. Instead, “disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology.”¹⁸ The monster reimagines how their meaning is encoded by this dominant

¹⁷ Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, “Introduction: A Genealogy of Monster Theory,” in *The Monster Theory Reader*, ed. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 25.

¹⁸ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 11.

ideology by working with and resisting notions of how those in power identify them as particular monsters. The monster makes use of what tools have been given to them by society to survive and recreate an alternative world. As Muñoz aptly states, “Disidentification uses the majoritarian culture as raw material to make a new world.”¹⁹

In addition to a disidentificatory practice, I see the monster as one with intersecting and complex identities and, therefore, “refuses easy categorization” into specific identities because they are a hybrid, as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argues in his seven theses on monsters as a culture.²⁰ Similarly, Muñoz explains how hybridity, like disidentification, “is meant to have an indexical use in that it captures, collects, and brings into play various theories of fragmentation in relation to minority identity practices. [...] *Hybrid* catches the fragmentary subject formation of people whose identities traverse different race, sexuality, and gender identifications.”²¹ He sees queer people of color in particular as being in this hybrid position, which is in constant transit between categorizations. While Muñoz does not turn to the monster like Cohen and I do, his understanding of these fragmented identities intertwining is similar to Cohen’s own views of how extracting then combining parts “including—indeed, especially—

¹⁹ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 196.

²⁰ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 6.

²¹ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 31–32. Emphasis in original.

marginalized social groups” can then be “assembled as the monster.”²² Monsters are amalgamations that reflect those who may struggle within and outside their communities, especially in their negotiations of their identities, all of which are slippery and difficult to define.

It is crucial, then, to emphasize that defining the monster is difficult due to the ever-shifting definition of what/who a monster is in society, which is one that is generally tied to difference. Cohen argues, “Any kind of alterity can be inscribed across (constructed through) the monstrous body, but for the most part *monstrous difference tends to be cultural, political, racial, economic, sexual.*”²³ The body becomes a crucial point of contention, then, to work out its monstrosity. I return to Jack Halberstam’s discussion on the monster, particularly how he draws attention to skin, which he argues that it “becomes a kind of metonym for the human; and its color, its pallor, its shape mean everything within a semiotic of monstrosity.”²⁴ Skin is sutured to surface-level understandings of race, class, gender, and sexuality in society to establish difference and Otherness. The monster will transform as needed to serve as the needed opposite of the human. It is also the case that how the monster is defined here in this dissertation will likely shift over time.

²² Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” 11.

²³ Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” 7. Emphasis added.

²⁴ Halberstam, *Skin Shows*, 7.

I next explore the foundations of my research to address literature that deals with historically marginalized groups being treated as the monster or Other. First, there is Barbara Creed's theorization of the "monstrous-feminine," particularly monstrosity's intimate bond with embodiment by using Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection as a framework to understand the female subject in horror films, which "abounds in images of abjection, foremost of which is the corpse."²⁵ Creed uses the term "monstrous-feminine" as opposed to "female monster" as a means to accentuate the significance of the relationship between femininity and how it is perceived as monstrous in horror films, particularly the ways in which it threatens men.²⁶ She points this out through parts and functions of the body, arguing that "when woman is represented as monstrous it is almost always in relation to her mothering and reproductive functions," as well as her role as castrator.²⁷ As a result, the abject female body is spectacularly grotesque in its intent to disrupt patriarchal order.

Relatedly, Harry M. Benshoff attends to homosexuality and its ties to monstrosity in horror films of the twentieth century, creating the analogy that "monster is to 'normality' as homosexual is to heterosexual."²⁸ Much like Halberstam, he recognizes the

²⁵ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (Routledge, 1993), 13.

²⁶ Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 3.

²⁷ Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 8–9.

²⁸ Harry M. Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film* (Manchester University Press, 1997), 2. Benshoff primarily focuses on male homosexuality in his monograph due to US culture's "ideas about and fears of homosexuality" being constructed "within a framework of male

role of the Gothic in constructing the monster–homosexual relationship as a deviant Other in twentieth-century horror films, which, ultimately, generated a complex understanding of queerness and monstrosity.

Racialized groups have also long been aligned with monstrosity. Black studies scholar Christina Sharpe describes the “monstrous intimacies” of the Black post-slavery subject and the repetitions of trauma and violence they face, past and present.²⁹ These intimacies are “a set of known and unknown performances and inhabited horrors, desire and positions produced, reproduced, circulated, and transmitted, that are breathed in like air and often unacknowledged to be monstrous.”³⁰ Sharpe draws particular attention to Black women and the construction of their alluring yet monstrous status in society, but these intimacies that she highlights can also be traced through the works of Halberstam, Benshoff, and Creed with their respective explorations of humans’ perverse desires for the monster. Cohen describes this desire in his theses on monsters, stating that they “will always dangerously entice.”³¹

homosexuality,” though he acknowledges that his investigations draw from “the expanding body of queer theory and historiography of twentieth-century gay and lesbian experience.” See Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet*, 7.

²⁹ Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (Duke University Press, 2010), 26.

³⁰ Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies*, 3.

³¹ Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” 19.

Part of the morbid enticement of monstrosity is looking—or staring, as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson appropriately calls it—at a body that challenges societal norms, such as the disabled body.³² She highlights the spectacle of “extraordinary” bodies that the dominant society has historically treated as monstrous, or more toward modernity, as freakish, and how these bodies “compel explanation, inspire representation, and incite regulation.”³³ Garland-Thomson traces “the freak discourse’s genealogy” to address how different bodies have shifted to become deviants in society, how “wonder [became] error.”³⁴ Crucially, she emphasizes and echoes similar ideas as the aforementioned scholars: “By constituting the freak as an icon of generalized embodied deviance, the exhibitions also simultaneously reinscribed gender, race, sexual aberrance, ethnicity, and disability as inextricable yet particular exclusionary systems legitimated by bodily variation—all represented by the single multivalent figure of the freak.”³⁵

It is also relevant to address the cultural and social construct of mental disability/madness (or more commonly known as “mental illness”). Clinical labels such as bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, among others are used to “pathologize and degrade”

³² Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

³³ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “Introduction: From Wonder to Error—A Genealogy of Freak Discourse in Modernity,” in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (New York University Press, 1996), 1.

³⁴ Garland-Thomson, “Introduction,” 3.

³⁵ Garland-Thomson, “Introduction,” 10.

Mad individuals and, in many cases, vilify them.³⁶ Maria Liegghio writes of the epistemic violence that Mad people face, especially how they “are disadvantaged against constructions of ‘normal mental health’ and experience their identities as pathologized and devalued, and *their humanity is denied*.”³⁷ Instead, Mad people are constructed as dangerous to society, which “becomes a powerful mechanism leading to their disqualification as legitimate knowers.”³⁸ Liegghio’s argument can be expanded to be inclusive of physically disabled people, as well as other historically marginalized groups who have been marked for their difference. As a result of such difference, they are all denied the ability to freely express themselves and, instead, are pushed to the fringes of society.

Many of these theorizations and arguments I have highlighted are breathed to life in screen media—particularly in the horror genre—and depict the monster in insidious or overt ways. It also becomes an opportunity for the audience to momentarily be and/or engage with the monster, which Cohen notes is an approach spectators might take, knowing that “the jolting sensuousness of the celluloid images will be followed by

³⁶ Robert Menzies, Brenda A. LeFrançois, and Geoffrey Reaume, “Introducing Mad Studies,” in *Mad Matters: A Critical Reader in Canadian Mad Studies*, eds. Brenda A. LeFrançois, Robert Menzies, and Geoffrey Reaume (Canada Scholars’ Press, Inc., 2013), 10.

³⁷ Maria Liegghio, “A Denial of Being: Psychiatrization as Epistemic Violence,” in *Mad Matters: A Critical Reader in Canadian Mad Studies*, eds. Brenda A. LeFrançois, Robert Menzies, and Geoffrey Reaume (Canada Scholars’ Press, Inc., 2013), 122. Emphasis added.

³⁸ Liegghio, “A Denial of Being,” 125.

reentry into the world of comfort and light.”³⁹ However, for those who have been deemed monstrous, the supposedly fictional imagery and narratives continue to be a part of and influence their very real lives. It is of interest, then, that Harry M. Benshoff makes note of how queer audiences will *identify* with the monster in horror films, stating that they are “more likely than straight ones to experience the monster’s plight in more personal, individualized terms.”⁴⁰ I am not saying that queer and other marginalized peoples perfectly align themselves with the monster, as I will later discuss in this introductory chapter, but it is very much the case that they are more likely to see how their own identity/ies have been similarly constructed like the monsters depicted in screen media.

While engaging with screen media, it is important to remember that the monster cannot exist without the human, who, as Alexa Wright argues, “is always implicated in the construction of the ‘other,’ whether monstrous or not.”⁴¹ It is the horror genre in particular that is often shaped by who and what is perceived as different in a society driven to meet a restrictive notion of normalcy. However, it is less common to discuss the horror that monsters themselves face, such as how their struggles are turned into spectacles, or how their existences are closely monitored. Furthermore, the fear of not belonging anywhere is one that both humans and monsters have, which, ultimately,

³⁹ Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” 17.

⁴⁰ Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet*, 13.

⁴¹ Wright, “Monstrous Strangers at the Edge of the World,” 181.

reflects the need to understand the monster and monstrosity as an exploration of the messy dynamics of knowledge and power. It also raises the question, then, as to who and what the “real” horrors in society might be, and how that is drawn to attention in the media we consume, including music. These are all things I consider throughout this dissertation.

Musically Animating the Monster

In Western music traditions, both art and popular, there have been various characteristics established as evil or unsettling to invoke discomfort and the monstrous by the collective imagination. One notable characteristic is the use of dissonance due to its unpleasant sound to the westernized ear. A historical example is the tritone, which has cultural associations to the Christian devil, particularly in early music, and was avoided in chant wherever possible. Over time, especially from the mid-nineteenth century on, the tritone was used with deliberation to invoke its cultural connotations.⁴² Another characteristic is the avoidance or deemphasis of a distinct melody, with composers and songwriters opting for unusual rhythms, time signatures, timbres, or other musical elements that would give their work(s) a distinctive—or even disturbing—sound. Composers may also have musicians use extended techniques to unsettle the listener: strings may play *col legno* (e.g., the repeated rhythm in the first movement of Gustav

⁴² For instance, Franz Liszt’s *Dante Sonata*, the beginning of Bernard Herrmann’s opening credits for *Psycho* (1970), and the main riff of Metallica’s “Enter Sandman.”

Holst's *The Planets*); a mistuned or out-of-tune instrument (e.g., the opening of Camille Saint-Saëns's *Danse macabre* with a scordatura violin's E-string tuned a half-step below); and pitch extremities (e.g., the pedal tones of the trombones toward the end of the fourth movement in Hector Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*).⁴³

In horror films, Janet K. Halfyard describes "particular musical gestures—the stinger to scare us, drones and sustained *tremolandi* strings to create suspense—that composers have long used to create the kinds of emotional responses required by the genre," "some otherwise unusual instruments" such as organs and harpsichords, and "the use of atonal and dissonant harmonies."⁴⁴ Science fiction films also carry elements of the monstrous, specifically with the extraterrestrial being a stand-in for the monster; composers will lean toward the sounds of synthesizers—notably the theremin—as a means "to signify otherworldliness and/or threat," as well as using "dissonance and/or electronic sounds" to gesture toward difference.⁴⁵

Film composers have also approached the monster by reworking preconceived notions of what particular songs and instruments are supposed to represent: harps,

⁴³ Another interesting example of a mistuned instrument is Gustav Mahler's use of a scordatura violin in the second movement of his Fourth Symphony, which is meant to represent Freund Hein (a personification of Death in German folklore) playing the fiddle.

⁴⁴ Janet K. Halfyard, "Mischievous Afoot: Supernatural Horror-Comedies and the *Diabolus in Musica*," in *Music in the Horror Film: Listening to Fear*, ed. Neil Lerner (Routledge, 2010), 21.

⁴⁵ Philip Hayward, "Sci-Fidelity: Music, Sound and Genre History," in *Off the Planet: Music, Sound and Science Fiction Cinema*, ed. Philip Hayward (John Libbey Publishing, 2004), 9, 24.

glockenspiels, and celestas become menacing as opposed to heavenly (e.g., *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1991)); the music box's romantic, childlike affiliations are given a twist (e.g., *The Omen* (1976)); rounds and nursery rhymes have a haunting quality to them (e.g., a rendition of "One, Two, Buckle My Shoe" in *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984)); a seemingly happy-sounding pop song is juxtaposed to a violent and horrifying scene (e.g., "Stuck in the Middle with You" in *Reservoir Dogs* (1992); or Western art music is used to create a jarring experience of hearing high art in a disturbing setting (e.g., *The Shining* (1980)).⁴⁶

There are also instances of leaning into cultural presumptions of how music representing monsters *should* sound. Hard rock and heavy metal have intimate ties to the monster, especially in horror films, which Joseph Tompkins remarks is a result of their "marketable image of [being] two culturally disreputable genres" that are "equally reprehensible."⁴⁷ Previously mentioned were instruments such as the organ and

⁴⁶ See James Deaville, "The Beauty of Horror: Kilar, Coppola, and Dracula," in *Music in the Horror Film: Listening to Fear*, ed. Neil Lerner (Routledge, 2010), 187–205 for his analysis on *Bram Stoker's Dracula*; Stan Link, "The Monster and the Music Box: Children and the Soundtrack of Horror," in *Music in the Horror Film: Listening to Fear*, ed. Neil Lerner (Routledge, 2010), 38–54 for his analysis of music boxes in horror films; Kathryn Kalinak, *Film Music: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 1–8 for her brief analysis of the use of "Stuck in the Middle with You" in *Reservoir Dogs*; as well as Jeremy Barham, "Incorporating Monsters: Music as Context, Character and Construction in Kubrick's *The Shining*," in *Terror Tracks: Music, Sound and Horror Cinema*, ed. Philip Hayward (Equinox Publishing, 2009), 137–70; and David J. Code, "Rehearing *The Shining*: Musical Undercurrents in the Overlook Hotel," in *Music in the Horror Film: Listening to Fear*, ed. Neil Lerner (Routledge, 2010), 133–51 for their respective analyses on the use of music in *The Shining*.

⁴⁷ Joseph Tompkins, "What's the Deal with Soundtrack Albums? Metal Music and the Customized Aesthetics of Contemporary Horror," *Cinema Journal* 49, no. 1 (2009): 80, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25619745>.

harpsichord in film that have become foundational to the musical aesthetics of the monster (e.g., the score for *Carnival of Souls* (1962), or the use of J.S. Bach's *Toccat and Fugue in D Minor*, BWV 565 in films such as *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1931)).⁴⁸ These two instruments are particularly appropriate when thinking about musical excess, whether it be the organ's grandiose size and sound, or the harpsichord's prominence in Baroque music.

The excess of electronic music may also be used to draw attention to the monster, especially in the science fiction genre to represent the dangers of aliens and machines as the Other. In her analysis of the music from the television series *The X-Files* (1993–2002), Isabella van Elferen writes, "The hollow and often dissonant electronic sound effects complement the synthesizer drones are clearly meant to symbolize the 'alien' nature of the threats that Mulder and Scully are dealing with. [...] This type of 'non-human' science fiction music [...] has become a common expression of non-human treat in horror films."⁴⁹ Relatedly, industrial music serves as a bridge between music and what might be described as noise, which KC Collins describes the genre as being "commonly built around [...] distorted, repetitive, percussive sounds of industrial machinery, often

⁴⁸ See Julie Brown, "Carnival of Souls and the Organs of Horror," in *Music in the Horror Film: Listening to Fear*, ed. Neil Lerner (Routledge, 2010), 1–20. Music theorist Stephanie Lind also discusses the trope of using Bach's *Toccat and Fugue in D Minor* in video games due to the influence of Western film music tradition. See Stephanie Lind, *Authenticity in the Music of Video Games* (Lexington Books, 2023), 64–66.

⁴⁹ Isabelle van Elferen, *Gothic Music: The Sounds of the Uncanny* (University of Wales Press, 2012), 90.

reflecting feelings of *alienation and dehumanisation* as a form of social critique.”⁵⁰ She also notes the various negative connotations that her listeners had upon listening to industrial recordings tied to the following characteristics: “low bass pedal points, mechanical sounds, and distortion, but tonally the most important element was the use of minor modes, in particular Aeolian and Phrygian tonality.”⁵¹

The excess of other sonic elements, some of which might be considered noise, is also prominent in horror films. Whether it be bloodcurdling screams, whirring chainsaws, or the groans of industrial machines, these soundscapes follow the equally excessive visual spectacle. The listener may have a visceral reaction to such noise as a result of the possible unsettling and uncomfortable feelings that come with them, perhaps more so when the source of the sound is not specified. Here, Michel Chion’s theorization of the *acousmètre* (literally “sound being”) in film is helpful, as it describes “a specific kind of ambiguity and oscillation” for when a sound is “neither inside nor outside the image.”⁵² The invisible presence of the *acousmètre*—perhaps all-pervasive—in horror films suggests a threatening, monstrous power that may unveil the terrors to come.

⁵⁰ KC Collins, “Dead Channel Surfing: The Commonalities between Cyberpunk Literature and Industrial Music,” *Popular Music* 24, no. 2 (2005): 166, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143005000401>. Emphasis added.

⁵¹ Collins, “Dead Channel Surfing,” 173–74.

⁵² Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, ed. and trans. Claudia Gorbman (Columbia University Press, 1994), 129.

Sound and music can animate the monster, but it is also helpful to consider their (near-)absence in the moving image. In seemingly silent moments, they heighten the audience's awareness of what is happening on-screen. Rebecca Coyle highlights how sound or its possible absence contributes to suspense in horror films in particular: "Some films are explicit in their horrific elements, and rely on frequent and/or prolonged use of shock scenes. Other films are more suggestive, relying primarily on the imagined rather than the evident and/or the continual deferral of the explicit."⁵³ A near-absent sonic landscape relies on the imagination of the listener to construct the worst to come, such as the grisly death of a character, which might then be paired with a startling noise or crashing chords.

Our Western cultural imagination has a catalog of musical conventions that help evoke a sense of what might be considered monstrous, especially in screen media. These ideas carry over to video games in ways that I would go so far as to say are amplified. Unlike film and television, video games as a medium can afford a distinct experience with horror as a result of its interactive nature, and KC Collins describes this nature of game sound to be "kinesonically syncretic."⁵⁴ As opposed to simply listening and, instead, placing focus on action, it "helps players learn the sound's meaning, increasing efficiency

⁵³ Rebecca Coyle, "Spooked by Sound: The Blair Witch Project," in *Terror Tracks: Music, Sound and Horror Cinema*, ed. Philip Hayward (Equinox Publishing, 2009), 213.

⁵⁴ KC Collins, *Playing with Sound: A Theory of Interacting with Sound and Music in Video Games* (The MIT Press, 2013), 32.

for the players, who can rely on the feedback to help them play the game.”⁵⁵ Dana Plank makes a similar observation and asserts that game sound stands as “one of the most important elicitors of ludic emotion” and how it leaves a lasting impression even when visuals are taken away because “sound will continue to play, emitting acoustical vibrations, frequencies that travel deep inside the ear and are transmitted as electrical signals to the auditory processing centres of the brain.”⁵⁶ This lends itself well to the music and sound of horror games in particular, which can be incredibly affective and generate physiological responses to further immerse the player, as though they are what Rebecca Roberts describes as “cross[ing] over into the game interface.”⁵⁷ Relatedly, Isabella van Elferen draws attention to the immersive characteristics of music and sound in Gothic games, stating that the “hauntology of music invites the ghosts of former horror experiences to haunt games that are played in the present.”⁵⁸

Horror games such as the ones from the *Silent Hill* franchise teach players “to rely on auditory clues which can alert them to the presence, type and proximity of monsters,”

⁵⁵ Collins, *Playing with Sound*, 33.

⁵⁶ Dana Plank, “Audio and the Experience of Gaming: A Cognitive-Emotional Approach to Video Game Sound,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Video Game Music*, ed. Melanie Fritsch and Tim Summers (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 300.

⁵⁷ Rebecca Roberts, “Fear of the Unknown: Music and Sound Design in Psychological Horror Games,” in *Music in Video Games: Studying Play*, ed. K.J. Donnelly, William Gibbons, and Neil Lerner (Routledge, 2014), 142.

⁵⁸ Van Elferen, *Gothic Music*, 123.

as Zach Whalen explains in his analysis of the music from this game.⁵⁹ Returning to Chion's idea of the acousmètre and applying it to monsters, they become a powerful signifier of the terror to come, more so than film and television because it *waits* for the player's actions. As William Cheng writes, the first *Silent Hill* (Team Silent, 1999) game's "grotesque soundscape manifests as a sentient antagonist, an invisible yet omniscient force that seethes and convulses as it plays mind games with the player."⁶⁰ Whalen describes many of the musical properties that make up the Western cultural imagination when it comes to horror that is implemented in the first *Silent Hill* as an example, pointing out the dynamic use of static, industrial sounds mixed with ambient music, as well as the smooth blending of sound and music to create the well-known eerie sonic atmosphere that is on constant loop in this survival horror game. K.J. Donnelly observes similar traits in the *Silent Hill* games, especially noting the "austere 'noise'" and use of "disjointed rhythms" and "broken machines" that are reminiscent of industrial music.⁶¹ Whalen also highlights the instances of silence, which, while it "corresponds occasionally to safety, its

⁵⁹ Zach Whalen, "Case Study: Film Music vs. Video Game Music: The Case of *Silent Hill*," in *Music, Sound and Multimedia: From the Live to the Virtual*, ed. Jamie Sexton (Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 76.

⁶⁰ William Cheng, "Monstrous Noise: *Silent Hill* and the Aesthetic Economics of Fear," in *The Oxford Handbook of Sound and Image in Digital Media*, ed. Carol Vernallis, John Richardson, and Amy Herzog (Oxford University Press, 2013), 176.

⁶¹ K.J. Donnelly, "Emotional Sound Effects and Metal Machine Music: Soundworlds in *Silent Hill* Games and Films," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Sound Design and Music in Screen Media*, ed. Liz Greene and Danijela Kulezic-Wilson (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 76.

presence is always threatened by the encroachment of sound, and the presence of monsters within *Silent Hill* guarantees its dissolution.”⁶²

Rebecca Roberts also highlights musical elements commonly heard in survival horror games to depict the monstrous. Focusing on the *Silent Hill* and *Resident Evil* franchises, she argues both have music that are “used as a continuous atmospheric signifier of danger, where previously it had been used to indicate sections of upcoming combat or as sonic stingers in tense, shock situations.”⁶³ Crucially, she adds that because the music is seemingly endless, “the players have no real indicator of safety and will remain tense throughout long periods of activity.”⁶⁴ Music and sound in these video games continue the filmic tradition of refusing any sense of peace for the player/listener, and, additionally, work toward heightening their anxiety “through the unseen monster, but also the body of the monster itself, when it actually arrives,” as Roberts aptly puts it.⁶⁵

I have focused primarily on the horror genre, but it is the case that other genres will draw inspiration from horror tropes and stereotypes to evoke similar terror and unease in their music and sound as a means to represent the monstrous. For instance, in the puzzle-platform video game *Portal* (Valve, 2007), the acousmètre comes into play

⁶² Whalen, “Case Study,” 78.

⁶³ Roberts, “Fear of the Unknown,” 138.

⁶⁴ Roberts, “Fear of the Unknown,” 138.

⁶⁵ Roberts, “Fear of the Unknown,” 142.

through the quasi-robotic voice of GLaDOS, a mysterious, maternal-sounding figure who guides the player-character through multiple test chambers (i.e., puzzles) with the promise of cake at the end. It is eventually revealed that GLaDOS is actually a malevolent AI computer whose intention is to kill the player-character. For most of the game, the player is possibly in constant negotiation with themselves as to whether they should trust this disembodied voice or not, whose tone and generally helpful tips suggest a sense of protection. However, the absence of the voice's source instills a sense of unease, especially when GLaDOS's voice glitches on occasion and, as the game progresses, she makes more sarcastic and biting remarks to the player-character. Stephanie Harkin argues that the voice of GLaDOS "is the predominant signifier of her presence that she weaponizes to manipulate and taunt the player. The empowered female voice is then a marker of her monstrosity while her dialogue also characterizes her as an emotionally abusive mother."⁶⁶ Indeed, even after the player-character supposedly defeats GLaDOS, they learn that her monstrosity lives on, which she taunts through song. Once again, she is invisible to the player-character as she sings during the end credits: "While you're dying, I'll be / Still alive / And when you're dead, I will be / Still alive."⁶⁷ As Andra Ivănescu notes, GLaDOS's song proclaim "[her] survival beyond the player's control, as the player

⁶⁶ Stephanie Harkin, "'The Only Thing You've Managed to Break So Far Is My Heart': An Analysis of *Portal*'s Monstrous Mother GLaDOS," *Games and Culture* 15, no. 5 (2020): 539, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412018819663>.

⁶⁷ The song that is sung during the end credits is titled "Still Alive." The lyrics are technically brought to reality in the sequel, *Portal 2* (Valve, 2012).

has no choice but to listen to [her] as the credits roll,” making clear that her monstrous presence will continue on.⁶⁸

It is often the case that “insane” characters in video games frequently take up the role of the monster, with their descent into madness (or perhaps already living with madness) seen as something to be pitied and/or feared from afar, ultimately epitomizing the monster to be the villain. Insane characters are often tied to various isolated locations including but not limited to abandoned asylums, forgotten laboratories, deserted islands, and enshrouded castles, all of which have disturbed pasts to further emphasize the monster’s living space to be on the margins of society. The enemies lurking in these areas are also frequently labeled as “crazy” or “insane,” embodying the stereotype of being homicidal maniacs.

Music and sound play a critical role in reifying stereotypes of insanity for these characters and locations. Again, many composers of these video games will turn to familiar musical and sonic tropes to depict the monstrous. Dana Plank analyzes the excessiveness of the theme music for Kefka, the insane antagonist from *Final Fantasy VI* (Square, 1994), which “employ[s] militaristic rigidity, violent dissonance, Baroque counterpoint, operatic grandeur, and destabilizing turns in meter and instrumentation.”⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Andra Ivănescu, “Inhuman Music and the Monstrous-Feminine,” *Journal of Sound and Music in Games* 5, no. 1 (2024): 33, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jsmg.2024.5.1.24>.

⁶⁹ Dana Plank, “Bodies in Play: Representations of Disability in 8- and 16-bit Video Game Soundscapes,” PhD diss. (The Ohio State University, 2018), 237.

A more conventional approach that relies heavily on Hollywood's depiction of insanity can be heard in the theme for Dr. Steinman from *BioShock* (2K Boston and 2K Australia, 2007), an antagonist with an obsession to correct human deformities that led to a serial killing spree of his patients in order to create the perfect human body. Dr. Steinman's theme has an indiscernible tonal center characterized by shrill, frenzied, and dissonant strings, potentially evoking in the player a similar state of franticness as they try to kill the doctor. In *Hotline Miami* (Dennaton Games, 2012), synthwave music accompanies oversaturated visuals and the player-character Jacket, as his perception of reality increasingly blurs after each killing spree.⁷⁰ The use of synthwave is especially relevant here, as one of the genre's musical influences are horror film soundtracks of the 1980s, especially ones reminiscent of works by John Carpenter or the Italian prog rock band, Goblin.⁷¹

⁷⁰ It is up for debate whether Jacket is mentally ill or not, with fans speculating and arguing with one another over his (in)sanity. See, for instance, u/luachief, "How insane is Jacket?" r/HotlineMiami, Reddit, February 3, 2022, https://www.reddit.com/r/HotlineMiami/comments/sjutqy/how_insane_is_jacket/; Gabbagool, "is jacket schizophrenic?" Steam, February 17, 2015, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/274170/discussions/0/618453594763982504/>; and A Midnight Spectacle, "Hotline Miami: Sociopathy Visualized," A Midnight Spectacle, June 2, 2021, video, 13:11, https://youtu.be/HbWMo_CBYqQ. I should note that on Steam, users can change their handles as much as they would like, meaning that Gabbagool's name may change since the writing of this footnote.

⁷¹ See K.J. Donnelly, "Hearing Deep Seated Fears: John Carpenter's *The Fog* (1980)," in *Music in the Horror Film: Listening to Fear*, ed. Neil Lerner (Routledge, 2010), 152–67; and Tony Mitchell, "Prog Rock, The Rock, The Horror Film and Sonic Excess: Dario Argento, Morricone and Goblin," in *Terror Tracks: Music, Sound and Horror Cinema*, ed. Philip Hayward (Equinox Publishing, 2009), 88–100.

It is the case this musical coding of the insane monster is further problematized with other stereotypes that emphasize Otherness. For example, in the life simulation video game *Animal Crossing* (Nintendo EAD, 2002) and its subsequent installments, there is a cute fox character named Redd whose illicit shop is called Crazy Redd's.⁷² His theme music plays each time the player enters his shop, which is composed of occasional out-of-tune instruments with an Orientalist melody that distinctly positions him as the Other. Similarly, in *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask* (Nintendo EAD, 2000), the antagonist Majora seems to have no main motivation other than to kill and torment their victim for sheer fun, going even further with their logic (or lack thereof) to try and crash the Moon into the Kingdom of Termina. Majora's theme has elements of percussive instruments from Chinese opera, which is accentuated in the music that plays during the final battle against them. Yet another stereotype can be heard in the survival horror game, *The Evil Within* (Tango Gameworks, 2014), in which consonance and dissonance are taken to extremes with the use of Claude Debussy's "Clair de lune" to signify safety and purity (i.e., sanity) to the player when they are close to a save point, ultimately, allowing their character Sebastian to regain his sanity. Upon leaving the save point, though, the music dissolves into shrill, dissonant strings with industrial sounds and growling that are all meant to unsettle.

⁷² In *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* (Nintendo EAD, 2013), the shop name changed to Redd's Gallery. At the time of writing, in the most recent installment, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo EPD, 2020), the store was rebranded as the Jolly Redd's Treasure Trawler.

Music and sound in video games are in a unique position to complicate the monster, especially in their relationship with visuals, narrative, and mechanics. Furthermore, due to their nonlinearity and, in many cases, having multiple scenes and/or endings, video games can sometimes become a space for the player to determine the outcome of the monster. As a result, the player is put in a complicated position, where they must negotiate the projection of themselves onto a monstrous identity, the degree to which they may embody monstrosity, or if they remain disconnected from it all. Luca Papale writes that “projection takes place when it’s the player that makes personality, values, and choices flow into the avatar—which might or might not reflect the player’s own.”⁷³ The player is implicated in this process of determining their status *as* or *against* the monster. Music and sound act as guides to further shape a player’s understanding of the gameworld, then, especially so when they refer to concepts from the “real” world to analyze their gaming experiences.

The Promise of Monsters

“It is true, we shall be monsters, cut off from all the world; but on that account we shall be more attached to one another.”

— Mary Shelley⁷⁴

⁷³ Luca Papale, “Beyond Identification: Defining the Relationships Between Player and Avatar,” *Journal of Games Criticism* 1, no. 2 (2014).

⁷⁴ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein: Or, the Modern Prometheus* (Penguin Classics, 2003), 148.

I return to my description at the beginning of the monsters I grew up with as being powerful and *divine*. There is something special about seeing the monstrous as divine and, to take it one step further, making the divine monstrous (Figure 1).⁷⁵ It acknowledges the ways in which monsters are capable of being both beautiful and grotesque, awe-inspiring and terrifying. It especially is the case that seeing the divine in monsters is all the more appealing to those who feel some form of kinship with them, especially due to being treated like monsters simply as a result of who they are as individuals.

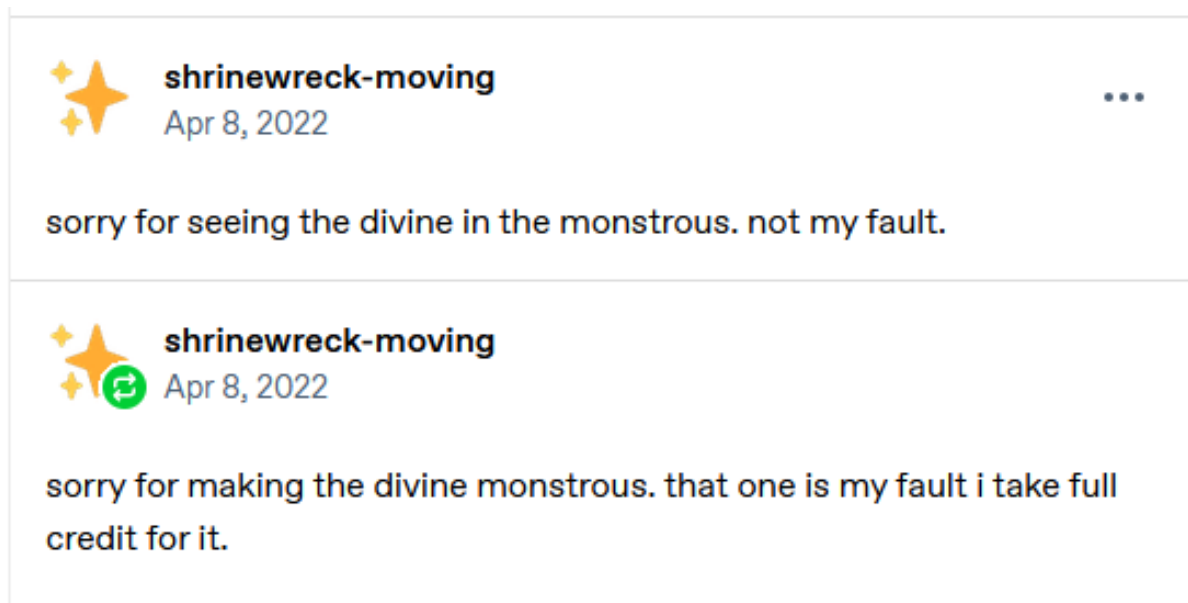


Figure 1. A Tumblr user's post on the divine and monstrous.

It is also important to keep in mind what Jeffrey Jerome Cohen writes in his final thesis on monster culture:

⁷⁵ See shrinewreck-moving, "sorry for making the divine monstrous..." Tumblr, April 8, 2022, <https://www.tumblr.com/shrinewreck-moving/680968058206027776/sorry-for-making-the-divine-monstrous-that-one-is>.

Monsters are our children. They can be pushed to the farthest margins of geography and discourse, hidden away at the edges of the world and in the forbidden recesses of our mind, but they always return. And when they come back, they bring not just a fuller knowledge of our place in history and the history of knowing our place, but they bear self-knowledge, *human* knowledge—and a discourse all the more sacred as it arises from the Outside. These monsters ask us how we perceive the world, and how we have misrepresented what we have attempted to place. They ask us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance toward its expression. They ask us why we have created them.⁷⁶

The existence of monsters introduces the means to better understand the human, and it is why I focus on the monster as a means to explore the formation of identity, because monsters promise to reveal why they exist in the first place, as Cohen aptly wrote. In the case of video games, we get glimpses of the monster by interacting with them in some manner, or in some cases, become the monster ourselves and play as them. Video games as a medium are unique in that they push us to repeatedly reflect on our actions and outcomes during and after every playthrough in the continuation of constructing the monster, and, in turn, the human. These actions are further enhanced by the music and sound that accompany them and mold our understanding of various characters.

Something to highlight, particularly in instances when the player is able to step into the role of the monster, is that I am not arguing for them to show empathy or,

⁷⁶ Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," 20. Emphasis in original.

arguably worse, humanize the monster. Perhaps the player may even wish to *repair* the monster through empathy and humanization. Queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's reparative reading may come to mind, who writes of how the reparative is being able to see the good even within the bad. She also writes, "Hope, often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates."⁷⁷ It is a desire to find pleasure and nourishment regardless of how these objects were produced in whatever context, to find hope in spite of everything.

There is certainly an appeal in being able to repair the monster, to give them hope and perhaps even a permanent place in the human world. Seeing the divine in the monstrous can certainly be interpreted as a form of repair, to return to my earlier example. However, the need to try and repair the monster tends to be more about the human than the monster. In other words, a reparative reading of the monster is often to the human's benefit, disregarding what the monster may actually think or desire. This is not to say that there is no value in the reparative but, rather, that it has its limitations. For those who find themselves seeing eye-to-eye with the monster, a reparative reading of a monster cast as a portent has value. However, if the monster is to be repaired as a means to empathize with or humanize them, it is here that I wish to intervene and argue that the

⁷⁷ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touch Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Duke University Press, 2003), 146.

monster does *not* need repairing. Instead, and as I will demonstrate in this dissertation, I argue that the monster will make something more for themselves that humans and the human category cannot offer. I return to the second part of my earlier example from Tumblr, which is that *making* the divine monstrous is to create an elsewhere for monsters, to see them as they are and let them *be*.

Methodology and Chapters Overview

Before I share an overview of this dissertation, I wish to address the reasons why I picked the case studies I did, as well as my decision to include ethnography. For this dissertation, I explore and argue my ideas through four video games across different genres: *Undertale* (Toby Fox, 2015), *Night in the Woods* (Infinite Fall, 2017), *Celeste* (Extremely OK Games, 2018), and *Hades* (Supergiant Games, 2020). *Undertale* is a roleplaying game (RPG) in the strain of traditional Japanese RPGs developed by Toby Fox, who also composed the music.⁷⁸ *Night in the Woods* is a side-scrolling adventure

⁷⁸ See Toby Fox, “Undertale Dev: ‘Every Monster Should Feel Like an Individual’,” interview by Steven Bogos, *The Escapist*, June 25, 2013, <https://www.escapistmagazine.com/undertale-dev-every-monster-should-feel-like-an-individual/>. Toby Fox has mentioned the influence of JRPGs such as the *Mario & Luigi*, *Shin Megami Tensei*, and *Mother* series on *Undertale*. The difference between Japanese and Western RPGs is a complicated discussion that is outside the scope of this dissertation, but I do want to emphasize that—in the sprawling genre that is the RPG—*Undertale*’s audiovisual retro aesthetics, turn-based combat system, as well as storytelling and dialogue align closely with traditional JRPGs, despite it being developed in the United States. Regarding the differences between the two, William Gibbons writes: “Broadly speaking, Western RPGs tend to favor individualized character creation, free exploration, and the creation of dark, ‘realistic’ fantasy worlds; JRPGs, on the other hand, typically privilege colorful, often cartoonish environments and situations, and a linear narrative with pre-established characters. These differences, though increasingly pronounced in recent years, are the product of a decades-long process of stylistic evolution, driven by technological differences, cultural preferences, and, eventually, generic expectations. The precise differences between, and relative value of, these subgenres is, unsurprisingly, a topic of intense debate with players and critics alike.” See William Gibbons, “Music, Genre, and Nationality in the

video game developed by Scott Benson, Bethany Hockenberry, and Alec Holowka, the latter also composing the music. *Celeste* is a platformer developed by Maddy Thorson and Noel Berry, with music composed by Lena Raine. Last but not least, *Hades* is a roguelike video game developed by a small team from the indie studio Supergiant Games, with music composed by Darren Korb.⁷⁹ All four video games have very little in common, other than that they are all classified as indie video games.

My decision to focus on these four case studies is partially due to my personal love for and investment in them, but it is mainly because of how particular identities are reflected in these video games that, to me, present the complexity of how historically marginalized peoples have contended with the dominant culture oft-aligning them with the monster: *Undertale* is rich with overt depictions of queerness between literal monsters; *Night in the Woods* reflects the joys and struggles of being Mad in a more conservative setting; *Celeste* has the player literally looking in the mirror to face a less pleasant version of themselves and contend with its ugliness; and *Hades* goes against the grain to subvert expectations of how particular characters known in Western canon should be perceived.

Postmillennial Fantasy Role-Playing Game,” in *The Routledge Companion to Screen Music and Sound*, ed. Miguel Mera, Ronald Sadoff, and Ben Winters (Routledge, 2017), 413.

⁷⁹ Supergiant Games had a team of about two dozen people that worked on *Hades*, which is comparatively larger than the studios behind *Celeste* and *Night in the Woods*, and, of course, *Undertale*, which was primarily developed by one person, though additional support was provided by Temmie Chang, who served as the lead artist. However, Supergiant Games is still significantly smaller than teams working on AAA titles. It is also the case that they have been developing and publishing their own games since their first release in 2011, *Bastion*.

Somewhat relatedly, I want to emphasize that I am not interested in exploring “authentic” or “positive” representation, which has been taken up elsewhere in game music and sound studies.⁸⁰ Instead, I want to draw attention to the reality of identity/ies being messy, slippery, and grotesque; I want to assert the need for us to contend with the complications that also come with being labeled as Other, as *monstrous*.⁸¹

It is also the case that indie video games are where such freedom to explore these ideas and themes are more prevalent than in mainstream titles, as they are less bound to expectations and have more creative freedom.⁸² It should be noted that what defines a video game as “indie” is a contentious discussion that is outside the scope of this dissertation, though it is not dissimilar to other media that have indie scenes like music and film. The Curation Jury of the Indie Game Awards have an agreed upon definition for what classifies a video game as eligible for their awards that is as follows: “Existing outside of the traditional publisher system, a game crafted and released by the developers who are not owned or financially controlled by a major AAA/AA publisher or

⁸⁰ For further discussion on existing literature on this topic from ludomusicology, see Chapter 1 of this dissertation.

⁸¹ For instance, Thomas B. Yee asserts in his monograph the importance of diversity, then advocates for players “to embrace [the Other’s] difference as fully human and deserving of dignity.” While I acknowledge that those who have been marginalized fully deserve dignity, I push back on the human label, particularly as it is used here to be equated with moral goodness and positivity. I often find that correlations like these are superficial and unproductive in discussions about the formation of identity. See Thomas B. Yee, *Gender, Race and Religion in Video Game Music* (Intellect, 2024), 19.

⁸² See Chapter 1 of this dissertation for further discussion on this point.

corporation, allowing them to create in an unrestricted environment and fully swing for the fences in realizing their vision.”⁸³ For this dissertation, I am understanding indie games to similarly mean video games that were created by individuals or relatively small development teams that (1) do not have financial backing from a major game publisher (e.g., Ubisoft and Nintendo) and (2) have complete creative freedom to design their games however they would like.

It is essential for me to emphasize that I am *not* suggesting the monstrous identity be adopted by everyone, especially by those who align themselves with the identity/ies I will discuss in this dissertation. Instead, I see it similarly to how “queer” and “crip” are claimed by some members of their respective communities but not all. However, and as I have stated earlier, I see significant value in the monster as a figure to explore how society fashions and understands identity as a concept.

Of course, this dissertation features my analyses of these video games and, inevitably, reflect what and how I experienced them. Furthermore, and as is often the case with anyone who plays video games *and* engages with the communities for them in some capacity, my thoughts and understandings of my case studies have been informed by both academic *and* fandom discourses. It is important to me that this dissertation reflects these two spaces coming together to propel my analyses, whether it be a theorized

⁸³ See “FAQ,” *The Indie Game Awards*, <https://www.indiegameawards.gg/faq>.

term by a scholar or an (un)ironic shitpost by a Redditor; I firmly believe in the necessity to seriously engage and be in dialogue with both. It is also the case that, when discussing identity, my own thoughts are not enough. As a result, I have turned to ethnography and interviewed several people from various backgrounds, as well as observed discussions amongst fans on social media platforms and discussion forums such as Reddit to help shape some of my discussions and analyses.

Chapter 1 takes into consideration how identity has been approached in both academic and non-academic spaces, as well as how music and sound are tied to identity. In addition to an exploration of what has been written about identity, this chapter features interviews and online discussions about identity and video games (along with its music and sound, wherever applicable), followed by considerations as to why any of these labels seemingly matter, particularly in relation to diversity and representation.

Chapter 2 investigates the relationship between horror and the monster, first, briefly exploring how monsters have been aurally depicted in video games to inform conventional and stereotypical expectations of how monsters should sound. I then analyze the music and sound of *Celeste* and *Night in the Woods* to show a more complex depiction of the relationship between horror and the monster, all of which contribute to how the monster is created and perceived by the creators and players alike.

Chapter 3 shifts from horror to failure, specifically how monsters are frequently perceived as societal failures by the dominant culture. I specifically frame this through

the lens of different temporalities to argue that monsters fail to be in-sync with what queer theorist Elizabeth Freeman describes as chrononormativity.⁸⁴ For this chapter, I turn to *Hades* and *Celeste* to demonstrate how the player/listener must reckon with the monsters' desires to live in their own spacetimes, as depicted through music and sound.

Last but not least, Chapter 4 considers how, in spite of their associations with horror and failure, monsters make worlds for themselves that let them *be*, which I explore through the music and sound of *Undertale* and *Hades*. I argue for the player/listener to engage, but not empathize, with alternative modes of being in the world, as well as to understand such modes to frequently be a disidentificatory practice.

⁸⁴ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Duke University Press, 2010), 3–5.

CHAPTER 1:

FINDING IDENTITY AND REPRESENTATION

This chapter is an exploration of how conceptions of identity as a discourse (and, more broadly, representation) have been discussed by scholars and, importantly for this dissertation, by individuals who were interviewed by me, as well as from my observations of online spaces, notably Reddit. I begin with a brief overview of scholarship on identity and representation, broadly speaking, as well as how they have been discussed in music studies and game studies. I draw particular attention to scholarship on identity outside of ludomusicology, due to the fact that there has been limited engagement with how identity is understood and constructed in the subdiscipline. This will then be followed by analyses of my interviewees' responses and discussions on social media platforms about identity and representation in relation to video games and, wherever possible, the music in the medium.

The literature on identity is an inexhaustive list, with scholars having negotiated and continuing to negotiate the term and concept, trying to define certain characterizations of an individual or a group, generally speaking. One discursive point is if identity is static or fluid. The word "identity" has even been a contested term, with some scholars, such as Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, finding that it is encumbered with definitions and would need more nuanced terms to fully encapsulate

the multiple ways to discuss identity.¹ However, scholars continue to use “identity,” often so in relation to “identification,” which “invites us to specify the agents that do the identifying.”² There is a “self-fashioning” that occurs, as Timothy D. Taylor argues, “in which selves are made out of one’s relationship to one’s Others, from one’s identification with one’s profession, from one’s relationship to production.”³

Stuart Hall is a key figure in cultural studies with his theorization of identity as well as identification. In his discussion on cultural identity, he addresses two different positions regarding it and uses the Caribbean diaspora as his primary example: one position is a sense of sharedness “with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our factual history,” while the other position recognizes that, while there are similarities between cultures, there are also “critical points of deep and significant *difference* which constitute ‘what we really are’: or rather—since history has intervened—‘what we have become’.”⁴ Hall places particular emphasis on the significance of history in shaping identities, noting that “like everything which is historical, they undergo constant trans-formation. Far from

¹ Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, “Beyond ‘Identity’,” *Theory and Society* 29, no. 1 (2000): 1–47, <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1007068714468>.

² Brubaker and Cooper, “Beyond ‘Identity’,” 14.

³ Timothy D. Taylor, *Beyond Exoticism: Western Music and the World* (Duke University Press, 2007), 120.

⁴ Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation,” *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 36 (1989), 69–70. Emphasis in original.

being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power.”⁵ Identities are what we call a shaping of narratives of the self, which are inherently unstable and suggest a constant process. Relatedly, Hall has also addressed the usefulness of the term “identification” alongside “identity,” noting that it allows for the individual to provide a contextualized self-definition.⁶ I find Hall’s approach to identity and identification particularly useful for this chapter (and, more broadly, this dissertation), with my interviews and observations of online spaces like Reddit revealing the history and process involved in conceptualizing identity.

Identity has also been discussed in depth within music studies. In his discussion on popular musics in relation to identity, Simon Frith argues “that identity is *mobile*, a process not a thing, a becoming not a thing,” as well as “that our experience of music—of music making and music listening—is best understood as an experience of this *self-in-process*.”⁷ Importantly, it must be acknowledged that the individual subjects are the ones driving this process, and who gets to do this will vary. To Frith, music and identity both “describes the social in the individual and the individual in the social,” and with popular music in particular, “it places us in the social world in a particular way” due to our

⁵ Hall, “Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation,” 70.

⁶ Stuart Hall, “Who Needs ‘Identity’?” in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, eds. Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay (SAGE Publications, 1996), 1–17.

⁷ Simon Frith, “Music and Identity,” in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, eds. Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay (SAGE Publications, 1996), 109. Emphasis in original.

understanding of what popular(ity) means.⁸ Timothy Rice provides an overview as well as a critique of how “identity” is applied. He argues that music scholars (specifically ethnomusicologists) fail to provide a succinct definition when they use the term in their own scholarship.⁹ He suggests that this may be due to the lack of engagement with theoretical scholarship on the topic and suggests that “organizing our thinking around a variety of theoretical perspectives [...] and general themes is one way to bring some order.”¹⁰ At the time of the article’s publication in 2007, Rice saw rich opportunities for music studies to continue contributing to identity discourse, something William G. Roy and Timothy J. Dowd also acknowledge in their argument that music’s “embeddedness in institution, its pervasiveness in everyday life, its popularity as an avocation, and its affirmation in a discourse of transcendent sanctification make it an accessible exemplar of the process of social construction.”¹¹ The prevalence of music in day-to-day life certainly has made it that, even for users online and my interviewees who had little to no technical knowledge of music, they still had plenty to say about the topic to then

⁸ Frith, “Music and Identity,” 109, 121.

⁹ Timothy Rice, “Reflections on Music and Identity in *Ethnomusicology*,” *Muzikologija* 7 (2007): 17–38, <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=1233957>.

¹⁰ Rice, “Reflections on Music and Identity in *Ethnomusicology*,” 18.

¹¹ William G. Roy and Timothy J. Dowd, “What Is Sociological about Music?” *The Annual Review of Sociology* 36 (2010): 186, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.012809.102618>.

extrapolate their understanding of identity, whether they realized they are doing this or not.

Tia DeNora provides insight on music and identity through ethnographic interview data and observations to focus on how her participants “engage in musical practices that regulate, elaborate, and substantiate themselves as social agents.”¹² She is especially interested in her participants’ process of producing their respective identities over time, taking into account music’s “effects” based on how “individuals orient to it, how they interpret it and how they place it within their personal musical maps, within the semiotic web of music and extra-musical associations.”¹³ With resonances of Stuart Hall’s emphasis on the significance of history in identity formation, DeNora draws attention to the importance of memory and argues that identification is significant in relation to memory, as “part of the work of producing one’s self as a coherent being over time, part of producing a retrospection that is in turn a resource for projection into the future, a cueing in to how to proceed.”¹⁴

Narrowing in on scholarship from game music and sound studies (i.e., ludomusicology), scholars have primarily attended to musical and sonic depictions and representations of particular identities. For example, on gender, Michael Austin analyzes

¹² Tia DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 47.

¹³ DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life*, 61.

¹⁴ DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life*, 66.

how people will use music to “[interpose] a (sometimes seemingly unintentional) gendered aesthetic” with orchestration that perpetuates stereotypes of the masculine and feminine.¹⁵ Another example, this time on race and ethnicity, includes Kate Galloway’s discussion on aural representations of Indigenous peoples, writing that resisting “harmful stereotypes and challenging the status quo also means eliminating elements of gameplay that are popular with a particular demographic of players,” a case that can also be made for other races and ethnicities.¹⁶ Scholars have also addressed class, such as Andra Ivănescu, who observes how in *Beneath a Steel Sky* (Revolution Software, 1994), “musical styles act as semiotic shorthand” as subtle cues to players about the socioeconomic statuses of various spaces they enter.¹⁷ Last but not least, musical representations of disability in video games have also received attention from scholars such as Dana Plank, who argues, “Representation of bodies in games have the power to

¹⁵ Michael Austin, “Orchestrating Difference: Representing Gender in Video Game Music,” in *Masculinities in Play*, ed. Nicholas Taylor and Gerald Voorhees (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 167. For another example, though with particular attention being given to the voice, see Jennifer Smith, “Vocal Disruptions in the Aural Game World: The Female Entertainer in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, *Transistor* and *Divinity: Original Sin II*,” *The Soundtrack* 11, 1–2 (2020): 75–97, https://doi.org/10.1386/ts_00006_1.

¹⁶ Kate Galloway, “Indigenous-Designed Pixels, Circuits, and Game Music and Sound,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Video Game Music and Sound*, ed. William Gibbons and Mark Grimshaw-Aagaard (Oxford University Press, 2024), 474. For another discussion on Indigeneity and representation in video game music and sound, see Juan Carlos Ponce Reyes, “Imagined Past and Future: *Aztech Forgotten Gods* and Pre-Hispanic Representation,” *Journal of Sound and Music in Games* 4, no. 3 (2023): 1–29, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jsmg.2023.4.3.1>.

¹⁷ Andra Ivănescu, “*Beneath a Steel Sky*: A Musical Characterisation of Class Structure,” *The Computer Games Journal* 7, no. 4 (2018): 240, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40869-018-0067-6>. For another example of sonic representations of class, see Lyne Dwyer, “Sex and the City: A Sonic Analysis of Sex Work and Socioeconomic Class in *Watch_Dogs 2*,” *Game Studies* 22, no. 2 (2022), https://gamestudies.org/2202/articles/gap_dwyer.

expose us to different modes and abilities; suggesting an opportunity to create new experiences, explorations of empathetic and affirmational embodiment through the development of new gameplay mechanics and their representation in sound.”¹⁸ I find what these scholars have discussed in their respective research helpful in shedding light on how and why people think about music and identity the way they do. While my findings in this chapter may resonate with what online users and my interlocuters have said, I would like to critique the need to have “good” representation and problematize feeling empathy for those who have been historically marginalized, which I will discuss further in later paragraphs and this dissertation, in general.

In ludomusicological scholarship, it is rarer to come across scholars turning to ethnography to interrogate the relationship between music and sound, identity, and player experience/reception in video games. One notable article is Kiri Miller’s ethnographic work in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (Rockstar Games, 2004), in which she investigates how players made sense of race through their use of the controllable radio stations in-game compared to “their real-life radio habits.”¹⁹ Her analysis reveals that players frequently listened to the in-game radio—specifically gangsta rap—through the ears of the Black male protagonist, CJ, “because that’s what [he] would do,” even if they

¹⁸ Dana Plank, “Bodies in Play,” 306. For another discussion on disability—specifically blindness—and sound, see William R. Ayers, “What Is It Like to Be a Dolphin? Echolocation and Subjectivity in Video Games,” *Journal of Sound and Music in Games* 2, no. 3 (2021): 1–33, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jsmg.2021.2.3.1>.

¹⁹ Kiri Miller, “Jacking the Dial: Radio, Race, and Place in *Grand Theft Auto*,” *Ethnomusicology* 51, no. 3 (2007): 406, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20174544>.

themselves would not listen to the genre outside of the game world.²⁰ Miller observes how players “decide that inhabiting a character means acquiring his tastes, and they follow the game’s cues in making the consumer choices of a stereotypical young black gang member.”²¹ This is further complicated when positionality is taken into consideration, one that she alludes to in her research.

Turning to game studies, more work on identity and representation—while also taking into consideration player experience and reception—has been done in the discipline than in game music and sound studies. Sociologist Adrienne Shaw has done significant work in her investigations to analyze the extent that players considered identity and representation important to them in relation to video games.²² Particularly in her monograph, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture*, she focuses on elucidating the terms “identity,” “identification,” and “media representation,” arguing that the three are “connected but distinct,” with identification being “used not as the lynchpin between identity and representation but rather as an entry point into describing participants’ complicated relationships with both.”²³

²⁰ Miller, “Jacking the Dial,” 422.

²¹ Miller, “Jacking the Dial,” 422.

²² See Adrienne Shaw, “Do You Identity as a Gamer? Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Gamer Identity,” *New Media & Society* 14, no. 1 (2012): 28–44, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444811410394>; Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014); and Shaw, “Talking to Gaymers: Questioning Identity, Community and Media Representation,” *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* 9, no. 1 (2017): 67–89, <https://doi.org/10.16997/wpcc.150>.

²³ Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge*, 7.

Furthermore, Shaw understands identification—which she asserts is a flexible concept—to “not [be] about a static, linear, measurable connection to a character [in video games]. Rather, it is about seeing ourselves reflected in the world and relating to images of others, both of which are critically tied to arguments for representation that focus on media’s ability to create possible worlds.”²⁴

Anthropologist Tom Boellstorff also analyzes the importance of identity in a virtual setting by turning to ethnography to conduct research on players and their online lives in the video game, *Second Life* (Linden Lab, 2003).²⁵ He specifically explores how identity is conceived in the virtual-world as opposed to the actual-world, as well as their similarities and differences, noting that the “permeable border” between the two worlds could demonstrate that players’ online lives in *Second Life* could be “closer to what they understood to be their *true selfhood*, unencumbered by social constraints or the particularities of physical embodiment.”²⁶ In other words, whether it be the player’s avatar virtually embodying an idealized version of how they want to look, or them wanting to act and express themselves in a way they feel is most genuine to who they actually are, virtual and online spaces make the player’s “real” identity malleable.

²⁴ Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge*, 70–71.

²⁵ Tom Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human* (Princeton University Press, 2008).

²⁶ Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life*, 121. Emphasis added.

More critically, media studies scholar Lisa Nakamura also acknowledges the freedom and flexibility that come with identity formation online, though she points out the issues that come with them, specifically turning to depictions of racial and ethnic identities in a disembodied setting that could reinforce stereotypes and unbalanced power dynamics.²⁷ Nakamura describes the online and virtual space as “a theater of performed identities,” recognizing the appeal of “passing” online—especially for those who have been oppressed due to being marginalized—where pretending to be a part of the majority culture “*would* be safer, more powerful, and better.”²⁸ However, she pays particular attention to white users who choose to “perform” a racial identity that is not their own and describes it as “identity tourism,” which allow these individuals “to appropriate an Asian [or other] racial identity without any of the risks associated with being a racial minority in real life.”²⁹ Her use of the term “tourism” is reflective of how tourists may act at travel destinations: “I wish to retain a sense of the identity tourist as one who engages in a superficial, reversible, recreational play at otherness, a person who is satisfied with *an episodic experience* as a racial minority.”³⁰ While Nakamura is writing specifically about identity in relation to the Internet and not necessarily video games, her

²⁷ Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet* (Routledge, 2002).

²⁸ Nakamura, *Cybertypes*, 31. Emphasis in original.

²⁹ Nakamura, *Cybertypes*, 40.

³⁰ Nakamura, *Cybertypes*, 55. Emphasis added.

ideas carry over to this medium, especially when avatar customization comes into play that can allow players to have such episodic experiences.

Game studies scholar Aaron Trammell expands on Nakamura's ideas of identity tourism through roleplaying games (RPGs) to consider how players make sense of identity and representation in the genre, noting that there are two angles to approach it: "A *player* angle looks at how identities, discrimination, and representations are actively constructed and negotiated by players. A *procedural* angle looks at how game design embodies certain representations and, with them, potential bias and stereotypes."³¹ In many cases, scholars from game studies and game music and sound studies alike have engaged with the procedural angle. However, I find it incredibly fruitful to take into serious consideration the player angle—put another way, participatory cultures—especially how players debate, engage with, and imagine the identities of not only their own avatars but also preexisting characters, whether it be in conversation with other players or through creative outlets such as fanart and fanfiction. On this note, it is especially crucial to keep in mind that fans *produce* content. They are doing more than just engaging with the text through discussion; they are actively informing and (re)shaping the text to be something more than its original creation.

³¹ Aaron Trammell, "Representation and Discrimination in Role-Playing Games," in *Role-Playing Game Studies: A Transmedia Approach*, ed. José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding (Routledge, 2018), 440. Emphasis in original.

When it comes to representation found in preexisting characters, players who are (multiply) marginalized may flesh out minor characters with detailed backstories and descriptions of their appearances that align with their own or even reimagine characters—minor or otherwise—in an entirely different way that could potentially mirror their own experiences more closely. For example, some trans and nonbinary people have claimed Sheik from *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo EAD, 1998) to be a part of the community, especially because the character is depicted and referred to as a young man, only to be revealed later on as Princess Zelda in disguise. One Redditor posted a meme that has Sheik and Zelda on the trans flag, saying they are like Sheik because they “look like a guy, but [they’re] actually a girl.”³² In another Reddit post, a user calls Sheik “one of the OG trans icons in gaming.”³³ Literary and fan studies scholar Ebony Elizabeth Thomas describes the ways in which young adults—particularly young Black women—reframe the novels they read as “restorying,” which “describes the complex ways that contemporary young people narrate the word and the world, analyze their lived experiences, and then synthesize and recontextualize a multiplicity of stories in forming new narratives. In other words, as young readers imagine themselves into

³² u/bluefishhegg, “Boymodeing while transfem be like” r/traaaaaaannnnnnnnnnns, Reddit, June 20, 2021, https://www.reddit.com/r/traaaaaaannnnnnnnnnns/comments/o3wt47/boymodeing_while_transfem_be_like/.

³³ u/StrangeTalkingCat, “Shout out to one of the OG trans icons in gaming, my boy Sheik for all the FTM out there!” r/traaaaaaannnnnnnnnnns, Reddit, March 6, 2019, https://www.reddit.com/r/traaaaaaannnnnnnnnnns/comments/axux5i/shout_out_to_one_of_the_og_trans_icons_in_gaming/.

stories, they *reimagine the very stories themselves*.”³⁴ Considering this, the digital space, then, becomes an essential space to communicate these restoried ideas of identity and representation.

Relatedly, Bo Ruberg’s interviews with various queer indie game makers consider the ways in which queerness can go beyond representation in video games, to make the queer identity messy, challenge ideas of empathy and find its alternatives, and recognize the importance of intersectionality.³⁵ For instance, when they interviewed Aevee Bee, Bee described the queerness of her visual novel, *We Know the Devil* (Date Night, 2015), as a means to show how “just beneath the surface of the characters’ seemingly fantastical transformation from human to demon is an ambivalent message about the power and the horror of being a transgender person who is made to feel like a monster, and who can choose whether to reject or embrace that monstrosity.”³⁶ In other words, it is important to recognize the *monstrousness* of queerness, and while this dissertation is, ultimately, an argument *for* embracing that monstrosity, I also recognize and validate those who choose to reject it. Furthermore, Bee, who stated in the interview that she was “against

³⁴ Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games* (New York University Press, 2019), 159. Emphasis in original.

³⁵ Bo Ruberg, *The Queer Games Avant-Garde: How LGBTQ Game Makers Are Reimagining the Medium of Video Games* (Duke University Press, 2020), 19–22. See also Ruberg, “Empathy and Its Alternatives: Deconstructing the Rhetoric of ‘Empathy’ in Video Games,” *Communication, Culture & Critique* 13 (2020): 54–71, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcz044>.

³⁶ Ruberg, *The Queer Games Avant-Garde*, 51.

representation,” it meant that “representation can’t just be a list of identity categories. It’s not really representation unless you’re creating complexity; without complexity, characters feel insincere and incomplete.”³⁷ Much like Ruberg and their interlocutors, while I find discourse on representation an important and unavoidable one (and it has been taken into serious consideration in game music studies), I am personally invested in analyzing the messy, complicated nature of how identity is fashioned, especially in ways that resist a need to be able to empathize with particular characters, especially monstrous ones.

Monstrosity presents a particular complexity due to its meaning in both majority and minority cultures. For the majority culture, it is the ways in which people from this group have defined the imagined “normal,” how they have “monstrified” those who fall outside these neat categorizations that define normalcy.³⁸ Yet, there are members of historically marginalized groups who have reclaimed the monster to create new narratives and ways to be represented. For example, scholars Barbara Creed and Harry M. Benshoff have analyzed the role of the monster in films in relation to femininity and homosexuality, respectively, to consider how there are ties between identity and

³⁷ Ruberg, *The Queer Games Avant-Garde*, 56.

³⁸ I take “monstrified” from Surekha Davies, who explores the “monstrification” and “monster-making” of Otherness in her monograph. See Surekha Davies, *Humans: A Monstrous History* (University of California Press, 2025), 4.

monstrosity.³⁹ Relatedly, Jack Halberstam rereads the monster in Gothic horror to be one “that is partial, compromised, messy, and queer.”⁴⁰ These ideas can all be applied to music and sound in video games, how the player/listener can *rehear* the monstrous and makes sense of identity and representation.

In the following section of this chapter, I will draw attention to what players themselves have to say about music and identity in video games. I first focus on the twelve interviews I was able to conduct between June to December 2022. I then turn my attention to the respective subreddits of my four case studies. I analyze the responses of both my interlocutors and Reddit users to present how these players are thinking about identity in general.

Players’ Thoughts on Music and Identity in Video Games

It was crucial for me to include the voices of players themselves in my research, not only because my opinion is not the only one that matters, but it is also the case that they help in shaping discourse on identity, whether they do so intentionally or not. To find participants, my search actually started with people I knew, particularly my online friends. I reached out to a few individuals who I thought would be interested in taking part in my research to share their experiences; I also requested that they pass my contact

³⁹ See Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, and Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet*.

⁴⁰ Halberstam, *Skin Shows*, 188.

information to people in their own circles who they thought would also be interested. The two main criteria I had that needed to be met by a potential interviewee was that they needed to semi-regularly play video games, regardless of types and genres, as well as respond to my questions in English. All participants were then given the option to have the interview conducted over a recorded audio or video call on Zoom, or through real-time text-based communication on Discord. These were then saved as audio, video, or text files, depending on the participant's preferred method of being interviewed. In addition, I requested that they all pick a pseudonym to increase their chances of not being identified.

Of the twelve interviews I conducted, three participants opted for real-time messaging on Discord, which presented different experiences than an interview on Zoom did not have. For instance, while messaging took almost twice the amount of time compared to interviews done on Zoom, I found that these three participants provided far more substantial responses compared to the other nine participants. This is likely because they had relatively more time to think through their ideas before messaging their responses to me. As a result, there was not as much need for me to follow up on these three participants' responses like I did with my nine participants on Zoom. However, the directness of the interviews conducted on Discord made it that there was far less wiggle room to have side conversations that revealed more to me about my interlocutors, as well as for the interview to have a more organic flow.

I deliberately chose not to ask my interlocutors for their identities or where they were based, especially the individuals who I did not know personally. Instead, I framed my questions in a way that would give them the choice to share how they identified or not. That being said, all twelve participants were aware that the interview being conducted had to deal with player experience and identity in relation to video game music, which perhaps made it that everyone was more than willing to share aspects of themselves with me.

All interviews started with me asking a bit about their relationship with video games, specifically how they got into playing them and the kinds of games they enjoy playing. I then asked what types of characters they liked, or, if they could list some of their favorite characters. I often followed up to ask why my interlocutors liked particular characters, with answers ranging from general preferences in fiction to personal reasons often correlated to their own lives. It was only natural for me to then ask about avatar customization and, should they play any games that require it, how they design their characters. I wrapped up the first part of this interview by asking my interlocutors to what extent they felt they were represented in video games, which was where many felt comfortable sharing how they identified to expand on their thoughts on representation in general.

The second part of the interview focused on video game music, which I started by asking for their favorite video game soundtracks. I asked this question primarily to gauge

the level of interest and expertise they had in music, though it was also my attempt to ease them into a new but related topic to the first half of the interview. My interlocutors' grasp of music ranged from knowing very little about it, to being deeply familiar with terms and concepts as a result of having studied music at some point in their lives. As a result, how the participants described music varied, with some responses being vague in nature, while others were able to precisely point out details only trained musicians would know. I then asked my interlocutors about the importance of music to their overall gameplay experience, or if they found music helpful at all. This then led to discussions about any musical moments that they found particularly memorable from certain video games, or if anything in game music in general stood out to them while playing.

My final question was perhaps the trickiest for my interlocutors, as I asked them if there were any music they associated with particular environments, aesthetics, or character archetypes. As I will discuss later in this section, my interlocutors—regardless of their music background—were relatively quick to point out details that reflect how culturally coded music in screen media is in a way that contributes to our collective imagination. However, they were particularly stumped by my mentioning characters and their archetypes.

As it turned out, when it came to the participants' understanding of identity and how it ties to music and sound in video games, I discovered that most of them did not see much correlation between the two, if at all, which would explain their puzzled

reactions. Yet, how they answered reflected that there was some inherent understanding that there are ties, whether it be based on their responses regarding identity and representation, or how they make sense of the music and sound that they hear in video games. Some of my interlocutors also saw the correlations between identity and monstrosity, though it was not always with what they heard in mind. Relatedly, in my observations of numerous threads on the subreddits for the video games I analyze in this dissertation (i.e., *Undertale*, *Night in the Woods*, *Celeste*, and *Hades*), very few Redditors found that there was a correlation between identity and music from what I was able to find, though, like my interlocutors, much thought went into discussions that centered identity and representation.

A crucial part of the discussion around identity and video games is the type of genres that my interlocutors play(ed), with everyone mentioning RPGs as either a formative and/or an integral part of their video gaming experience. The RPG genre is a sprawling one, covering innumerable titles that sometimes vastly differ from each other. However, what allows these titles to all be grouped under the RPG umbrella is the particular investment that the player has in inserting themselves into a particular role and fashioning an identity of some kind, whether it be creating their own avatar or playing as an already existing character. As Sebastian Deterding and José P. Zagal write regarding the genre's structure, "In RPGs, people adopt situational roles of players and are free to play with—temporarily try on, explore, experience, act out, subvert—alternative roles,

identities, and selves.”⁴¹ In other words, identity and identification are crucial to the genre, especially in ways that go beyond representing who they actually are offline. Notably, one of my participants, Wolfgang, told me how he found RPGs to be “a nice escape from reality, and a good way to break out of the norm and try new things in cool and crazy far-off worlds.”⁴² Furthermore, he expressed an interest in playing as someone who is not like him, “a straight cis white male,” in the Japanese MMORPG, *Final Fantasy XIV* (Square Enix, 2013).⁴³ Instead, he chose to create a female character:

So when I was but a fledgling, lowercase “g” gamer, I definitely did what I think a lot of people do when starting out (especially if they’re not the most imaginative individuals, like myself), and would make characters that I felt embodied more of myself as I was at the time. I don’t think I ever really looked at character creation as a “you can be anyone you want to be!” thing for quite some time, tbh [to be honest]. However, when I first started playing [*Final Fantasy*] XIV, I actually made a big departure from that. When I rolled my first character, I was like “Archer, duh” and then, because I came from playing Elder Scrolls, I was like “alright, need to scale off of Dex [dexterity], who has the highest base Dex”

>cat

“... I refuse to be a fucking cat boy. welp, this is a game for weebies, so I guess I’m gonna be a kawaii uguuuuu cat girl”

⁴¹ Sebastian Deterding and José P. Zagal, “The Many Faces of Role-Playing Game Studies,” in *Role-Playing Game Studies: A Transmedia Approach*, ed. José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding (Routledge, 2018), 4.

⁴² Interview with Wolfgang on Discord, August 1, 2022.

⁴³ Interview with Wolfgang. MMORPG is the abbreviated form for massively multiplayer online roleplaying game, which usually has the player take on the role of a character (often one they create themselves) and play in an online setting with other players.

and then I proceeded to make the most garbage generic kawaii cat girl I could, and while naming her I was a bit stumped. Then, I remembered a viral tumblr post where someone called OP [the original poster] trash, to which her response was “I’m not just fucking trash, I’m the Trash Queen” and that’s how Trash Queen was born⁴⁴

Some of my other interviewees have also shown interest in creating avatars that do not look anything like them. For example, Valentine mentioned putting in significant time in creating her avatar when given the option, especially something “visually appealing” that “doesn’t necessarily have to be something that [she] identif[ies] with; it just has to be an aesthetic [she] desire[s].” She continued, “I’m looking for something that I *want* to be, and I can be anything in [video games], why would I be myself?”⁴⁵ Valentine gave an example from one of her favorite video game franchises, the fantasy RPG *Dragon*

⁴⁴ Interview with Wolfgang. Wolfgang used several terms that reflected his impression that I also understood both anime/manga (henceforth animanga) and video gaming cultures (which I did), the two having many overlaps. When he described himself as a “lowercase ‘g’ gamer,” Wolfgang is gesturing to the idea that an uppercase “g” gamer would be a so-called “serious” or “hardcore” gamer, a way for him to imply that this is not necessarily a good thing. In *Final Fantasy XIV*, the player can choose to play as a Miquo’té, a playable race that look like feline humanoids, which is what he is referencing to when he mentions selecting a “cat” for his first character. Furthermore, by “cat boy” and “cat girl,” Wolfgang is referencing animanga series that featured characters with feline characteristics (e.g., the 2002 anime series, *Tokyo Mew Mew*), which became an aesthetic trend and the subject of online humor particularly in the 2000s into the 2010s in the animanga fan community. The connection to animanga is clear when he describes *Final Fantasy XIV* as “a game for weebies” due to it being (a) a Japanese video game and (b) part of a franchise that is popular among animanga fans who also play video games. “Weebies” is a shortening of “weeaboos,” which is a derogatory term to describe people (specifically those who are non-Japanese) obsessed with Japanese popular culture. Wolfgang’s description of “a kawaii uguuuuu cat girl,” then, is gesturing to the cute aesthetic (i.e., kawaii) distinct to Japanese popular culture that has been frequently appropriated by non-Japanese people, while “uguuuuu” is a reference from the 2002 anime series, *Kanon*, in which one of the main characters, Ayu, is known for saying “uguu” in a cutesy and childlike way when frustrated.

⁴⁵ Interview with Valentine on Zoom, August 13, 2022.

Age (BioWare, 2009), and said, “I don’t want to play, like, some six-foot-tall, short hair [that’s] brown guy... boring! Give me the fucking, like, eight-foot-tall Qunari chick with horns and braids, and give me magic, like let’s go.”⁴⁶ Relatedly, Winston Flan initially created avatars based on their appearance but eventually switched to creating ones based on their original characters (OCs), such as “always making sure [their avatars] have pink hair to remind [them] of Sana [the name of one of their OCs].”⁴⁷

On the other hand, a few of my interviewees *did* create avatars based on how they actually look, for the most part. For example, Leon (who self-identified as a “white guy, blonde hair, [and] thin”), TheMoneyToad (who self-identified as a cisgender white man), and Bread (who self-identified as a white lesbian) all stated that they preferred to create avatars that looked similar to them.⁴⁸ Leon further expanded and said, “I don’t do well with blank slates because I don’t like to fill them in,” stating that creativity was a major

⁴⁶ Interview with Valentine. The Qunari is one of the existing races in the *Dragon Age* franchise and are known to be large humanoids with metallic skin, horns, white hair, pointed ears, and unusual eye colors such as red or violet. The Qunari are a playable race in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (BioWare, 2014), which is what Valentine is specifically referencing, as well as *Dragon Age: The Veilguard* (BioWare, 2024), which was released after the interview was conducted.

⁴⁷ Interview with Winston Flan on Zoom, October 19, 2022. An original character (often abbreviated as OC) generally refers to a character created for a particular fandom, meaning they are a non-canonical character existing in the fictional universe to interact with existing characters and places. In some cases, OCs can be self-insertion characters, though many fans create OCs entirely from their own imagination. OCs have also been used in a wider sense to refer to a character that someone created.

⁴⁸ Interview with Leon on Zoom, June 28, 2022; interview with TheMoneyToad on Zoom, July 30, 2022; and interview with Bread on Zoom, August 8, 2022. Leon did mention that he “tried a few different things like that *Elder Scrolls* character [he] mentioned,” for which he “decided to make a female character just to really try to get in the mindset [that he is] roleplaying someone else.”

barrier, thus, he said he preferred playing premade characters.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, Bread mentioned how, for her, when she is creating avatars, “it just feels weird [...] to play [as] someone else that doesn’t look like me.”⁵⁰ In other instances, a couple of my interlocuters did not care at all about avatar customization. Notably, Xing stated, “I hate designing my own avatar. I hate having a self-insert character. I either go kind of by random or by what kind of looks I like most, but too many choices overwhelm me.”⁵¹ Relatedly, Gab stated, “i’m personally really lazy about original characters or things i have to create myself. i think with my own avatars i just wear what’s cute rather than try to create a character. [...] i guess i see no reason for something of mine to be involved since i’m trying to experience something someone else mad[e].”⁵² Ultimately, responses varied drastically when I asked my participants about creating their own avatars, with some finding it freeing from reality, while others found it challenging. Interestingly, a handful of them used *Final Fantasy XIV* as their example to explain their respective thought processes about avatar creation, one reason perhaps being that the popular MMORPG had an

⁴⁹ Interview with Leon.

⁵⁰ Interview with Bread. That being said, Bread mentioned that she enjoyed creating avatars with pink hair simply because she liked it, as well as having dyed her hair this color at one point in the past.

⁵¹ Interview with Xing on Zoom, July 12, 2022.

⁵² Interview with Gab on Discord, November 2, 2022. Gab wrote in all lowercase letters throughout the interview, which I will leave as is whenever I quote her.

expansion pack released at the end of 2021 (i.e., not long before I conducted my interviews).⁵³

Ragnhild Tronstad writes about character creation and identification in the MMORPG franchise, *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004).⁵⁴ She argues that there are two kinds of identification: “sameness identity” and “empathic identity,” with the former describing the sense that the player has become or is the character, while the latter is understood as connecting with the character’s experiences but not necessarily the character themselves.⁵⁵ The majority of my interlocutors would often find themselves aligning with what Tronstad describes as empathic identity, particularly for playable characters that have already been somewhat fleshed out by the writers of the video game. For example, Leon immediately named the black mage, Vivi, from the Japanese RPG *Final Fantasy IX* (Square Enix, 2000) as a playable character he strongly related to. This connection he expressed was because Vivi is “coming to terms with his identity as someone whose body is very different from everyone else’s,” which he found relatable as someone who went through significant physical hardships in the past.⁵⁶ Relatedly, Bread

⁵³ The participants who mentioned *Final Fantasy XIV* while discussing avatar creations were Xing, Valentine, Gab, and Wolfgang. The expansion pack in question is called *Endwalker*.

⁵⁴ Ragnhild Tronstad, “Character Identification in *World of Warcraft*: The Relationship between Capacity and Appearance,” in *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader*, ed. Hilde G. Corneliussen and Jill Walker Rettberg (The MIT Press, 2008), 249–63.

⁵⁵ Tronstad, “Character Identification in *World of Warcraft*,” 251.

⁵⁶ Interview with Leon.

stated, “I see myself in [female characters], yeah, or more that I find them to be relatable to a certain extent, because I don’t really relate too much with male characters.”⁵⁷ On the other hand, among my interviewees, Anya actually expressed that she disliked most premade and playable protagonists, stating that she often found them “annoying,” especially because many have a “tragic, dark past and, like, they’re all following that same archetype, and usually, to me, it’s just... like man, chill out, edgelord.”⁵⁸ Instead, she found more commonality with characters—often non-playable—that brought comedic relief, her reasoning being, “If I was put in this situation, I also would just be a clown, you know?”⁵⁹

Of interest was Valentine’s response to characters she resonated with, specifically stating, “I honestly feel like I frequently identify with villains,” which she expanded on further to explain how many villains that she has watched in media were frequently queer-coded.⁶⁰ She then said after a chuckle, “No wonder I like them; I identify with them because they look like me and my friends, and act and talk like me and my friends.”⁶¹

⁵⁷ Interview with Bread.

⁵⁸ Interview with Anya on Zoom, June 27, 2022. An edgelord is a derogatory term used to describe someone who shares provocative or controversial opinions that lean toward nihilistic or extremist for attention or shock value. The term is derived from the concept of someone being (or trying to be) edgy.

⁵⁹ Interview with Anya.

⁶⁰ Interview with Valentine.

⁶¹ Interview with Valentine. Our conversation briefly derailed as we discussed the queer-coding of Disney villains as one such example, as well as other animated media. For further research on the topic of queer-coding in media, see, for some examples, Meredith Li-Vollmer and Mark E. LaPointe, “Gender

This rather aptly draws attention to the close ties that Henry Benshoff has pointed out between queerness and monstrosity in horror films, which he argues that “perhaps more than any other genre, actively invoke queer readings, because of their obvious metaphorical (non-realist) forms and narrative formats which disrupt the heterosexual status quo.”⁶² Somewhat relatedly, Leanne (who self-identified as “mixed” and Black) wrote in response to the reclamation of villains and monsters as “the almost necessary work minorities have to do to enjoy things,” meaning “to just mold media as we see fit since [everyone] hates us, kind of like how blacktober is a thing.”⁶³

While Leanne’s “everyone hates us” statement seems extreme, there is a kernel of truth in her observation, particularly for characters that do not fit standards of normalcy as defined by the majority culture. Race, ethnicity, and skin tones came up on a number of occasions in multiple interviews, with a few of my interlocutors expressing a desire to

Transgression and Villainy in Animated Film,” *Popular Communication* 1, no. 2 (2003): 89–109, https://doi.org/10.1207/S15405710PC0102_2; Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 17–38; and Richard Dyer, *The Culture of Queers* (Routledge, 2001), 70–89.

⁶² Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet*, 6.

⁶³ Interview with Leanne on Discord, December 6, 2022. Leanne wrote primarily in lowercase letters throughout the interview, which I will leave as is whenever I quote her. Blacktober is a month-long event that occurs in October when Black and mixed Black creatives are uplifted for their works by following a prompt list celebrating Black art (whether it be fanart, original art, cosplay, etc.). Blacktober was first started in 2020 in response to anti-Blackness in the creative arts (e.g., Black artists being harassed for reimagining their favorite characters as Black in media). While the official organizers of Blacktober have chosen to discontinue the event in 2023, they encouraged “keeping the spirit alive.” See Blacktober Official (@The_Blacktober), X, August 18, 2023, https://x.com/The_Blacktober/status/1692602875107537037.

see darker skin tones, while others explicitly acknowledged that whiteness and fair skin seem to be the default in many video games.⁶⁴ Gab, Tala, and Winston Flan have also shared their disappointment in the lack of available options for darker skin tones, as well as hair styles and textures.⁶⁵ In a similar vein, Tala and Winston Flan, in addition to Indigo, all expressed their disappointment in the lack of ethnic representation, specifically ethnicities associated with Southeast Asia.⁶⁶

Meanwhile, five of my interlocutors who self-identified themselves as white stated that, when it came to race and ethnicity, they were cognizant of being well-represented in video games (“More Than Enough,” according to Wolfgang, and “dramatically overrepresented,” according to Leon).⁶⁷ Xing (who self-identified as Chinese American) and Anya (who self-identified as white) added some variation to the discussion around

⁶⁴ I group whiteness and fair skin together, due to the fact that all of my interlocutors brought up examples of video games developed in East Asia (mainly Japan), meaning it is important to recognize that the region will work under different cultural ideas from the West, e.g., having fair skin (which is often conflated with whiteness) being a desirable trait.

⁶⁵ For discussions on hair styles and texture in video games, see, for a couple examples, David R. Dietrich, “Avatars of Whiteness: Racial Expression in Video Game Characters,” *Sociological Inquiry* 83, no. 1 (2013): 82–105, <https://doi.org/10.1111/soin.12001>; and Jennifer Williams, “The Erasure of Virtual Blackness: An Ideation About Authentic Black Hairstyles in Speculative Digital Environments,” *Journal of Future Studies* 24, no. 2 (2019): 37–46, [https://doi.org/10.6531/JFS.201912_24\(2\).0005](https://doi.org/10.6531/JFS.201912_24(2).0005).

⁶⁶ Interview with Tala on Zoom, July 5, 2022; interview with Winston Flan; interview with Indigo on Zoom, October 19, 2022. All three of them self-identified as Filipino.

⁶⁷ Interview with Wolfgang; interview with Leon. Wolfgang capitalizing each word is something many people online might do for playful emphasis, especially in a sarcastic or an ironic sense. Depending on the context, some may even follow capitalized words with a trademark symbol to add further weight to what they are emphasizing and suggest that this is a part of who they are.

race and ethnicity, with Xing stating that as an East Asian, she only needed to play Japanese video games for some semblance of representation.⁶⁸ Anya, on the other hand, stated the confusion she sometimes felt while seeing certain characters' races in Japanese video games—particularly ones with fantasy settings—as many appeared white to her, though she asserted that, in the end, she was hesitant to “claim characters from media from other countries as white.”⁶⁹ However, Japanese media studies scholar Koichi Iwabuchi writes of such racial ambiguity through his concept of “cultural odor,” which he argues “is also closely associated with racial and bodily images of a country of origin.”⁷⁰ Notably, he writes how characters from Japanese media may lack this odor, with their non-Japaneseness being known as *mukokuseki*, “literally meaning ‘something or someone lacking any nationality,’ but also implying the erasure of racial or ethnic characteristics or a context, which does not imprint a particular culture or country with

⁶⁸ Interview with Xing. Xing did state that when it comes to representation for her particular identity as a queer Chinese American, there were scant examples, though she was able to provide two: *Butterfly Soup* (Brianna Lei, 2017) and *MAGIC MIRROR HALL* (The Apothecary, 2018). Both are free visual novel games that can be downloaded on <https://itch.io/>, a website and platform for small and indie developers to sell video games, tabletop roleplaying games, comics, zines, music, among others that users can download following a pay-what-you-want model.

⁶⁹ Interview with Anya. Anya is not the only white person to struggle with determining a character's race from Japanese media. In a study conducted by Amy Shirong Lu, it was discovered that many white participants assumed an anime character was white, even for characters originally designed to be of Asian descent. See Amy Shirong Lu, “What Race Do They Represent and Does Mine Have Anything to Do with It? Perceived Racial Categories of Anime Characters,” *Animation* 4, no. 2 (2009): 169–90, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1746847709104647>.

⁷⁰ Koichi Iwabuchi, *Recentring Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* (Duke University Press, 2002), 27–28.

these features.”⁷¹ This returns to the frustrations that a few of my interlocutors felt about the prevalence of fair-skinned and/or white characters, also raising an interesting point as to why the absence of racial or ethnic characteristics happens to default to something akin to whiteness.

This brings to attention the video game, *Hades*, which, while by developers from the United States, still comes as somewhat of a pleasant surprise: despite the game being explicitly about Greek mythology, the creative team deliberately chose to racialize a number of deities and figures. For instance, Athena and Ares are both dark-skinned and Black, while Dionysus is South Asian and Hermes is East Asian.⁷² When asked about the diverse cast of *Hades*, Greg Kasavin, the creative director of Supergiant Games, wrote:

They’re called the Greek gods because they were worshiped in ancient Greece, not because they themselves are ethnically Greek. [...] Zeus rules all the heavens, not just the airspace over Greece. Poseidon rules all the sea and land. They sprang from the Titans, who sprang from primordial Chaos, the source of all creation. So it stands to reason that the gods represent all the people of the world, at least indirectly.⁷³

⁷¹ Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization*, 28.

⁷² At the time of writing this, Supergiant Games is still developing *Hades II*, the sequel of *Hades*, which has been released in early access in 2024, meaning players can purchase and play a video game while it is still in the development stage then, in turn, provide feedback and suggestions. Early access is also a common approach for indie developers to fund the development of their games. So far, *Hades II* features several more Greek deities and figures who are racialized, much like its predecessor.

⁷³ See Ash Parrish, “Black Athena: How *Hades* Gets Its Gods Right,” *Kotaku*, September 22, 2020, <https://kotaku.com/black-athena-how-hades-gets-its-gods-right-1845146132>.

This creative decision was well-received in most cases, though it is not entirely surprising that others expressed displeasure. For instance, in a post about Ash Parrish's article (which the above explanation from Kasavin is from), one Redditor described the developers' approach as "bad history," which prompted another user to reply that "they just want to use it to push their agenda," with both comments receiving several upvotes.⁷⁴ Another Redditor in the same post argued that the developers "get the history wrong and they do this diversity thing on purpose because they wanted to get more audience, simple."⁷⁵

Relatedly, queer representation in *Hades* (and many other video games) has been subject to criticism from likeminded people. In one post, a frustrated Redditor inquired why "such a progressive game [like *Hades* has] such non-progressive 'fans'?"⁷⁶ One user commented that it stems from the very nature of video gaming culture: "Any video game sub will be full of the types of people that hate us, because gamers have been targeted for recruitment by hate movements for the last decade and a half."⁷⁷ In this particular case,

⁷⁴ See u/Libadn87, comment on "Black Athena: How Hades Gets Its Gods Right," r/HadesTheGame, Reddit, February 18, 2021, <https://www.reddit.com/r/HadesTheGame/comments/iyosjb/comment/gnvn6xy/>; and u/TheRealWabajak, comment on "Black Athena: How Hades Gets Its Gods Right," r/HadesTheGame, Reddit, March 22, 2024, <https://www.reddit.com/r/HadesTheGame/comments/iyosjb/comment/kw4i6av/>.

⁷⁵ See u/cordrgz, comment on "Black Athena: How Hades Gets Its Gods Right," r/HadesTheGame, Reddit, July 26, 2024, <https://www.reddit.com/r/HadesTheGame/comments/iyosjb/comment/lf205yp/>.

⁷⁶ See u/pumpkinsforsale, "LGBT+ In this sub," r/HadesTheGame, Reddit, January 26, 2022, https://www.reddit.com/r/HadesTheGame/comments/sdqvsz/lgbt_in_this_sub/.

⁷⁷ See u/ElirDesian, comment on "LGBT+ In this sub," r/HadesTheGame, Reddit, January 26, 2022, <https://www.reddit.com/r/HadesTheGame/comments/sdqvsz/comment/hueq22j/>.

the main hate movement in question is Gamergate, an online harassment campaign from 2014 to 2015 that pushed back against progressive ideas in video gaming culture. Gamergate focused on targeting women and nonbinary people in the industry, such as feminist media critic Anita Sarkeesian and game developer Zoë Quinn. The effects of this hate movement continue to reverberate in these online spaces. For example, there was significant backlash in 2024 to Sweet Baby Inc., a small studio that provides consultation on video game narratives during development with the goal to promote diversity and inclusion in-game, resulting in some news outlets calling the harassment they faced as “Gamergate 2.0.”⁷⁸ In a similar vein, on the software digital distribution platform, Steam, a group was created in March 2024 called “Woke Content Detector,” which has members dedicated to creating a comprehensive list of games that have “Woke content and if so, to what degree.”⁷⁹

When it came to discussions around music, my interlocutors had more to say about its ties to representation and authenticity as opposed to identity. For instance, Anya explained how video games might “mimic real-life countries, areas, and cultures,” but

⁷⁸ For two examples, see Theara Coleman, “Gamergate 2.0: Extremism in Video Games Sees Another Reckoning,” *The Week*, March 21, 2024, <https://theweek.com/culture-life/personal-technology/games/gamergate-2-extremism-video-games>; and Megan Farokhmanesh, “The Small Company at the Center of ‘Gamergate 2.0,’” *Wired*, March 14, 2024, <https://www.wired.com/story/sweet-baby-video-games-harassment-gamergate/>.

⁷⁹ See “Woke Content Detector,” Steam, https://steamcommunity.com/groups/Woke_Content_Detector. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the four video games that I use as my case studies for this dissertation have all been labeled “woke” by this group, particularly for their “overtly pro-LGBTQ+ messaging.”

when it comes to the music in particular, it might come off as “low effort” or “an uninformed recreation of what you probably heard like... once... in one traditional piece.”⁸⁰ She went on to provide an example from *Final Fantasy XIV* (which she half-jokingly stated was “the biggest offender” of this), in which she explained how she assumed one area of the game was heavily inspired by India, with the music borrowing elements from South Asian music traditions.⁸¹

A broader example Anya provided and called “a big, general stereotype” is in desert areas and how “they sound kind of Middle Eastern.”⁸² Several of my other interlocutors used the desert as an example as well, such as Leon, who described it as “some kind of stereotype of Middle Eastern music;” Xing, who also described it as “hearing Middle Eastern-sounding music;” Tala, who referenced the Orientalist nature of the music that they then described as “twangy and uses traditional Middle Eastern instruments;” Winston Flan mentioned always expecting particular “stringed instruments;” Gab described the environment to “always sound like the ones in octopath traveler or in mario;” and Leanne noted how “desert levels or environments in any game

⁸⁰ Interview with Anya.

⁸¹ As I have never played *Final Fantasy XIV*, I decided to look into some musical examples that were associated with the region Anya was described, which is called Radz-at-Han. It became clear to me why Anya thought of the subcontinent, as the music was reminiscent of Hindustani classical music, ranging from the improvisatory-like melodic frameworks found in ragas, to the prominent use of a sitar.

⁸² Interview with Anya.

always sound similar [...] to evoke the feeling of '[we're] in a desert town'."⁸³ Importantly, though, Anya asserted how people like herself "who [have] not done as much research on those areas and cultures [learn] all these from video games."⁸⁴ In other words, these musical portrayals may be their only frame of reference for how these music traditions sound.

A few of my interlocutors used the Chinese RPG *Genshin Impact* (MiHoYo, 2020) as their frame of reference to discuss representation and authenticity in video games, mainly to praise the composers for their approach to the video game's music. Indigo commented that the music seemed to have been "thoroughly researched" by the composers due to its sheer range in diversity, and Valentine similarly explained how the music "reflects parts of our world."⁸⁵ For a few musical examples, the Liyue region was described by both Bread, Tala, and Valentine as "Chinese-inspired;" Bread described the Mondstadt region as "medieval European-inspired," while Tala specified and said

⁸³ Interview with Leon; interview with Xing; interview with Tala; interview with Winston Flan; interview with Gab; and interview with Leanne. Winston Flan is most likely thinking of instruments such as the oud, qanun, as well as other lutes and zithers found in the Arab region. Gab references music from *Octopath Traveler* (Square Enix/Acquire, 2018) and the *Super Mario Bros.* franchise. Regarding *Octopath Traveler*, she is most likely thinking of "The Sunlands" by Yasunori Nishiki. As for *Super Mario Bros.*, there are multiple examples throughout the series, such as "Shifting Sand Land" by Koji Kondo from *Super Mario 64* (Nintendo EAD, 1996) and "Dusty Dune Galaxy" by Mahito Yokota from *Super Mario Galaxy* (Nintendo EAD, 2007). I have also written elsewhere about the (in)authentic musical portrayals of the desert in *The Legend of Zelda* franchise through the lens of Orientalism. See Hyeonjin Park, "Listening to the Gerudo and the Desert in *The Legend of Zelda* Series" in *The Oxford Handbook of Video Game Music and Sound*, ed. William Gibbons and Mark Grimshaw-Aagaard (Oxford University Press, 2024), 495–515.

⁸⁴ Interview with Anya.

⁸⁵ Interview with Indigo; and interview with Valentine.

“German-inspired;” and Winston Flan commented that the Sumeru region seems to have been “inspired by South Asia.”⁸⁶ Furthermore, Tala noted that when the composers “leaned more into [using] traditional instruments,” it would often be easier for them to figure out what the cultural influences might have been for these regions’ respective music.⁸⁷

There are also instances of players putting together fan-made playlists (also commonly known as a fanmix) that they feel relates to the video game, particularly the characters.⁸⁸ Among my interlocutors, Xing was the only person to mention creating playlists for characters, which was an activity she stated she “tend[s] to be a bit nuts about.”⁸⁹ Xing stated that she enjoyed creating playlists with narratives, then provided an

⁸⁶ Interview with Bread; interview with Tala; interview with Valentine; and interview with Winston Flan. As I have never played *Genshin Impact*, I looked into some musical examples that were associated with these regions to confirm the accuracy of my interlocutors’ descriptions. Liyue’s music featured pentatonic scales and Chinese instruments such as what sounded to me like an erhu and a pipa; Mondstadt’s music featured a far more traditional Western orchestra, as well as instruments commonly associated with the Renaissance and Baroque periods such as a lute and a harpsichord; Sumeru’s music featured augmented seconds, as well as Arab and South Asian instruments such as what sounded to me like a sitar, an oud, and a doumbek. Many thanks to Tala for sending me specific examples of music from the Mondstadt region.

⁸⁷ Interview with Tala.

⁸⁸ The term “fanmix” is a portmanteau of “fan” and “mixtape,” though many fans today—particularly younger ones—may opt to say playlist instead, which could represent both a generational difference and how/where these fanmixes are created (e.g., Spotify playlists). It is also common for fanmixes to accompany other works by fans, notably fanfiction, for which a writer may create a fanmix to accompany their story. Especially in the 2010s, it was common for fanmixes to be uploaded on various websites such as LiveJournal, Tumblr, and/or the now defunct 8tracks. For more on fanmixes, see Gavia Baker-Whitelaw, “The Evolution of Fandom Mixtape Culture,” *Daily Dot*, June 1, 2021, <https://www.dailydot.com/pop-culture/fandom/fandom-mixtape-culture-tumblr-spotify-8tracks/>.

⁸⁹ Interview with Xing.

example of one such playlist with a character named Yusuke from the Japanese RPG, *Persona 5* (P-Studio, 2016), for which she not only gave a unique name for this curated playlist but also created a cover. She shared a few songs on this playlist, one of them being “Tryst with Mephistopheles” by Owen Pallett, in which she specifically highlighted the lyrics: “Down come the vultures / I will not be your fuel anymore” to reflect a turning point in Yusuke’s character arc.

On Reddit, I browsed the subreddits for my four case studies to see if similar discussions were had about music and identity.⁹⁰ For *Night in the Woods*, one Redditor asked which albums and/or songs the protagonist, Mae, fans felt that she would listen to, especially as a rebellious young adult. In their post, they wrote, “Give me some recommendations, im making a playlist and i need some Punk, midwest emo, shoegaze tunes you can find. Other recomendationes besides these genres are valid too.”⁹¹ The post received a fair number of responses, with the most upvoted comment being for an emo band known as Modern Baseball.⁹² Another user commented that they felt Mae would be

⁹⁰ As opposed to using [sic], I have chosen to retain all Redditors’ original spellings, capitalizations, and punctuations that I quote in this chapter and the rest of the dissertation.

⁹¹ u/AtticNerdGregg, “Wich albums/songs Mae would listen to?” r/NightInTheWoods, Reddit, November 7, 2024, https://www.reddit.com/r/NightInTheWoods/comments/1glqfm0/wich_albumsongs_mae_would_listen_to/.

⁹² u/e-pancake, comment on “Wich albums/songs Mae would listen to?” r/NightInTheWoods, Reddit, November 7, 2024, <https://www.reddit.com/r/NightInTheWoods/comments/1glqfm0/comment/lvwbyqz/>.

“into a ton of early hardcore punk” such as Black Flag, Minor Threat, Dead Kennedys, among others.⁹³

For another video game I analyze in this dissertation, *Celeste*, one Redditor asked what fans thought the protagonist’s (Madeline) favorite genre of music might be.⁹⁴ A popular comment was from one user who put down melodic death metal.⁹⁵ Another comment that received numerous upvotes was speedcore, an electronic microgenre known for its fast and intense tempos and extremely distorted sounds.⁹⁶ Relatedly, two users commented hyperpop, another electronic microgenre known for its maximalist and exaggerated approach to pop music.⁹⁷ However, the most upvoted comment was Lena

⁹³ u/Insomnia_Incarnate, comment on “Wich albums/songs Mae would listen to?” r/NightInTheWoods, Reddit, November 7, 2024, <https://www.reddit.com/r/NightInTheWoods/comments/1glqfm0/comment/lvw9utz/>.

⁹⁴ u/PROFESSIONAL-PISSERS, “What do you guys think Madeline’s favorite genre of music is?” r/celestegame, Reddit, September 17, 2023, https://www.reddit.com/r/celestegame/comments/16lhve3/what_do_you_guys_think_madelines_favorite_genre/.

⁹⁵ u/-MegaMan401-, comment on “What do you guys think Madeline’s favorite genre of music is?” r/celestegame, Reddit, September 17, 2023, <https://www.reddit.com/r/celestegame/comments/16lhve3/comment/k12gcki/>.

⁹⁶ u/megamaz_, comment on “What do you guys think Madeline’s favorite genre of music is?” r/celestegame, Reddit, September 17, 2023, <https://www.reddit.com/r/celestegame/comments/16lhve3/comment/k12f6rr/>.

⁹⁷ u/Hameru_is_cool, comment on “What do you guys think Madeline’s favorite genre of music is?” r/celestegame, Reddit, September 18, 2023, <https://www.reddit.com/r/celestegame/comments/16lhve3/comment/k13z949/>; and u/etchthefemboy, comment on “What do you guys think Madeline’s favorite genre of music is?” r/celestegame, Reddit, September 18, 2023, <https://www.reddit.com/r/celestegame/comments/16lhve3/comment/k14glvl/>.

Raine, the composer of the video game's music.⁹⁸ While this is a tongue-in-cheek response, it is also likely that this received numerous upvotes because both the composer and Madeline are trans women, along with the fact that this answer aligned closely with other responses that Madeline is likely to listen to some kind of electronic music (i.e., the general musical style of the video game's soundtrack). Furthermore, the *Celeste* subreddit is known for having many trans-related jokes, one being that *Celeste* would make the player trans.⁹⁹ However, starting June 2024, the moderators of the subreddit implemented a rule explicitly stating that "egging" and "egg jokes" would be prohibited due to the discomfort it had caused.¹⁰⁰

It is worth noting that the aforementioned genres are all loosely connected to the trans community, particularly hyperpop, which can have elements of speedcore and metal. First, Aliya Chaudhury argues that hyperpop's tendency to blend genres can be

⁹⁸ u/brenoCAT, comment on "What do you guys think Madeline's favorite genre of music is?" r/celestegame, Reddit, September 17, 2023, <https://www.reddit.com/r/celestegame/comments/16lhve3/comment/k12j0o1/>.

⁹⁹ For example, see u/HadesEverdeen, "Madeline is trans, Maddy Thorson is trans, Lena Raine is trans, everyone is trans!" r/celestegame, Reddit, August 5, 2023, https://www.reddit.com/r/celestegame/comments/15iu7mc/madeline_is_trans_maddy_thorson_is_trans_lena/.

¹⁰⁰ See u/KanashimiMusic, "Celeste does NOT make people trans," r/celestegame, Reddit, June 17, 2024, https://www.reddit.com/r/celestegame/comments/1di1wl9/celeste_does_not_make_people_trans/. "Egging" is online and queer slang used to describe trans people who have yet to realize or are in denial that they are trans. Being in "egg mode" is similar to being in "the closet," with "hatching" being akin to "coming out." This concept grew in popularity around 2017, particularly with the creation of the subreddit r/egg_irl, which is self-described as "memes about trans people in denial."

traced to different heavy metal scenes that did similar genre-blending (e.g., nu metal).¹⁰¹ In addition to mainstream pop culture, hyperpop also gestures toward subcultures from the 2000s and early 2010s including but not limited to nightcore, anime, and pop punk music, which often provided safe spaces (frequently online) for many trans people.¹⁰² Hyperpop also has a number of notable artists who are trans or nonbinary, such as SOPHIE, Hexcode, Dorian Electra, and Laura Les of 100 geecs, all of whom have reveled in the genre's use of distortion and modulation, particularly for their voices. As Nic Johnson observed, "At its most basic level, though, [pitch changing] allows trans people to sing comfortably without the burden of dysphoria."¹⁰³ Hyperpop is a unique genre in the way it resonates particularly with trans and nonbinary fans and artists alike; it also demonstrates the frequency of fashioning identity through music (and, more broadly, popular culture). Whether fans of *Celeste* (and other video games) realize it themselves or not, the connections they make between the video game and its music to other music

¹⁰¹ Aliya Chaudhury, "Why Hyperpop Owes Its Existence to Heavy Metal," *Kerrang!*, April 14, 2021, <https://www.kerrang.com/why-hyperpop-owes-its-existence-to-heavy-metal>.

¹⁰² Nic Johnson, "How Hyperpop Gives Trans Artists a Voice," *Ringtone*, August 12, 2020, <https://www.ringtonemag.com/articles/how-hyperpop-gives-trans-artists-a-voice>. Nightcore has some overlaps with speedcore, specifically that it is also a hardcore electronic genre known for its fast tempos. Nightcore during this period was almost always associated and accompanied with anime culture, with remixes featuring covers and thumbnails of anime or Japanese video game characters. One notable example is the sped-up version of "Caramelldansen" by Caramell, which became a viral meme in the mid-2000s when it was first attached to a video loop from the Japanese visual novel, *Popotan* (Petit Ferret, 2002). A virtual group called Caramella Girls was eventually launched to promote the sped-up song in 2008. See ILIKEHAVESKILLAGEXD, "Caramelldansen SpeedyCake Remix Original Video," YouTube, September 9, 2008, video, 2:56, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o6Zp4cW8w8A>.

¹⁰³ Johnson, "How Hyperpop Gives Trans Artists a Voice."

and/or musical genres such as hyperpop illuminates the significance of identity formation that occurs and the broadening of discourse around identity.

Conclusion

My conversations with my interlocutors, along with the discussions that have taken place on Reddit, actually reveal how closely linked video games, music, and identity are, even if these individuals approach this relationship in a somewhat circuitous or implied manner. They have also all shown that they had something to say about this topic, especially how identity relates to representation, a related yet distinct idea of its own. However, as I gestured toward earlier in this chapter, discourse around identity and representation are not necessarily well-received in gaming communities. As Reddit in particular reveals, many video games fans have had negative reactions to any posts that deal with issues related to diversity and inclusion, even if posts are either genuine inquiries or tongue-in-cheek. For an example of the former, in one post, a Redditor asked how inclusivity may or may not affect the gaming industry, particularly what it means when a game is “being labelled as ‘too inclusive’ or ‘woke’.”¹⁰⁴ One Redditor responded that “tbh gamers aren’t the most welcoming community for this type of stuff,” while

¹⁰⁴ See [deleted], “How inclusivity is affecting (or not) the gaming industry?” r/truегaming, Reddit, September 10, 2021, https://www.reddit.com/r/truегaming/comments/plkffj/how_inclusivity_is_affecting_or_not_the_gaming/. It should be noted that the subreddit r/truегaming is meant to be a space for more in-depth discussions on anything related to video games, as opposed to r/gaming, which, while occasionally has in-depth discussions, is a significantly larger subreddit that allows for a variety of posts ranging from memes to inquiries, so long as they stay on topic.

another pointed out, “How can games be inclusive without being called woke or SJW? They can’t. The crowd of grifters who make money out of fabricated outrage and conspiracies won’t stop calling everything that can [be] woke.”¹⁰⁵ Both Redditors suggest that it would essentially be impossible to please everyone in in gaming communities, particularly one particular crowd in which most (if not all) members sympathize with the driving force of Gamergate.

This certainly seems to be the case, even when looking at Reddit posts that approach diversity in a more joking manner. For instance, one Redditor posted a screenshot of Aloy, a female protagonist from the video game *Horizon Zero Dawn* (Guerrilla Games, 2017) with the title, “I think we’re getting a hang of this whole diversity thing,” as a means to point out how she was fully-clothed and not sexualized in a stereotypical manner, unlike many other female protagonists in other video games.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ u/Patenski, comment on “How inclusivity is affecting (or not) the gaming industry?” r/truегaming, Reddit, September 10, 2021, <https://www.reddit.com/r/truегaming/comments/plkffj/comment/hcbfml/>, and u/ArnoldIO6, comment on “How inclusivity is affecting (or not) the gaming industry?” r/truегaming, Reddit, September 10, 2021, <https://www.reddit.com/r/truегaming/comments/plkffj/comment/hcb1ryp/>. SJW is an abbreviation for “social justice warrior,” which is a pejorative term primarily used for someone who has socially progressive views. SJW used to have a neutral to positive connotation for people engaged in social justice activism but eventually became an overwhelmingly negative one, especially with the term being adopted by the group that would become the alt-right in the early to mid-2010s. See Abby Ohlheiser, “Why ‘Social Justice Warrior,’ a Gamergate Insult, Is Now a Dictionary Entry,” *The Washington Post*, October 7, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2015/10/07/why-social-justice-warrior-a-gamergate-insult-is-now-a-dictionary-entry/>.

¹⁰⁶ See u/DRJT, “I think we’re getting a hang of this whole diversity thing,” r/gaming, Reddit, June 16, 2016, https://www.reddit.com/r/gaming/comments/4oefc4/i_think_were_getting_a_hang_of_this_whole/. Notable examples of female characters who are frequently sexualized due to how they are depicted include Lara Croft from the *Tomb Raider* franchise, Chun Li from the *Street Fighter* franchise, Kitana from the *Mortal Kombat* franchise, and Bayonetta from the titular franchise. Bayonetta in particular has led to some disagreements amongst fans about whether her character design is sexualizing or empowering. For

Shared a few days after E3 in 2016 and while Gamergate was still relatively fresh on everyone's minds, the post garnered well over two thousand comments, many of which had neutral to negative reactions about the "diversity thing."¹⁰⁷ The top-rated comment expressed complete displeasure at diversity even being mentioned, with the Redditor writing, "Please don't patronize a good design with this diversity crap."¹⁰⁸ Another Redditor commented, "Nintendo got the best hang of the whole 'diversity thing' by not giving a shit."¹⁰⁹

Though no identifying markers were revealed by these Redditors, it is not entirely out of the question to assume that many of them would identify as a cisgender white man,

more on this discussion, see Amanda Phillips, "Welcome to My Fantasy Zone: *Bayonetta* and Queer Femme Disturbance," in *Queer Game Studies*, ed. Bo Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw (University of Minneapolis Press, 2017), 109–123; Amanda Phillips, *Gamer Trouble: Feminist Confrontations in Digital Culture* (New York University Press, 2020), 119–132; and Katherine Cross, "Bayonetta and .error404: Two Concepts of Nudity," *Paste Magazine*, January 13, 2015, <https://www.pastemagazine.com/games/two-concepts-of-nudity-bayonetta-and-error404>.

¹⁰⁷ E3, which is short for Electronic Entertainment Expo, was an annual event until 2021 for the video game industry that hosted industry professionals to introduce and advertise upcoming games, hardware, and merchandise. *Horizon Zero Dawn* was officially announced in 2015 at E3 and, in 2016, was further advertised for its eventual release the following year.

¹⁰⁸ u/DreyfussFrost, comment on "I think we're getting a hang of this whole diversity thing," r/gaming, Reddit, June 16, 2016, <https://www.reddit.com/r/gaming/comments/4oefc4/comment/d4c1y06/>.

¹⁰⁹ [deleted], comment on "I think we're getting a hang of this whole diversity thing," r/gaming, Reddit, June 16, 2016, <https://www.reddit.com/r/gaming/comments/4oefc4/comment/d4buzse/>. It is likely that this user used Nintendo as an example, due to the Japanese game company's history of aggressively maintaining as apolitical of a position as possible. Even the former president of the North American branch of Nintendo, Reggie Fils-Aime, commented in 2017, "Making political statements are for other people to do. We [at Nintendo] want people to smile and have fun when they play our games." See CBC News: The National, "The National for Thursday June 15, 2017," YouTube, June 15, 2017, livestreamed video, 59:55, <https://www.youtube.com/live/yzJ0P0c3MxM?si=bHRTZGudNhkMGWs>, 59:04–59:15.

likely in his twenties or thirties. This is perhaps a result of the still-ongoing and prevailing stereotype in the United States that the typical gamer is of this demographic, which also happens to have overlaps with the user demographic of online spaces such as Reddit.¹¹⁰ Furthermore, while social media platforms like Reddit may have their socially progressive spaces, they are also known for serving as a base for those who actively resist or even outright bash on these views. Kristin MS Bezio aptly asserts the necessity to trace the digital history of gaming when thinking about the gamer stereotype, “which includes the creation, distribution, and marketing of [digital] *games*.”¹¹¹ She also states that it is important to consider *who* has had the most access to the very machines that led to these games, which frequently has ties to wealth and education in the United States. In other words, “this demographic tended to be predominantly white, middle-to-upper-class, and male.”¹¹² In addition to this, when thinking about the presumed target audience of video games, Bezio points out that it is not a coincidence that there is an overlap with the demographic of the alt-right, which is also primarily made up of young white men.¹¹³

¹¹⁰ In fact, the Pew Research Center released the demographic profiles of regular social media news consumers in the United States in 2024, for which their survey reflected that of those surveyed who regularly accessed Reddit, 68 percent identified as men and 53 percent identified as white. See Pew Research Center, “Social Media and News Fact Sheet,” *Pew Research Center*, September 17, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/social-media-and-news-fact-sheet/>.

¹¹¹ Kristin MS Bezio, “Ctrl-Alt-Del: GamerGate as a Precursor to the Rise of the Alt-Right,” *Leadership* 14, no. 5 (2018): 558, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715018793744>. Emphasis in original.

¹¹² Bezio, “Ctrl-Alt-Del,” 558.

¹¹³ Bezio, “Ctrl-Alt-Del,” 559–60.

For Gamergate to coincide with the rise of the alt-right, it would be difficult to dismiss this as a coincidence, considering the near-identical foundations that both movements have developed at around the same time. Much of these resonate with Umberto Eco's idea of "Ur-Fascism," or "Eternal Fascism," having features that are unable to "be organized into a system; many of them contradict each other, and are also typical of other kinds of despotism or fanaticism. But it is enough that one of them be present to allow fascism to coagulate around it."¹¹⁴ Eco describes some of these features to include a return to traditionalism and rejection of modernism, a fear of difference, heroism becoming the norm, anti-intellectualism (using George Orwell's Newspeak as one such example), among others. As some of the aforementioned discussions on Reddit in previous paragraphs have shown, it is particularly the fear of difference and anti-intellectualism—sometimes obfuscating the devaluing of knowledge through the use of memes and online slang—that builds up and eventually leads to a reactionary backlash. The tension of Gamergate is that, as much as the very people who have embraced the movement's ideology vehemently reject discussions about identity—which are often conflated with diversity and representation—they frequently fail to realize how closely bound they actually are to this discourse, with many of them shaping much of their own core identity based on video games. The construction of the gamer identity by Gamergate

¹¹⁴ Umberto Eco, "Ur-Fascism," *New York Review of Books*, June 22, 1995, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1995/06/22/ur-fascism/>.

supporters and sympathizers is especially apparent when observing which video games they consider fake or legitimate.

It is no coincidence, then, that there is an especially clear divide between AAA video games and indie video games. In the video game industry, AAA is a tier classification of video games that are produced or distributed by major publishers such as Nintendo, Square Enix, Ubisoft, and Blizzard; as well as being known for having higher development and marketing budgets than other tiers.¹¹⁵ It is frequently the case that Gamergate supporters recognize titles in this tier to be “real” video games that supposedly lack sociopolitical motives.

Indie video games, on the other hand, are generally known to be created by individuals or smaller development teams that lack the technical support and financial budget of publishers like the aforementioned. Many indie games often focus on experimental gameplay, as creators are often able to afford the freedom to take risks that are not seen as often in AAA titles. Furthermore, there are many indie games that explicitly draw attention to the distinct lived experiences, often from those of marginalized communities.¹¹⁶ As Adrienne Shaw succinctly frames it, “Indie game

¹¹⁵ AAA titles are not unlike blockbuster films, should a comparison be made.

¹¹⁶ For some examples, *Gris* (Nomada Studio, 2018) and *missed messages*. (Angela He, 2019) bring attention to grief and depression; *1000xRESIST* (Sunset Visitor, 2024) and *Venba* (Visai Games, 2023) focus on the experiences of Asian diasporic communities; and *A YEAR OF SPRINGS* (npckc, 2021) and *He Fucked the Girl Out of Me* (Taylor McCue, 2022) reflect trans women’s experiences in specific circumstances.

designers have long questioned the norms of representation, and audiences have at their disposal many tools, from mods to reading against the grain of a game, to question normative representation.”¹¹⁷ On this note, two of my interlocutors have made similar comments on the importance of indie games in what they make possible. Xing mentioned how “authentic diversity comes from self-expression, and a lot of that self-expression comes from indie games over mainstream games.”¹¹⁸ Wolfgang, after stating the importance of representation, noted that video games have “still a lot of ways to go,” but then added:

honestly the indie scene do be really poppin’ in that regard, like straight up I can’t think of an indie game with particularly *bad* representation in recent years. hopefully indies will pioneer the way for all the dumbass corporations¹¹⁹

However, these risks and forms of attention often come with criticism and even backlash about whether these video games could be considered games. Indeed, the early stages of Gamergate could be traced back to indie game developer Zoë Quinn and the release of their game, *Depression Quest*, in 2013, which is an interactive fiction game designed to emulate the experience of living with depression through various scenarios.¹²⁰ Not long after the game’s release, Quinn faced significant harassment from

¹¹⁷ Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge*, 231.

¹¹⁸ Interview with Xing. By “mainstream,” she primarily means AAA titles.

¹¹⁹ Interview with Wolfgang. The emphasis was included in his original message.

¹²⁰ *Depression Quest* can be played for free on the following website: <http://www.depressionquest.com/>.

gamers who did not see *Depression Quest* as a “real” game not only due to its formatting but also for supposedly having a political agenda.

The value of indie video games is implicitly questioned, then, particularly to determine if it’s solely for the (empty) value of “diversity” and “representation” or not. Bo Ruberg notes that the answer is not entirely straightforward: “Rather than seeing themselves as either empowered to make the medium of video games more diverse, or exploited by more privileged individuals, [queer indie game-makers] resist the presumption that the mainstream game industry, with its handwringing about becoming ‘better,’ should be the intended audience for their games in the first place.”¹²¹ In other words, these developers are showcasing that there *is* value in their games regardless of whether they meet mainstream audiences’ standards or not, and, crucially, that the “rhetoric of empathy, while often well-intended, promotes the appropriation and consumption of marginalized experiences.”¹²²

To conclude, the focus on indie video games in relation to conceptions of identity in this dissertation was a conscious choice that I made, given the ongoing discourse about their legitimacy in gaming circles. Furthermore, while monsters and monstrosity are not explicitly discussed, they lurk in the shadows and dark corners of our subconscious when

¹²¹ Bo Ruberg, “The Precarious Labor of Queer Indie Game-making: Who Benefits from Making Video Games ‘Better’?” *Television & New Media* 20, no. 8 (2019): 785, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476419851090>.

¹²² Ruberg, “Empathy and Its Alternatives,” 55.

we discuss identity, representation, diversity, and other related topics. Constructing identity (or identities) can be a liberatory form of expression; it can also be destructive, depending on how one presents it. The monstrous identity, then, is a complicated one, that will be further explored in the following chapters.

CHAPTER 2: THE HORROR OF MONSTERS

On some level I knew horror wasn't just about monsters doing bad things. [...] It's about the threat and the thrill of getting it wrong.
— S. Trimble, "A Demon-Girl's Guide to Life"¹

In this chapter, I examine horror in relation to the monster through music and sound in video games. I place particular focus on the unsettling tensions that come with leaning into *and* away from conventional ideas of monstrosity that are frequently entangled with horror tropes and stereotypes, especially in the video games *Celeste* and *Night in the Woods*, both of which play with and complicate horror and the monster through their respective music.

It comes as little surprise that video game music regularly draws from the catalog of Hollywood horror film music to construct the monster and the monstrous, as I have explored in the introduction of this dissertation.² However, even genres outside of horror rely on these musical tropes to evoke terror and unease as a means to immerse the player into a world with monstrous enemies. For example, in the action-adventure game *The*

¹ S. Trimble, "A Demon-Girl's Guide to Life," in *It Came from the Closet: Queer Reflections on Horror*, ed. Joe Vallese (The Feminist Press, 2022), 10.

² For more scholarship, see in particular the following two collections: Philip Hayward, ed., *Terror Tracks: Music, Sound and Horror Cinema* (Equinox Publishing, 2009); and Neil Lerner, ed., *Music in the Horror Film: Listening to Fear* (Routledge, 2010).

Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time, the composer Koji Kondo turns to familiar conventions from the horror film tradition for the game's more menacing locations and enemies. Tim Summers observes that the cue for the dungeon, the Shadow Temple, makes use of "a harpsichord, sung and chanting voices, and metallic scrapes and rattles" to create an unsettling soundscape.³ In addition, the main antagonist, Ganondorf, makes a grandiose sonic entrance before the final boss battle, which is captured through a cutscene of him playing the organ (Figure 2). Drawing from Julie Brown's discussions on the relationship between the villain and the organ, Summers describes Ganondorf's "sonic power" as a way to deliver the message that he is dangerous, and the use of the organ "serves as a shortcut for rounding out his identity, putting him in a long line of evil antagonists."⁴

³ Tim Summers, *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time – A Game Music Companion* (Intellect, 2021), 130–31.

⁴ See Brown, "Carnival of Souls and the Organs of Horror," 1–20; and Summers, *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*, 142.

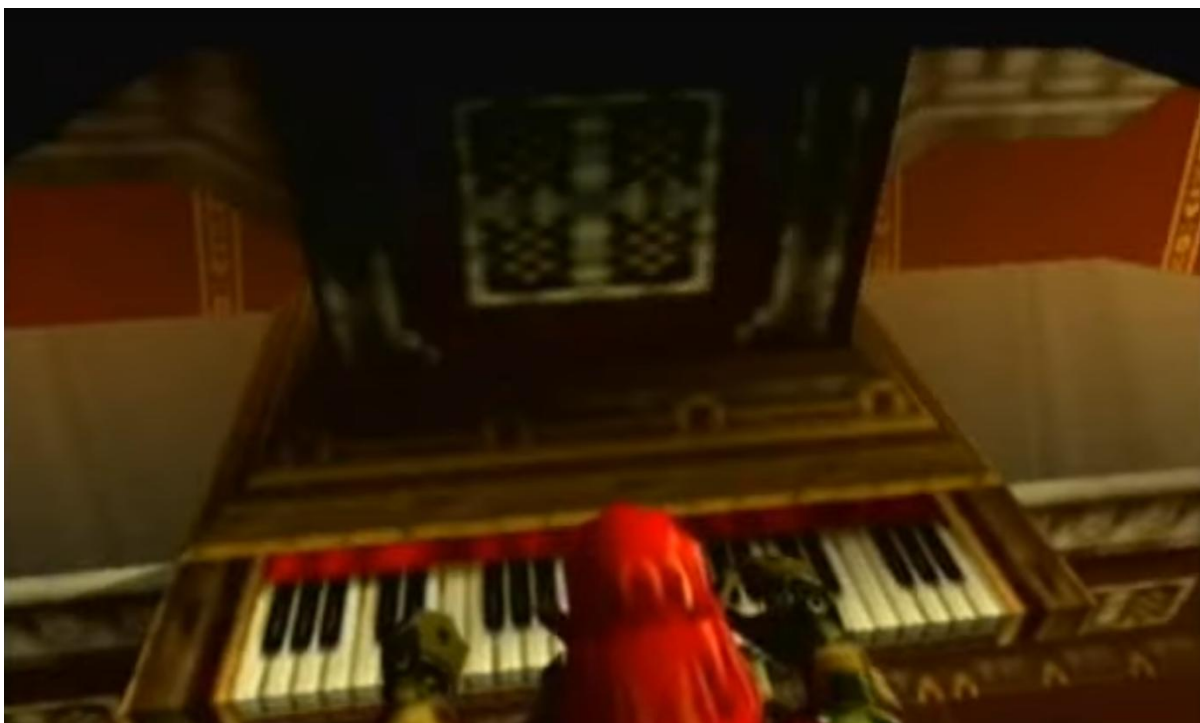


Figure 2. Ganondorf playing the organ in *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*.

In video games, it is especially the case that the monster goes hand-in-hand with insanity, with a focus on their descent into madness or perhaps already living with it. Especially in the horror genre, these frequently villainized characters are often tied to various isolated locations, usually with disturbed pasts to further emphasize what visual artist Alexa Wright describes as the monster “lurking on the margins of society.”⁵ Music and sound follow suit with familiar tropes that would reify horror and its ties to the monstrous, particularly through excess. Musicologist Isabella van Elferen notes that, in Gothic music and, more broadly, musical depictions of monstrosity, excess is an important timbral characteristic.⁶ Furthermore, “[A] lot of monstrous nondiegetic music

⁵ Wright, “Monstrous Strangers at the Edge of the World,” 180.

⁶ Van Elferen, *Gothic Music*, 69. Music theorist Megan Lavengood has also drawn attention to how timbre “can evoke specific intertextual and extramusical associations for a listener,” which can “inform and

is almost too loud, too harsh, too dissonant, involves quite too many brass and percussion instruments, and goes on so long it verges on the unpleasant.”⁷ These dense timbral and textural elements exude excesses that are meant to unsettle the player and have horror come alive.

Some video games go a step further with their respective audio design and have sanity tied to the player-character. In such cases, audio’s kinesonically syncretic nature becomes all the more apparent in the ways in which it works with other components of the game—such as visuals, narrative, and mechanics—to inform the player of their character’s sanity levels. An early example of the use of a sanity meter is in *Eternal Darkness: Sanity’s Requiem* (Silicon Knights, 2002) (Figure 3), which would make use of sound effects ranging from amplified sounds such as water dripping and whispering that fades in and out.⁸ Later games such as *Don’t Starve* (Klei Entertainment, 2013) and *Darkest Dungeon* (Red Hook Studios, 2016) also quantify sanity and turn to auditory cues to inform the player of their character’s (in)sanity. As the character’s sanity deteriorates in *Don’t Starve*, the player will begin to hear wind howling, disembodied whispering, and

enhance analyses of narrative” in video game music. See Megan Lavengood, “Timbre, Genre, and Polystylism in *Sonic the Hedgehog 3*,” in *On Popular Music and Its Unruly Entanglements*, ed. Nick Braae and Kai Arne Hansen (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 211.

⁷ Isabella van Elferen, “Sonic Monstrosity,” *Horror Studies* 7, no. 2 (2016): 313, <https://doi.org/10.1386/host.7.2.307.1>.

⁸ See Henry C. Sterchi, Edward A. Ridgeway, and Denis P. Dyayck, Sanity System for Video Game, US Patent 6,935,954 B2, filed December 14, 2000, and issued August 30, 2005.

an array of unidentifiable animal sounds, all of which get louder with the steady accumulation of psychological damage. In *Darkest Dungeon*, when a character's stress level reaches one hundred, there is a chance of gaining an affliction that will negatively impact the player's progress through a dungeon; a sonic cue is given with the sound of metal clashing followed by a deep growl.



Figure 3. The sanity meter (top left) in *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem*.

The aforementioned examples highlight the fact that the player is attuned to their aural surroundings; whether it be musical excess, distortion, or other elements, they all result in triggering a response from the player. It is almost as if they are aurally staring at something different or when something is amiss; in other words, when things seem abnormal. Disability studies scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson writes about the tendencies to stare at disabled people, noting that “[w]hatever or whomever embodies

the unpredictable, strange, or disordered prompts stares and demands putting order to apparent disarray, taming the world with our eyes.”⁹ Reframed with music and sound in mind, the player will do what they can to “tame” the game world to return it to a sense of normalcy and predictability to their ears. This may mean killing all enemies, returning to safe spaces that is underpinned by consonant music, or solving puzzles that will stop the noisiness so often connected to horror.

These stereotypical approaches in representing the monstrous in video games—particularly insanity—heavily borrow from preexisting Western music traditions. They are clear and polarizing approaches that make little room for interpretation as to who the monster is. What happens, then, when these conventions are complicated by the creators, composers, as well as the player? I explore this question in two of my primary case studies, *Celeste* and *Night in the Woods*. In these two video games, I argue that their respective music and sound present a more complex depiction of horror and the monster from different angles that also account for the visuals, narratives, and mechanics. Furthermore, I take into consideration fan reception and discourses, all of which contribute to how the monster is created and perceived.

⁹ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, 15.

The Distorted Self in *Celeste*

Celeste approaches horror and the monster primarily through texture and timbre to construct the monstrous identity and its complexity. In this section, I specifically focus on two levels—referred to as “chapters” in-game—to consider the relationship of horror and the monster and how it comes from within the protagonist. The player controls Madeline, who undertakes an arduous journey to reach the summit of Celeste Mountain. On her climb to the summit, Madeline discovers different areas, such as a resort in disrepair, while also having eerie and seemingly supernatural experiences. She is never completely alone on her journey, though, and forms friendships with two characters. The first one, who she calls Granny, is an elderly woman seemingly residing somewhere on the mountain, while the second one, Theo, is a social media-obsessed backpacker who Madeline regularly encounters in each area leading up to the summit.

In the game’s second chapter, which takes place in an area known as the Old Site, the player-character finds themselves in a room with a large mirror. Upon closer look, Madeline catches a glimpse of someone who appears to be her, except that this “reflection” has a darker demeanor and appearance, with purple hair, red eyes, and pale purple skin, all while wearing dark purple clothes (Figure 4). As Madeline continues staring at her reflection—referred to in-game as “Part of You/Me” and as Badeline by the fanbase—she

unexpectedly breaks out of the mirror and runs away.¹⁰ After this encounter, Madeline runs into her doppelgänger on several more occasions, usually in moments when she is in distress. In each encounter, Badeline generally presents herself as the pragmatic side of Madeline, often discouraging the protagonist from climbing the mountain and even admonishing her for trying. To many fans, Badeline is a manifestation of Madeline's fears and insecurities that stem from her anxiety and depression.¹¹



Figure 4. Madeline looking at Badeline in the mirror in the second level.

¹⁰ It is the case that the game files also refer to Madeline's reflection as "Badeline," a play on Madeline's name. I will also be referring to Madeline's counterpart as Badeline in this dissertation.

¹¹ For instance, see u/action_lawyer_comics, "I just beat Celeste, and I don't think I've been moved by a game's ending like this in a long time (SPOILERS)," r/celestegame, Reddit, January 27, 2020, https://www.reddit.com/r/celestegame/comments/euqj0r/i_just_beat_celeste_and_i_dont_think_ive_been/; and u/anatomy, "What is the Message of this game again?" r/celestegame, Reddit, November 15, 2020, https://www.reddit.com/r/celestegame/comments/juy57d/what_is_the_message_of_this_game_again/.

I return to Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's theory of staring, as she writes that we can only see ourselves "through the mediation of images or reflections. [...] The person in the mirror or the photograph is not the person we experience ourselves to be; rather, that person is the one others see."¹² It is curious, then, that who Madeline sees in the mirror does not quite look like her, reversing what Garland-Thomson states about staring at one's own reflection. In Madeline's case, the person in the mirror is someone she experiences herself to be—literally, a Part of Her—and is one who others cannot see. This draws attention to a paradoxical situation of how Madeline sees herself: the reflection is actually not her, but it also is. Badeline seemingly becomes her own entity after she breaks out of the mirror. She not only has a materialized body but agency as well, with the ability to carry conversations with the player-character, bringing up the troubling question of whether this now-corporealized reflection is actually the protagonist or not.

In Madeline's second encounter with Badeline, she asks the other, "Why would Part of Me look so *creepy*?"¹³ Badeline replies with exasperation, "This is just what I look like, okay? Deal with it." This response suggests that she is her own entity, twisting the idea of what a reflection is on its head, especially when she begins to chase Madeline after their conversation ends. This second meeting with Badeline is important to highlight, as

¹² Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, 51.

¹³ In *Celeste*, certain words and phrases will often move and shake to add particular emphasis in the dialogue, which I will indicate by using italics any time I quote the game in this dissertation.

the player will see that the screen will distort as the two characters converse. In future encounters with Badeline, the screen will continue this effect by glitching and distorting as a visual sign of Madeline's distress. When Madeline's stress levels are particularly high to the point of having a panic attack, purple tendrils reminiscent of Badeline's hair appear as the screen glitches (Figure 5). The visuals and dialogues throughout this game suggest that Badeline is a monster—one who embodies the worst of Madeline's anxiety and depression.



Figure 5. Madeline having a panic attack.

When confronting (or, rather, running away from) Badeline, the player must work under pressure to avoid her and other obstacles that could lead to their death. The stress that comes with playing *Celeste* is notoriously known in the gaming community, so much so that it has spawned numerous questions from new players about the game's

difficulty.¹⁴ The mechanics add another metaphoric layer of monstrosity to this game that makes the stakes seem even higher. The monstrous horror of it all is further accentuated by the music and sound, though one that is complicated in nature due to how they are tied to certain characters and environments.

The game's composer Lena Raine creates a constant state of unease and anticipation throughout the game by turning to timbre and texture as a means to heighten it. Raine's approach to the music in *Celeste* is not unlike the use of heavy metal in horror films, as Lee Barron and Ian Inglis write, as both push for a jarring and unsettling experience. The two authors note that there are "rising levels of noise, reduced levels of noise, tonal distortion, accelerated or decelerated rhythms, turbulence and disorder, irregular lyrical contours, heightened pitch, and the juxtaposition of calm and chaos."¹⁵ Many of these characteristics can also be heard in *Celeste*'s synth-heavy soundtrack, grounding it in horror music conventions that work to amplify the game's anxiety-inducing mechanics and narrative. Of note is Raine's heavy use of distortion in

¹⁴ For some examples, see u/TarcanSam, "Is Celeste hard?" r/celestegame, Reddit, September 10, 2019, https://www.reddit.com/r/celestegame/comments/d2g5ly/is_celeste_hard/; u/manny_0583, "How HARD is Celeste?" r/celestegame, Reddit, March 30, 2021, https://www.reddit.com/r/celestegame/comments/mgkje1/how_hard_is_celeste/; and u/backtosnack, "If I suck at hard video games, is Celeste still worth it?" r/celestegame, Reddit, April 21, 2020, https://www.reddit.com/r/celestegame/comments/g5kz65/if_i_suck_at_hard_video_games_is_celeste_still/.

¹⁵ Lee Barron and Ian Inglis, "Scary Movies, Scary Music: Uses and Unities of Heavy Metal in the Contemporary Horror Film," in *Terror Tracks: Sound and Horror Cinema*, ed. Philip Hayward (Equinox Publishing, 2009), 187.

Madeline's encounters with Badeline, reifying her as a monstrous figure with the supposed intent to cause harm. However, as Badeline comes from within, it presents a complicated situation of whether Madeline herself *is* the monster.

The juxtaposition of calm and chaos that Barron and Inglis highlighted exemplifies the complexity of the monster in *Celeste*. During fast-paced moments in the game, the music adds to the sense of urgency with rising and falling sixteenth-note runs or arpeggios that are not dissimilar to the rises and falls of anxiety. Musical elements change in response to the player-character's situation and/or location, switching from complex to simpler rhythms during moments of calm. However, there remains tension due to the game's difficulty, which, ultimately, serves as a reminder that one's anxiety and depression never fully go away. These musical shifts draw the player into what I argue is Madeline's disabled world, which are full of clashes with her monstrous self. This is most apparent in the leitmotif that represents Madeline, as well as a variation of it that is meant to represent Badeline (Figure 6). Madeline's leitmotif, played by a synth with a piano playing a descending arpeggio on repeat, makes its first appearance in the first chapter of the game in the area known as the Forsaken City. The variation of the leitmotif assigned to Badeline reflects the protagonist's internal conflict in making sense of whether her doppelgänger is a part of her reality or not, showing that the two cannot be easily separated. This variation also makes several appearances—the first being in the

game's second chapter—and is recognizable not only by its rhythmic and key change but also due to a change in musical texture.



Figure 6. Transcriptions of Madeline's leitmotif (top) and its variation used for Badeline (bottom).

I turn my attention now to specific moments in *Celeste*—specifically Chapters 2 and 5 of the game—that play with these musical characteristics to represent Madeline and Badeline. First focusing on the chase in the game's second chapter, the music abruptly shifts from a calmer and thinly textured melody to a denser one, with sixteenth-note arpeggios played frantically on a piano that rise and fall, while a distorted bass synth plays rising sixteenth-note arpeggios that seem to be following the piano line. This musical structure is particularly appropriate in this situation, considering that Badeline is following the player-character's exact movements a few seconds after, showcasing the closely knit relationship between the audio and visuals in depicting a chase. In the transition from calm to chaos, a synth variation of Madeline's leitmotif leads to a denser texture that presents an excess of overpowering synths during this chase. Meanwhile, the piano recedes into the background, exacerbating the player's level of stress to the point of frustrated terror.

By the time Madeline reaches an area known as the Mirror Temple (i.e., the game's fifth chapter), she has encountered Badeline on several occasions, all of which led to stressful circumstances not only for her, but by extension, the player as well. Whether it be taunting the hotel owner Mr. Oshiro at the Celestial Resort in the third level of the game, or her appearance right when an old gondola abruptly stalls, Badeline is a portent who insists on haunting Madeline. This is much to Madeline's frustration, especially considering that this physical manifestation literally came from her. The blurred distinction between Madeline and Badeline is most apparent in the Mirror Temple, with mirrors playing a critical role in this level, as the area's name suggests. As Madeline progresses through the Mirror Temple, she eventually finds Theo, who is trapped behind a mirror. From this interaction up until, after some exploration, she finds a large, shattered mirror, the music remains unsettlingly calm with its slow melody played by a piano, featuring rising and falling sixteenth-note arpeggios played in a lower range.¹⁶

Upon discovering the shattered mirror, Madeline finds herself trapped in the mirrored world as well, which turns out to be an unsettling space that Lena Raine has described as having "weird cosmic horrors within."¹⁷ The eeriness of this environment is

¹⁶ The piano melody occasionally disappears, depending on where the player-character is in the Mirror Temple, and will sometimes switch to choral-like synths.

¹⁷ Lena Raine, "Interview: Composer Lena Raine Talks Celeste Soundtrack & Working in Game Audio," interview by Ryan Paquet, *Original Sound Version*, February 5, 2018, <https://www.originalsoundversion.com/interview-composer-lena-raine-talks-celeste-soundtrack-working-in-game-audio/>.

heightened by ominous synths with percussive elements slowly added into the texture. When Madeline runs into Badeline again, the latter eventually remarks, “But I’m not the only *creepy thing* living in that messed up head of yours. Don’t like what you see? *What a surprise*. [...] Look into the mirror, all of this is yours. [...] You’re in control here, not me.” In the mirror—which appears to be Badeline’s world—distorted synths take precedence to amplify the horrors stemming from Madeline’s mind. Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of being in the mirror is how the player-character is followed by multi-eyed swimming creatures that aggressively chase after her when she is seen by them (Figure 7). When one of these monsters go in for an attack, its seemingly largest eye is revealed to be a mouth, as if to swallow the protagonist. Furthermore, the screen distorts any time she is close to this creature.



Figure 7. The multi-eyed swimming creatures found in the fifth level. When the monster cannot see Madeline, it will float idly (left). When Madeline is in view, though, the monster changes color and quickly chases after the player-character (right).

The music distorts and becomes unstable as Madeline tries to leave the mirrored world, reflecting not only her fears and anxieties but also the player’s own as they both

navigate their way through this area. Disability studies scholar Alison Kafer describes the disabled experience to be similar to what the player-character experiences, as “feelings of asynchrony or temporal dissonance.”¹⁸ Being stuck in an eerie realm leads to a different understanding of time and space for the player-character, in which they are constantly stared at and followed by eyes on the walls, serving as a reminder that Madeline is the one who created these monsters, that they are also a part of her.

Madeline soon finds herself in front of another mirror, though this time, she sees her actual reflection. She asks herself, “If this is all in my head, why is it so hostile?” She continues, “Those *things* are hunting me. I’m a trespasser in my own world.” The protagonist is aware of the trespassing monster and the madness that comes with it. However, it is more than “mental illness” that leads her to feeling this terror. A couple years after *Celeste*’s release, Maddy Thorson, who is one of the developers, revealed that Madeline is a transgender woman.¹⁹ From Madeline looking in the mirror and seeing Badeline, to the attempts to abandon and run from this reflection, Thorson writes “that was all unknowingly written from a trans perspective,” as she realized that Madeline’s journey was inadvertently also reflective of her own understanding of her trans identity.²⁰

¹⁸ Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Indiana University Press, 2013), 34.

¹⁹ Maddy Thorson, “Is Madeline Canonically Trans?” *Maddy Makes Games*, November 5, 2020, https://maddymakesgames.com/articles/is_maddy_trans/index.html.

²⁰ Thorson, “Is Madeline Canonically Trans?”

Additionally, Lena Raine is also a trans woman, which adds even more to the transness of *Celeste*.²¹ In other words, the monster in *Celeste* is not only reflective of Madeline's wrestling with madness and disability but gender as well. The monstrous nature of gender identity is particularly familiar for many trans people. Susan Stryker writes:

I find a deep affinity between myself as a transsexual woman and the monster in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Like the monster, I am too often perceived as less than fully human due to the means of my embodiment; like the monster's as well, my exclusion from human community fuels a deep and abiding rage in me that I, like the monster, direct against the conditions in which I must struggle to exist.²²

Madeline has shown her fears and insecurities stemming from madness, but she has also lashed out and expressed her frustration, reflecting a monstrous rage that comes with grief and frustration in making sense of one's gender identity, the wave of self-doubt and anxiety of wanting her gender to be seen as authentic.

The meaning of the game's text is enhanced by this added reflection from Thorson, revealing the intersections of gender and disability to be an unavoidable one. The anxieties of Madeline being a trans woman become apparent, particularly on *Celeste's* subreddit, with Redditors posting their skepticism about the "transness" of the game. For instance, one Redditor inquires how Madeline retroactively being called trans is any

²¹ I discuss further the transness of *Celeste* and its music in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

²² Susan Stryker, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage," *GLQ* 1, no. 3 (1994): 238, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-1-3-237>.

different from J.K. Rowling calling one of her characters from the *Harry Potter* series gay.²³ On the other side of the spectrum, one user emphatically declares that Madeline *is* trans, arguing that they were “fed up” with other users debating Madeline’s gender identity, even pointing out that “there’s no proof she’s cis—there’s not even *evidence* she’s cis—and yet people see [her being trans] as a question.”²⁴

Questions and dismissive comments regarding Madeline’s trans identity cropped up even prior to the publication of Thorson’s reflection confirming this, specifically after the release of a free update in January 2020. This update included the ninth and final chapter of the game, titled “Farewell,” and had a scene at the end that showcased small pride and trans flags on Madeline’s desk (Figure 8). One post from around the time of the update inquired if Madeline is trans, to which the original poster concluded “if you want her to be,” going on to state the importance of respecting one another’s interpretations.²⁵ The post received a variety of responses, ranging from users expressing their delight that trans people were being represented in some fashion, while others shared their

²³ See u/spiderman800166, “How is Madeleine being declared trans any different then what J K Rowling did with Dumbledore?” r/celestegame, Reddit, November 7, 2020, https://www.reddit.com/r/celestegame/comments/jq3gme/how_is_madeleine_being_declared_trans_any/.

²⁴ See u/putting_stuff_off, “I’m fed up of people arguing over whether Madeline is trans,” r/celestegame, Reddit, November 5, 2020, https://www.reddit.com/r/celestegame/comments/johqjm/im_fed_up_of_people_arguing_over_whether_madeline/. Coincidentally, this Redditor wrote their post on the same day before Maddy Thorson published her post about Madeline being a trans woman.

²⁵ See u/rollerCrescent, “Is Madeline Trans?” r/celestegame, Reddit, January 13, 2020, https://www.reddit.com/r/celestegame/comments/eodk41/is_madeline_trans/.

skepticism, such as one user arguing that there is no dialogue proving “those pixels called Madeline is a trans.”²⁶



Figure 8. A closeup of the pride and trans flags on Madeline’s desk, tucked behind her keyboard.

The complications of Madeline being a monster become more overt with players’ reluctance to accept her identity as a trans woman being a part of the narrative, though they were receptive of her mental disabilities. However, it is the case that identities cannot be separated; the journey Madeline embarks on is equally about her disabled and trans identity. While players are not outright calling Madeline a monster, the unease tied to

²⁶ See u/Dvjmarcomatheus, comment on “Is Madeline Trans?” r/celestegame, Reddit, January 14, 2020, <https://www.reddit.com/r/celestegame/comments/eodk41/comment/fed0ojo/>.

difference—especially bodily difference—is clear in the ways they push back against her trans identity, reflecting societal anxieties of the very existence of trans people, especially trans women.

I return to the use of glitches and distortion in the music and visuals of *Celeste*, then, and intertwine their ties with madness to transness by following game studies scholar Ari Gass’s analysis of glitch as a trans representational mode in video games. In their analysis of one level of the indie game *Problem Attic* (Liz Ryerson, 2013), Gass notes how glitches are “the particularity of the uncertainty, difficulty, and pain one might experience while in search of self, but it also indexes the violence of the coercive regulatory norms that make the search so challenging.”²⁷ In the case of *Celeste*, Madeline grapples with a manifestation of her anxiety and depression that glitches and distorts, which become all the more challenging to deal with when pushback against her trans identity is also taken into consideration in her search of self. Gass also writes that glitch “allows creators to reflect on the kinds of difficult or negative emotions of transgender life (including dissociation and dysphoria) that videogames often struggle to communicate,” yet simultaneously, the deliberate creation of glitch in art and video games “suggest that the glitch is a desired state.”²⁸ The manifestation that is Badeline,

²⁷ Ari Gass, “Glitch as a Trans Representational Mode in Video Games,” *Media-N* 20, no. 1 (2024): 16–17, <https://doi.org/10.21900/j.median.v20i1.1207>.

²⁸ Gass, “Glitch as a Trans Representational Mode in Video Games,” 19.

then, presents a more complicated understanding of the monster with how horror persists. It highlights the impossibility of positioning the monster as good or bad; instead, the monster resides in a murkier elsewhere.

Celeste's music is a journey to understand this monstrosity that shapes Madeline, often taking the form of Badeline. The music warps and transforms from piano to synths and back, much like Madeline going back and forth with Badeline. Texture and timbre respond to the player-character's movements from one platform to the next. Music distorts and reverberates throughout this game to reflect the messiness and monstrosity of gender and madness, especially the process of figuring these out. This messiness is especially apparent when Madeline enters the mirrored world, where she has to deal with the horrors coming from within her that exacerbate her fears and insecurities. *Celeste* presents the complexity of dealing with one's own perceived monstrosity and the horror that comes with it. The challenges due to the game's mechanics while entangled in this mental and emotional wrestling are heightened by the music, as it relentlessly pushes the player to brink of spiraling.

Celeste looks at the shifts in texture and timbre in relation to horror and the monster, creating space for a moment to reflect on one's monstrosity through Madeline and Badeline. My second case study for this chapter, *Night in the Woods*, uses shifts within the game's diegesis and musical leitmotifs to reveal that while the monster can come from

within, it can also be an external force. In addition, the events surrounding the composer after the game's release further deepen the player's reflections on horror and the monster.

Monstrous Existence in *Night in the Woods*

Night in the Woods takes place in an economically declining town called Possum Springs. Populated by zoomorphic characters (Figure 9), the player controls twenty-year-old college dropout, Mae Borowski (depicted as a cat), who slowly comes to terms with the fact that her hometown and its inhabitants have changed considerably since high school. The plot centers on uncovering the gruesome secret of Possum Springs; it also encourages the player to develop relationships with various characters they encounter, creating opportunities for them to explore topics that range from the mental health of young adults to the socioeconomic conditions of the Rust Belt of the United States.²⁹

²⁹ While Possum Springs is a fictional town, there are many reasons to believe that it takes place in the Rust Belt, specifically rural Pennsylvania: two of the three developers (Scott Benson and Bethany Hockenberry) are from Greater Pittsburgh, the close ties that Possum Springs has to coal mining and freight trains, the cultural nods to Polish immigration to this area (e.g., surnames such as Borowski and the prominence of pierogies), among others. See u/saladshooter4ever, "Pennsylvania represent!" r/NightInTheWoods, Reddit, March 11, 2017, https://www.reddit.com/r/NightInTheWoods/comments/5ytzr3/pennsylvania_represent/.



Figure 9. Mae Borowski (center) and other notable characters around her from *Night in the Woods*.

For better or worse, Mae also indulges in her impulsiveness driven by her madness, experiencing abstract dreams-turned-nightmares, all of which shape the game's narrative. However, the complexity of Mae's monstrousness becomes apparent when the player focuses on her social interactions and general musings, revealing a relatively immature young woman with existential anxieties due to being stuck at an impasse. Moreover, it reveals that her monstrousness was largely shaped by a greater horror: capitalism. In the several gameplay hours the player spends in Possum Springs, they will discover the anti-capitalist undercurrents of *Night in the Woods*, as interactions with the working-class characters reveal the lasting consequences of a system that pushed the town over the edge: small, family-owned businesses closing as large chain stores take over; the collapse of a

once prosperous mining town due to the outsourcing of materials and labor; young adults leaving (or attempting to) for better opportunities in cities; among others. The decline of Possum Springs is not only apparent narratively but visually as well. For example, the town's infrastructure and the buildings are in a state of disrepair. Furthermore, *Night in the Woods* takes place during autumn, a season of deterioration, suggesting one of its major themes is that of decline. Decline as a theme is all undergirded with the use of leitmotifs that shape much of the game's narrative and characters to reveal the complexities of horror and of the monster.

I call one of the most important leitmotifs of this game the “destruction” leitmotif (Figure 10), which the player hears when Mae acts on her impulses.³⁰ This leitmotif is readily recognizable due to its aggressive, fast-paced melody with an ominous bass underlying it. A significant part of Mae's personality is her rebellious “fuck you” attitude toward the world, so much that her impulsivities manifest in physically destructive ways that are, perhaps unsurprisingly, frowned upon by Possum Springs' residents. Mae is also often at odds with authoritative figures—notably her aunt, who is a police officer—and will be reprimanded for her recklessness.³¹ Yet, these moments are more than a “fuck you” to the world and the residuals of teenage rebellion. The game implicitly reveals that

³⁰ A variation of the destruction leitmotif is first heard early on in the game in one of Mae's dreams.

³¹ Mae's disdain for her aunt (and, more generally, the police) is particularly apparent in her journal, which features a portrait of her aunt with “ACAB” written in different styles on the side.

Mae has deep anxieties of being left behind by her friends who have grown up—or, rather, were forced to—while she was away at college, to the point that it would be easier for her to dissociate from reality and be on autopilot.



Figure 10. A transcription of the destruction leitmotif.

The player's role becomes crucial in the game, then, as they become Mae and experience Mad living. When the opportunity arises to destroy something, the leitmotif will repeat and serve as a reminder that the player is stuck in this loop until everything is sufficiently destroyed. In other words, the destruction leitmotif at this moment is doing more than reflecting the game's narrative; it also delivers instructions to the player that they must follow if they wish to make any progress in the game. For example, when Mae visits a local donut shop with two of her friends, she goes to the public restroom and unexpectedly decides to trash the place. The player-character is then given the following tasks: unroll toilet paper and take wads of it to clog the toilet, shove some of the toilet paper into a hand dryer, as well as leave scratch marks on the mirror. These destructive events never seem to be a cathartic experience for Mae; instead, she often expresses ambivalence about how she should cope with her madness.

This ambivalence is noteworthy, as it reflects that there is no clear divide between sanity and madness for Mae (or any Mad individual), as much as the world she lives in tries to make this the case. Disability rights activist and scholar Shayda Kafai writes,

"Fear arises in border crossings related to sanity and madness particularly because it is difficult to identify what madness *is*."³² The need to create such borders is one Jeffrey Jerome Cohen has also explored in his seven theses on monsters, writing about how "step[ping] outside this official geography is to risk attack by some monstrous border patrol or (worse) *to become monstrous oneself*."³³ The townspeople are quick to identify and define the monster to avoid being labeled monsters themselves, even though the lines are blurred, and Mae is cognizant of this unclear divide.

The unstable border is also reflected musically to demonstrate how Mae exists in the difficult-to-define in-between. This instability is most apparent halfway through the game when audio, narrative, and visuals work in tandem to exemplify it. There are two musical cues that play at the end and start of each day in-game. At the start of the game, Mae's days end with a consonant arpeggio played by an electric guitar before she goes to sleep. Her day then begins with a bright melody played by chimes before she wakes up. After waking up, the player will see that Mae is wide-eyed, standing straight, and visibly "normal" in appearance. Halfway through the game, however, a musical shift occurs in these two cues. After this midpoint, each day now ends with a slightly dissonant arpeggio played by an out-of-tune piano, while the day now instead begins with a melody that is

³² Shayda Kafai, "The Mad Border Body: A Political In-betweeness," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (2013), <https://dx.doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v33i1.3438>. Emphasis in original.

³³ Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," 12. Emphasis added.

noticeably hollower and wooden in tone played by a synthesized keyboard percussion instrument. Visually, Mae appears the same, yet her conversations with other characters suggest that something has changed, that she seems more tired than usual. It is not until the player is near the end of the game that she begins to appear unwell (Figure 11). These shifts demonstrate how the variation of the two musical cues guide the player between the sane/mad border, and it is this in-between space Mae is in for most of the game.



Figure 11. Mae appears “normal” for most of the game, even when other characters remark that she seems more tired than usual (left). Near the end of the game, she appears unwell (right).

Mae’s existence between the sane/mad border is also apparent in the music heard in her dreams-turned-nightmares, further blurring another border. Her in-between existence is articulated by the blurring of diegetic and nondiegetic music, representing the resistance for Mae’s madness to be defined, as it repeatedly leads to the question as to whether she is actually hearing the music in her dreams or not. Her first dream seems

to suggest that the music is entirely nondiegetic. However, four subsequent dreams require Mae to find four musicians who are part of the Deep Hollow Hollerers in the reality of the dream. Their individual parts are heard as she finds each member of the quartet, suggesting that the music heard in her dreams actually may be diegetic (Figure 12). These dreams make it difficult to determine if any of the music heard during these sequences are diegetic or not, placing them in what Robynn J. Stilwell calls the “fantastical gap.”³⁴ Stilwell notes the “fantastical” nature of this ambiguity to not only mean to relate to fantasy, but that “it can also mean, musically, an improvisation, the free play of possibility.”³⁵ Indeed, Mae’s dreams are just as fantastical and, musically, move freely based on the player’s actions. It may even be the case that Mae’s circumstances cannot fit within the boundaries of the fantastical gap, that she is simultaneously hearing and not hearing the music, reflecting the monstrous logics of a Mad mind that are difficult to define.

³⁴ Robynn J. Stilwell, “The Fantastical Gap between Diegetic and Nondiegetic,” in *Beyond the Soundtrack: Representing Music in Cinema*, ed. Daniel Goldmark, Lawrence Kramer, and Richard Leppert (University of California Press, 2007), 184–202.

³⁵ Stilwell, “The Fantastical Gap between Diegetic and Nondiegetic,” 187.



Figure 12. The members of the Deep Hollow Hollerers, who Mae must find in certain dream sequences.

Some of Mae's dreams reveal more than the complex monstrousness of her Mad identity; they also reveal another monstrous presence—arguably a greater one—throughout this game. In one dream, Mae has a conversation with a giant cat she initially assumed was God due to its eerie, supernatural appearance. The player finds out that this godlike entity not only rejects the label of God but presents a cold, nihilistic stance on the universe. Furthermore, the cat regards Mae as mere “atoms,” that she and everything else are “monstrous existence,” suggesting that they are all meaningless monstrosities in this world. The use of ambient music with a rumbling synth bass during this interaction harkens back to horror film music conventions to create tension, giving the impression that the situation Mae is in is not meant to be a pleasant one, even if she is not in a state of danger. Here, her madness is not necessarily trivialized; it is more an assertion that existing itself is a monstrous act.

The use of ambient music during this dreamlike exchange between a godlike entity and Mae foreshadows the greater monster lurking in *Night in the Woods*, as this unsettling music returns for another godlike figure. This time, though, the entity embodies a Lovecraftian horror outside of dreams, rumored to be lurking in a seemingly bottomless pit of an abandoned mineshaft. The player eventually learns toward the end of the game that a cult has been sacrificing various townspeople “who wouldn’t be missed” to this monstrous god they call the Black Goat, believing that each sacrifice is a step closer to “Make Possum Springs Great Again,” as media studies scholar Patrick Fiorilli describes the group. He also writes that this cult “do[es] not seek, like so many of Lovecraft’s cults, to birth into the world the terrible dominion of their god. Rather, they seek to maintain a certain status quo—better yet, to reclaim the status quo of greatness they feel has been unjustly taken from them—taken from them by whom else but the very souls they feed into the pit.”³⁶ At this climactic moment in-game, the monster is revealed to not quite be Mae but, rather, the devastating results of capitalism on her town, as well as the traditionalist ideology upheld by some of the townspeople. The real horror is an economic system—and an ideology in its own way—that utterly failed a town and its inhabitants, including the protagonist. The Black Goat, then, is a monstrous metaphor for neoliberalism and its vicious cycle that leads to people suffering—even dying—for the

³⁶ Patrick Fiorilli, “Meet the New Boss, Same as the Old Gods: Reading *Night in the Woods* through Mark Fisher,” *Game Studies* 22, no. 1 (2022).

sake of maintaining this status quo. Ambient music, then, seems appropriate as a means to subtly reveal the deep and invasive roots of capitalism, especially when taking into consideration the commercialization of this musical style and similar ones to it that streaming services like Spotify have often wrapped neatly through mood playlists.³⁷

Other than its possible and subtle connection with ambient music, capitalism is not directly musically represented in an explicit manner in *Night in the Woods*, though two other leitmotifs can be attributed to it (Figure 13). One leitmotif, first heard on the title screen of the game, is what I refer to as the “decline” leitmotif, due to its numerous appearances throughout a game that revolves around this theme. The decline leitmotif intertwines with other leitmotifs, proving that a state of decline is unavoidable in this town and within these characters’ lives. Inextricably tied to the decline leitmotif is the leitmotif of Possum Springs. The town’s leitmotif reflects its people’s feeling of contempt for Mae and, to a somewhat lesser extent, her friends, for their difference and rejection of order. And, while the melodic line of the Possum Springs leitmotif sounds cheerful, it is no different from the politeness that disguises disgust. The interplay of the decline and town’s leitmotifs throughout the game demonstrates that, similarly to Mae, the townspeople have anxieties of their town being stuck in what seems to be a hopeless situation.

³⁷ See Eric Drott, *Streaming Music, Streaming Capital* (Duke University Press, 2024), 101–43, particularly 125–32. Many thanks to Stefan Greenfield-Casas for directing me to this text.



Figure 13. Transcriptions of the decline leitmotif (top) and Possum Springs’s two-part leitmotif (center and bottom).

Considering Mae’s madness clashing with the expectations of a capitalist society that demands her to be a productive and rule-following adult, it proves difficult to define one singular monster in *Night in the Woods*. Mae’s inability to meet these expectations results in the townspeople ostracizing her and—especially after dropping out of college—perceiving her as a monstrous failure. Much like madness, monsters are difficult to define due to the way they exist in the cracks throughout this game, ranging from the supernatural figures that appear in Mae’s dreams and/or reality, to the various characters struggling to survive in a broken system that failed them. Additionally, music blurs the boundaries of monstrosity through leitmotifs and the fantastical gap.

To conclude this section, I now wish to discuss the role of Alec Holowka—the composer for *Night in the Woods*—to address one final perspective on horror and the monstrous as related to the game. Holowka not only wrote the music but was also one of the three developers who brought this game to life. The developers inserted much of their

lived experiences into *Night in the Woods*, ranging from their own struggles with their mental health (particularly Holowka), as well as their upbringings (particularly Bethany Hockenberry).³⁸ The inclusion of such personal aspects of their lives is what makes this game feel “authentic” to many players, with some expressing how they were able to relate to the characters and/or growing up in a location similar to Possum Springs, as well as the music playing an integral part in shaping their emotional attachments to this game. For instance, one Tumblr user posted, “Sometimes you just have to listen to the nitw [Night in the Woods] soundtrack and b sad,” noting in the hashtags that “the word proximity makes me sad now,” in reference to how distance—physical and emotional—was portrayed in-game.³⁹ For another example, a Redditor posted a screenshot of their Spotify Wrapped, which showed that Alec Holowka was their top artist for the year, commenting that the soundtrack moved them, especially because they felt “a sense of

³⁸ Scott Benson, “An Interview with Scott Benson (Night in the Woods),” interview by William Hoffacker, *Cartridge Lit*, May 15, 2018, <https://cartridgelit.com/2018/05/15/interview-scott-benson/>.

³⁹ See doodlboy, “Sometimes you just...” Tumblr, April 9, 2021, <https://www.tumblr.com/doodlboy/648032127277056000/sometimes-you-just-have-to-listen-to-the-nitw>. While hashtags on Tumblr are generally used to make it easier to search for posts and for organizational purposes, many users also use hashtags to provide additional “silent” commentary that they may not necessarily want visible in the actual post. One Tumblr user describes hashtags on Tumblr as “a really nice form of textual subvocalization/whisper mode/aside/whatever” to highlight its distinctness compared to other social media platforms that also make use of hashtags. See szhmidty, “Tumblr really stumbled...” Tumblr, April 20, 2025, <https://www.tumblr.com/szhmidty/781395810028077056/tumblr-really-stumbled-into-a-beautiful-feature>.

nostalgic sadness” while playing the game as a result of having grown up in a town similar to Possum Springs.⁴⁰

However, *Night in the Woods* found itself in a thorny space a couple years after its release. In late August 2019, indie developer Zoë Quinn came forward on X (formerly Twitter) to share that Holowka sexually and emotionally abused them.⁴¹ They received support for coming forward with their story but also received significant backlash for allegedly making false accusations.⁴² Quinn followed up with another tweet, exclaiming shock due to the number of messages they received from others who were also hurt by him.⁴³ The two other developers, Scott Benson and Bethany Hockenberry, announced shortly after in a thread on X that they would be cutting ties with Holowka moving forward.⁴⁴ A few days after these public accusations, Holowka was found dead, having died by suicide.

⁴⁰ See u/TheLilyGalaxy, comment on “This Soundtrack Really Moved Me...” Reddit, December 2, 2021, <https://www.reddit.com/r/NightInTheWoods/comments/r79z3p/comment/hmxx6f1/>.

⁴¹ Zoë Quinn, (@UnburntWitch), X, August 26, 2019, <https://x.com/UnburntWitch/status/1166212005629325313>.

⁴² A brief search of Holowka’s full name on social media platforms like X and Tumblr reveals that, to this day, there are still individuals who continue to question Quinn’s statement and refuse to believe them. This backlash is no doubt in part because of Quinn’s ties to Gamergate, specifically that they were the initial target and suffered violent harassment.

⁴³ Zoë Quinn (@UnburntWitch), X, August 26, 2019, <https://x.com/UnburntWitch/status/1166230016847253504>.

⁴⁴ Night in the Woods (@NightInTheWoods), X, August 28, 2019, <https://x.com/NightInTheWoods/status/1166778462264274944>.

A little over a month after his death, Eileen Holowka provided more information about her brother, stating that he struggled with mental illness and was a victim of abuse.⁴⁵ Benson also stepped forward with his own story of his complicated friendship with Holowka, including the emotional abuse he went through during the years they worked together.⁴⁶ Benson concluded in his post:

I cared a lot about Alec [Holowka], despite all this. But covering for and enabling the harm someone does to the people around them isn't caring for them. Sometimes nothing turns out well. Sometimes everything's fucked. Sometimes every outcome is bad.

He's gone. And I'm left to fumble for the words for what he did to me years ago, and what this means to me now.⁴⁷

For many fans, these posts and events have led to complicated feelings for the game, which became wrapped in horror. This is especially apparent from a post made by one of the moderators of the game's subreddit regarding future discussions related to Holowka.⁴⁸ Redditors shared the emotional conflict they felt in the comments, on the one hand wanting to continue loving a game that left a profound impact on them, yet, on the

⁴⁵ Eileen Mary Holowka, "For Alec, Thoughts on Transformative Justice," *Medium*, October 1, 2019, <https://medium.com/@eileenhollowka/for-alec-thoughts-on-transformative-justice-3e2a264dd891>.

⁴⁶ Scott Benson, "Alec," *Medium*, September 3, 2019, <https://medium.com/@bombsfall/alec-2618dc1e23e>.

⁴⁷ Benson, "Alec."

⁴⁸ See u/themaplebeast, "News Regarding Alec Holowka & Future Discussion Guidelines," *r/NightInTheWoods*, Reddit, August 31, 2019, https://www.reddit.com/r/NightInTheWoods/comments/cy5lx9/news_regarding_alec_hollowka_future_discussion/.

other, struggling to come to terms with a complicated figure who, for some, completely marred the game. The top-rated comment on the moderator's post perhaps expresses this conflicted feeling best: "Everything about this is just terrible. The allegations, the corroborations, the anguish, the dumpster fires burning on Twitter and Steam as a result... I don't even really know what to say, other than it sucks to see something you love get sucked up in something this horrible. 'Everything sucks forever' seems a decent summary of my mood right now, tbh."⁴⁹

Since 2019, *Night in the Woods* fans have continued to grapple with the monstrosity that is even more inherently part of this game now. The music is impossible to separate from this game, as it significantly shapes the characters and narrative. Even during my first playthrough since Holowka's death, his inexcusable actions continually lurked in the shadows of my mind as I played. Every element of the game felt more bittersweet, more uncomfortably monstrous than before. For me and many other players, to play *Night in the Woods* today is not only to experience the monstrousness found within the game, but also to contend with an equally complicated monster who helped shape it.

⁴⁹ u/coldmail750, comment on "News Regarding Alec Holowka & Future Discussion Guidelines, r/NightInTheWoods, Reddit, August 31, 2019, https://www.reddit.com/r/NightInTheWoods/comments/cy5lx9/comment/eypwkf6/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web2x&context=3. Redditor coldmail750 is referencing a line said by one of the characters from the game, Lori: "I feel like no one cares. Everything just... sucks forever."

Conclusion

The music and sound in these two case studies complicate monstrosity in the way it acknowledges its horrors and how it engages with their respective visuals, mechanics, narrative, and/or fan discourses. In *Celeste*, textures and timbres uncomfortably twist and turn to reflect how Madeline is grappling with her madness and gender. In *Night in the Woods*, the monster is constantly shapeshifting through its music within and outside the game, always existing in the in-between. Horror is inescapable when it comes to the monstrous, but the music in these two games demonstrates how music and horror can be interrogated to reveal the complications of both when depicting the monster.

The next chapter of this dissertation will continue to explore how music shapes and complicates the monster. More specifically, queer, Mad, and racialized peoples are often defined as monstrous failures in Western society and pushed to the fringes. In doing so, though, these monsters exist in their own time and space that reframe failure to mean something more, something equally as complex as horror.

CHAPTER 3: MONSTROUS FAILURES

*... the disregarded sometimes live the most remarkable lives,
but there's so much we have to unsee to see that in its entirety.*
— Billy-Ray Belcourt, *A Minor Chorus*¹

Monstrosity is frequently ascribed to those who seemingly *fail* to uphold societal conventions and expectations of how one presents, how one navigates through society. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen writes in his seven theses on monstrosity that the monster is “an embodiment of a certain cultural moment—of a time, a feeling, and a place.”² He also writes how monsters “must be examined within the intricate matrix of relations (social, cultural, and literary-historical) that generate them.”³ In other words, the monster’s identity is a volatile one due to the always-changing definition of who/what a monster is in society. As a result, it is so often the case that the monster will find themselves failing to *be* in normative time and space, particularly as defined by the dominant culture at any given time.⁴ In this chapter, I turn to the different ways monsters fail to follow “normative”

¹ Billy-Ray Belcourt, *A Minor Chorus* (W.W. Norton, 2022), 119.

² Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” 4.

³ Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” 5.

⁴ I wish to emphasize again that I am thinking of these ideas within a Western framework, particularly that of the United States. It is also the case that the scholars I engage with also primarily draw attention to US society.

temporality, especially as theorized by Elizabeth Freeman with “chrononormativity,” to inform my analyses of two video games: *Hades* and *Celeste*. I also draw from other disciplines and scholars that have discussed different ways of thinking about temporality in relation to normativity: queer time, crip time, mad time, and Black time.⁵ Something I wish to highlight is that conceptions and experiences of time are distinctly cultural, in addition to that, they are meant to reflect their ties to the continual process of how definitions shift and transform much like identity.

It is important to first address how I plan on approaching these different temporalities in the music of my case studies. There will inevitably be some overlaps, considering how failure to follow a particular timeline set by a cis heteronormative, able-bodied and -minded, sanist, as well as racist (particularly anti-Black) society acts as the connecting thread. My understanding of how theorists who have engaged with temporality in relation to identity is a result of how many minoritarians *fail* to ascribe to normative expectations. Notably, Elizabeth Freeman approaches chrononormativity with queer temporality in mind, which she describes as “ways of living *aslant* to dominant forms of object-choice, coupledness, family, marriage, sociability and self-presentation and thus *out of synch* with state-sponsored narratives of belonging and becoming.”⁶ Jack

⁵ See Freeman, *Time Binds*, 3–5. I will briefly expand on the definitions of the different temporalities listed in the following paragraphs.

⁶ Freeman, *Time Binds*, xv. Emphasis added.

Halberstam similarly describes queer time to be an “alternative” time following “logics that lie outside of paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death.”⁷ Both scholars address the often (cis)heteronormative expectations of a typical life trajectory, highlighting marriage and family (i.e., reproduction) in particular as necessary markers for a supposedly fulfilling and successful life that queer people may fail to achieve.

Relatedly, there are parallels between queer time and crip time, which disability studies scholar Alison Kafer describes as “flex time not just expanded but exploded; it requires reimagining our notions of what can and should happen in time, or recognizing how expectations of ‘how long things take’ are based on very particular minds and bodies.”⁸ Here, Kafer resists the expected chronology of a person’s life by emphasizing the need for a flexible *tempo*, proposing that “the clock [bends] to meet disabled bodies and minds.”⁹ It sometimes means the breaking of time, as Ellen Samuels highlights in her essay, “Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time,” in which she notes how crip time “requires us to *break in* our bodies and minds to new rhythms, new patterns of thinking and feeling and moving through the world.”¹⁰ If queer time frequently highlights the failure to

⁷ Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York University Press, 2005), 2.

⁸ Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 27.

⁹ Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 27.

¹⁰ Ellen Samuels, “Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v37i3.5824>. Emphasis added.

achieve expected milestones of life, then crip time expands on this to demonstrate how one can potentially fail to follow the “normal” rhythms of life toward these oft-expected milestones.

Similar to crip time is “madtime,” as coined by La Marr Jurelle Bruce, who defines it as “a transgressive temporality that coincides with phenomenologies of madness” that include “the quick time of mania; the slow time of depression; the infinite, exigent now of schizophrenia; and the spiraling now-then-now-then of melancholia.”¹¹ Tempos and rhythms also play a pertinent role in madtime, with Bruce describing it as “a mode of metaphysical syncopation” that disrupts “Western Standard Time,” which is “the Eurocentric, heteronormative, capitalist, rationalist clock-time that reigns in the modern West.”¹² Madtime could be seen as a complex series of affective disruptions, then, a disavowal of following the beat much like queer time and crip time.

Last but not least, there is Black time, which I understand to frequently challenge the notion of time and space in ways that reflect Black history and Black living.¹³ Black time, as Tao Leigh Goffe writes, is “not-yet-standardized time,” and “stands in contrast

¹¹ La Marr Jurelle Bruce, *How to Go Mad without Losing Your Mind* (Duke University Press, 2021), 32. I follow Bruce’s spelling of “mad time” as one word from this point onward.

¹² Bruce, *How to Go Mad without Losing Your Mind*, 205, 204.

¹³ Here, I think specifically of Black Americans, understanding that it is also entangled in other Black histories. Michelle M. Wright describes the complications of using “Black” and “Blackness” and how they cannot be easily defined, as they depend heavily on spacetime. See Michelle M. Wright, *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 1–35.

to imperial time, quite literally ‘standard time,’ the standardization of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT),” which parallels Bruce’s description of Western Standard Time.¹⁴ Black time often resists the Western colonial narrative of linearity—a narrative of progress as developed during the Enlightenment—to instead encompass different times and spaces simultaneously. Michelle M. Wright makes a compelling case through her theorization of “Epiphenomenal time,” which centers the “now” and is how “the past, present, and future are always interpreted.”¹⁵ Wright explains that the only way all intersections of Blackness can be accommodated in spacetime is “not the present, so to speak, but the moment of the *now*, in which the present and the future are conflated and as many past and present moments exist as we can currently discuss.”¹⁶ Her description complements Bruce’s concept of madtime, who also has Black time in mind. He writes of how “colored people’s time seems to recalibrate clocks, rearrange minutes and years, bend time lines, and syncopate metaphysics so that said ‘colored’ person is not late after all, but is right on time.”¹⁷ These different temporalities cross paths to show the common intersections in a space delegated for failures, while also reflecting an ongoing resistance to hegemonic structures and normative expectations that I will take into consideration in this chapter.

¹⁴ Tao Leigh Goffe, “Stolen Life, Stolen Time: Black Temporality, Speculation, and Racial Capitalism,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 121, no. 1 (2022): 112, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-9561573>.

¹⁵ Wright, *Physics of Blackness*, 4.

¹⁶ Wright, *Physics of Blackness*, 60. Emphasis in original.

¹⁷ Bruce, *How to Go Mad without Losing Your Mind*, 206.

Much of Western art and popular music traditions also follow a linear trajectory, embracing particular forms and progressions that lead to tidy resolutions that sound *good* to the westernized ear. This may range from sonata form as popularized in the eighteenth century to the I-IV-V-I chord progression of a pop song. It becomes the case that whether music is good or not (or whether it even counts as music, for that matter) will be contested when certain elements are introduced that seem disruptive and unpredictable. This takes me to video game music, which adheres somewhat to Western musical conventions but ultimately deviates from them due to its playful nature. Importantly, game music *fails* to adhere to a linear timeline because of its unique nature of being dynamic in its response to player action.¹⁸ Tim Summers writes about the queerness of video game music, taking particular care to highlight the relationship between the music and the player/listener. “Players are frequently given agency to affect musical change,” he writes, which includes “denying climaxes, prompting disjunction and causing musical development.”¹⁹ Video game music is nonlinear with how it reacts and changes to what occurs during gameplay and based on the player’s actions. I would add further to this to show how game music

¹⁸ Video game music has generally been described as “adaptive,” “interactive,” and/or “dynamic.” KC Collins distinguishes the three terms as follows: adaptive audio is “sound that occurs in the game environment, reacting to gameplay, rather than responding directly to the user;” interactive audio is sound “in reaction to gameplay, which can respond to the player directly;” and dynamic audio is something of an umbrella term and means “sound that reacts to changes in the gameplay environment and/or in response to a user.” See KC Collins, *Game Sound: An Introduction to the History, Theory, and Practice of Video Game Music and Sound Design* (The MIT Press, 2008), 183–85.

¹⁹ Tim Summers, *The Queerness of Video Game Music* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 8, 25.

echoes other forms of temporalities as well—crip, Mad, and colored—in that time seemingly bends and goes awry as players or even non-playable characters defy expectations and actions, revealing an infinite number of unique experiences that fail to follow a neat and predictable trajectory.

Music will inevitably play a critical role in shaping failure in video games, then, and it does so in ways that trouble linearity and to reveal alternative epistemologies. In the following sections that each focus on *Hades* and *Celeste*, I aim to present the ways in which time bends and shifts within these two case studies' respective music. I intend to show how time marks particular characters as failures while also challenging normative ways of experiencing time through music. In addition, combining the dynamic nature of video game music in relation to failure with my focus on identity reveals an intimate component in these analyses, specifically *Celeste*, in which the focus is on the character that the player controls and, thus, will reveal the entangled relationship between player and character.

The Failure's Lament in *Hades*

In *Hades*, the main objective for the player-character, Zagreus, is to escape the Underworld in order to reach his mother, Persephone, in the mortal world. However, as the player will eventually discover, even after reaching the surface, Zagreus is doomed to “die” and return to the House of Hades. As a result, assuming they are not defeated before reaching the surface, every playthrough (or run, as they are known in roguelike

games) will repeatedly take the player-character through the four main dungeons: Tartarus, Asphodel, Elysium, and the Temple of Styx.²⁰ Between runs, Zagreus is able to take part in other activities while he is in the House of Hades, specifically through his interactions with other residents of the Underworld. For this section of the chapter, I will focus on one particular resident whom Zagreus is able to befriend over time: Orpheus (Figure 14). Prior to in-game events, on the order of Hades, Orpheus was sent to solitary confinement due to his refusal to sing despite being the court musician. After meeting certain prerequisites, the player-character can revoke this sentence with the purchase of a document that will result in Orpheus's immediate release from confinement and subsequent appearance in the House of Hades.

²⁰ A crucial feature of roguelikes is the permadeath mechanic, which is when the player-character loses all of their health and are considered permanently dead, thus, ending the run. Depending on the video game, permadeath can either mean the player must create an entirely new character, or their character loses all progress and returns to the start. In addition, roguelikes traditionally have procedurally generated levels, meaning that every run will have rooms with different layouts. As a result, each run ends up being unique and extends the video game's replayability. In the case of *Hades*, when the player-character dies, they lose almost all the progress made during their run and return to the House of Hades; while certain items are permanently lost (e.g., Charon's Obols and Poms of Power), others (e.g., gemstones and chthonic keys) can be kept in order to purchase permanent upgrades that would affect all future runs.



Figure 14. Orpheus as depicted in *Hades*.

Numerous players have expressed their surprise upon seeing Orpheus's character design, with some admitting that they initially thought the character was a woman due to his seemingly effeminate appearance and, in particular, his voice, which is in a higher-than-expected register for a male character. For a few examples, one Redditor created a post, asking, "I wonder if I'm the only one that thought Orpheus was a woman? The soft voice, the feminine makeup?"²¹ In another Reddit post, a user posted a screenshot of

²¹ See u/BlockbusterChamp, "Did anyone accidentally think Orpheus was a woman at first?" r/HadesTheGame, Reddit, January 22, 2021, https://www.reddit.com/r/HadesTheGame/comments/l2qa3s/did_anyone_accidentally_think_orpheus_w_as_a_woman/.

Orpheus with their post title being: “They refer to Orpheus as a man but why does he look and sound like a woman? I’m confused.”²² Over on Steam’s discussion boards, one player asked, “Why Orpheus is a woman in this game? [...] And does it mean that Orpheus and her muse are lesbians in this game?”²³ On another discussion thread, a player asked, “why is orpheus a woman? but mentions being a husband.”²⁴ In most cases, players who asked about Orpheus’s gender did so with sincerity, some even wondering if the developers deliberately made the character transgender. However, others have shared their anxieties about the musician’s particular depiction that, given the benefit of the doubt are ignorant, but nevertheless unquestionably sexist and transphobic. For instance, on Steam, one player virulently responded in a discussion thread that “everything about [Orpheus] is female, its is a woman, they just say he. there is probably some sort of message about trans people that no one gives a f about it in there, this being an american made game.”²⁵

²² See u/Raiders_Nation, “They refer to Orpheus as a man but why does he look and sound like a woman? I’m confused.” r/HadesTheGame, Reddit, October 8, 2021, https://www.reddit.com/r/HadesTheGame/comments/q4f4lw/they_refer_to_orpheus_as_a_man_but_why_does_he/.

²³ See onyxgayan, “Why Orpheus is a woman in this game?” Steam, January 4, 2020, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/1145360/discussions/0/2632850464735163083/>. It should be noted that on Steam, users are able to change their handles at any given point, meaning the names of any Steam users cited may change since the time of writing this dissertation.

²⁴ See jonlaura, “why is orpheus a woman,” Steam, December 28, 2020, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/1145360/discussions/0/2995422855900558084/>.

²⁵ See jonlaura, comment on “why is orpheus a woman” Steam, January 2, 2021, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/1145360/discussions/0/2995422855900558084/?ctp=2#c2995422855919440552>.

My interest in Orpheus stems from these fans' reactions to his character, especially in conjunction with my argument that in *Hades*, he is coded as Black. More specifically, I argue that he is *blackened*, a term that Black studies scholar Christina Sharpe uses to describe individuals of African descent "who because of a proximity to blackness (specifically a proximity to the shame, violence, etc. that black bodies are made to wear) are covered by the shadow of blackness" and "positions [them] as not properly white or nonblack."²⁶ Eurydice (another character who Zagreus eventually meets in Asphodel), describes Orpheus to have had curly hair and tan skin when he was alive; in the afterlife as the player-character knows him, Orpheus has ashen skin that is not necessarily fairer in complexion, as well as hair that is not unlike an afro.

Outside of the video game, players have not speculated about Orpheus's race the same way they have about his gender (as far as I was able to find), but it does not change the fact that *Hades*'s reimagining of the mythological figure *failed* to meet Western modern expectations and conventions. Orpheus's character design goes outside the boundaries of how he has usually been depicted in Western European art: youthful, fair-skinned, and masculine (Figures 15 and 16).²⁷ Instead, the musician "make[s] strange the categories of beauty, humanity, and identity that [people] still cling to" with how he presents in the

²⁶ Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies*, 190–191n9.

²⁷ The full painting for Figure 15 can be seen online in the Getty Museum Collection. See <https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/103RD4>.

video game. More so than his appearance, though, Orpheus's voice drew significant attention, especially because he speaks and sings at a higher register than what players would expect from a male character that will often be perceived as cisgender, no less. *Hades's* composer and audio director, Darren Korb, stated in an interview that he faced challenges in determining how Orpheus would sound. Korb had to consider the fact that the character would have to sound "angelic and ethereal," as he was "trying to embody the supposed greatest musician of all history, who moved the gods to tears with their singing."²⁸ Korb was not without references, though, and stated that Radiohead served as an inspiration, as he "imagined a 'when Thom Yorke sings in falsetto' kind of vibe" for Orpheus.²⁹

²⁸ Darren Korb, "Hades Interview – The Beatles, Tom Hiddleston, and Creating Zagreus," interview by Cian Maher, *The Gamer*, September 24, 2020, <https://www.thegamer.com/hades-interview-zagreus-darren-korb/>.

²⁹ Korb, "Hades Interview."



Figure 15. A closeup of Orpheus (right) and Eurydice (left) in the oil painting, "Orpheus and Eurydice" (c. 1709) by French artist, Jean Raoux (1677–1734).



Figure 16. Orpheus in the oil painting, “Orfeo con la viola” (c. 1675) by Italian artist, Cesare Gennari (1637–1688).

While it is the case that Korb’s inspirations for Orpheus’s voice were from Western popular music, I would be remiss to not address opera from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, especially considering the number of operatic works that use the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice as their settings; the seventeenth century alone has nearly

twenty operas about the musician.³⁰ Additionally, the choice to present Orpheus's voice at a higher register to reflect the "angelic and ethereal" that Korb described is not dissimilar to the allure of the castrato's voice during these centuries.³¹ Operas based on the Orpheus myth in the early seventeenth century had the role of Orpheus written for changed voices (i.e., *voci mutate* in Italian, or mature voices), which upholds modern conventions of masculinity in Western society. These include operas like Jacobo Peri's *Euridice* (1600), Giulio Caccini's *Euridice* (1602), Claudio Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* (1607), and Stefano Landi's *La morte d'Orfeo* (1619). However, the role of Orpheus was also written for castrati, as was the case for operas such as Luigi Rossi's *Orfeo* (1647), Antonio Sartorio's *Orfeo* (1672), and Christoph Willibald Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762). Musicologist Roger Freitas argues that it was not only the castrato's voice that infatuated the audience of this time period, but also—and especially—because of his desirable body that was neither fully masculine nor feminine.³²

The idea of a castrato in heroic operatic roles may be bewildering for the average westernized individual from the twenty-first century, then, as he fails to fit our current

³⁰ For a detailed list, see Frederick W. Sternfeld, "Orpheus, Ovid and Opera," *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 113, no. 2 (1988): 174, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrma/113.2.172>.

³¹ A castrato is a male singer who was castrated before puberty for the purpose of preserving a singing voice in a higher range. Castrati were central to both church music and opera primarily in Italy throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, eventually falling out of popularity in the nineteenth century.

³² Roger Freitas, "The Eroticism of Emasculation: Confronting the Baroque Body of the Castrato," *The Journal of Musicology* 20, no. 2 (2003): 196–249, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jm.2003.20.2.196>.

conventions of masculinity. Emily Wilbourne argues that many modern readers have defined the castrato's body "by lack," such that "the castrated individual is rendered neither male nor female, but a *monster* without access to full personhood."³³ Wilbourne's use of the word "monster" is worth noting, considering the monster's proximity to desire and the complexity that comes with it. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen writes, "This corporeal fluidity, this simultaneity of anxiety and desire, ensures that the monster will always dangerously entice."³⁴ Returning to *Hades*, then, Orpheus exists in a distinctly monstrous position due to his depiction in-game, one that evokes a kind of allure—particularly his voice—while also causing enough anxiety to have provoked multiple questions about his gender.

The frequency at which Orpheus has been mistaken for a woman by players also has correlations to the first song that the player-character will hear him sing in the House of Hades: a lament. It is largely women across many cultures globally who are known to lead and perform laments, as Gail Holst-Warhaft addresses in her research on the form.³⁵ To briefly bring back Baroque opera to this analysis, it is the case that one particularly famous lament is the closing aria from Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* (c. 1688) that is

³³ Emily Wilbourne, "The Queer History of the Castrato," in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Queerness*, ed. Fred Everett Maus and Sheila Whiteley (Oxford University Press, 2018), 444. Emphasis added.

³⁴ Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," 19.

³⁵ See Chapter 1 of Gail Holst-Warhaft, *Dangerous Voices: Women's Lament and Greek Literature* (Routledge, 1992). Many thanks to Ramona Gonzalez for drawing my attention to women's laments.

sung by Dido, the Queen of Carthage, before she dies by suicide. In *Hades*, Orpheus openly cries in song for failing to save Eurydice, the high register of his voice gesturing to a woman's performance of a lament as his voice soars in his cries. Furthermore, Orpheus's lyre—performed and recorded on a Mediterranean stringed instrument—situates him in yet another musical tradition: Greek lament traditions, and again, particularly that of women.³⁶

A blackened Orpheus with a high vocal register raises further anxieties, then. In her ethnographic work on Black countertenors in gospel performance, Alisha Lola Jones writes that if “listeners subscribe to an imagined fixity of gendered vocal range boundaries, African American men who sing high or sing in a higher register during gospel performance may be perceived as socioculturally queer, trespassing into a vocal domain designated for women.”³⁷ Indeed, players' (un)intentional queering of a blackened Orpheus because of his voice and appearance present their (sub)conscious qualms of the character *failing* to meet their expectations of someone they assumed would

³⁶ It is not clear what specific instrument is used, but Korb stated in an interview that he used three Mediterranean instruments for the *Hades* soundtrack: a baglama (Turkey), a bouzouki (Greece), and a lavta (Turkey). See Darren Korb, “‘Metal Comes from Hell, Everyone Knows This’ – Darren Korb Talks Loki, Lavtas, and Led Zeppelin,” interview by Gavin Lane, *Nintendo Life*, September 11, 2021, <https://www.nintendolife.com/features/metal-comes-from-hell-everyone-knows-this-darren-korb-talks-loki-lavtas-and-led-zeppelin>. Regarding Greek lament traditions, Margaret Alexiou has written extensively about the ritual lament in Greece, having also made note of the types of laments that women would have performed: *thrênos*, *góos*, and *kommós*. See Margaret Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 1974), 102–3.

³⁷ Alisha Lola Jones, “Singing High: Black Countertenors and Gendered Sound in Gospel Performance,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Voice Studies*, ed. Nina Sun Eidsheim and Katherine Meizel (Oxford University Press, 2019), 39.

be a cis heteronormative model of (white) masculinity; in reality, there is a mingling of both popular *and* historical influences that has resulted in a unique—even if unsettling to some players—reimagining of the mythological figure that is equally repulsive and attractive.

I have extensively discussed Orpheus's voice and appearance in relation to gender and, to a lesser extent, sexuality. I now turn to address his proximity to madness and Blackness, which becomes clear in how he is metaphorically chained—first in solitary confinement, then in service to the House of Hades as a court musician. I look in particular at the lament that Orpheus sings, which is only heard in the House of Hades, to consider how, despite his many failures, he becomes the force to take control of the confined space that is the Underworld, which I argue can be explored through Mad and Black temporalities.

After Zagreus releases Orpheus from solitary confinement, the musician appears in the House of Hades, but he remains inconsolable and will refuse to sing when asked. To persuade Orpheus into singing, the player-character must befriend him and give the musician at least one Nectar, an in-game currency. In doing so, they will eventually hear him sing at random in one of their many returns to the House of Hades.³⁸ More

³⁸ Players have noted that the trigger for Orpheus to sing is random, with some stating that it took them numerous returns to the House of Hades to finally hear him sing, while others had better luck and heard him much earlier on.

specifically, the first song that they will hear Orpheus sing is his lament. The fact that the first song the player-character hears from the musician is one about failure is apt, given that he lost Eurydice due to his mistake of looking back. This also echoes the laments sung in Orphean operas, such as Monteverdi's "Tu se' morta" in Act II of *L'Orfeo* and Gluck's "Che farò senza Euridice?" in Act III of *Orfeo ed Euridice*.

I turn to La Marr Jurelle Bruce's theorization of madtime, specifically "melancholic time," to approach the structure of Orpheus's lament. Bruce describes melancholic time as "a sonic sadness that clamors for a lost object, troubles normative temporality, travels in sorrowful circles, and repeats itself over and over again."³⁹ Repetition of both words and music play a key role in establishing Orpheus's grief over losing Eurydice. Lyrically, the words "don't look back" are frequently repeated, particularly toward the end of the lament, when he sings it five consecutive times. Musically, arpeggiated bass lines are repeated with rises and falls like the sea, this image further established in the lyrics when he sings "Sunk below the mortal sea / Her anchor weighs upon me / Fasten her tether unto me / That she may rise to sail free." Orpheus exists in this melancholic time and wanders aimlessly through music to express his grief. Indeed, even after the musician finishes singing, he continues to play the accompaniment of the lament on his lyre

³⁹ Bruce, *How to Go Mad without Losing Your Mind*, 226.

seemingly *ad infinitum*, with the sound only fading away when Zagreus begins his next escape out of the Underworld.

To further establish the grief that correlates to this lament, Korb has included (intentionally or otherwise) echoes of the Baroque lament bass. However, in Orpheus's case, this is reconfigured to be heard in the melody, drawing even closer attention to his sorrow (Figure 17). Musicologist Ellen Rosand describes some ways that seventeenth-century composers have made use of the descending tetrachord in their respective works, such as Monteverdi "employing suspensions, syncopation, and phrase overlapping [that] creates affective dissonances of harmony, melody, rhythm, and texture" in his madrigal, "Lamento della ninfa" (1638).⁴⁰ Meanwhile, she describes Francesco Cavalli's laments as "generally distinguished by their slow tempo, heavily stressed triple meter, and string accompaniment."⁴¹ In *Hades*, the melodic structure of Orpheus's lament is at odds with the bass line's relentless rising and falling in triple meter, along with the fact that his singing is accompanied by him playing the lyre. And, like Monteverdi's "Lamento della ninfa," Orpheus's lament has a "strongly minor configuration" and features an "unremitting descent" that "offers an analogue of obsession, perceptible as an expression

⁴⁰ Ellen Rosand, "The Descending Tetrachord: An Emblem of Lament," *The Musical Quarterly* 65, no. 3 (1979): 349, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/741489>.

⁴¹ Rosand, "The Descending Tetrachord," 353.

of hopeless suffering.”⁴² His sorrow is seemingly endless, so much that it fills the entire House of Hades so that little else is heard.



Figure 17. A transcription of the first line from Orpheus’s lament, with the descending lament “bass” noted in red boxes.

I also must take Orpheus’s Blackness into consideration when discussing his lament. Focusing first on the lyrics, it is worth remembering that *Hades* is set in Ancient Greece. However, as players from the twenty-first century—especially for those from the United States—their/our historic understanding of the relationship between Blackness and the sea, an important motif in Orpheus’s lament, is likely going to be the transatlantic slave trade. I return to the point of the musician being metaphorically chained in the afterlife, where he is “utterly resigned in death,” as stated in the game’s Codex.⁴³ When Orpheus’s voice soars through the highest notes of the lament in the bridge (“We’re foundering / Drowning”), a link is formed between the trauma of enslaved Africans with Orpheus’s own. And, prior to his singing this lament, Orpheus’s imprisonment due to his refusal to sing echoes the likely punishment of enslaved people on plantations who

⁴² Rosand, “The Descending Tetrachord,” 350.

⁴³ The Codex is a book given to Zagreus by Achilles, in which it contains information on all the characters, creatures, opponents, and objects that the player-character will encounter in their escapes. In addition to providing information, the Codex is colored by Achilles’s experiences and opinions, giving the player a better understanding of the fallen hero. The Codex also keeps track of the amount of Nectar and Ambrosia the player-character has gifted to various characters.

may have similarly refused to perform for their white masters. These resonances gesture to the musician existing in different times and spaces, then. By failing to follow a linear progression in the game's narrative, instead, Orpheus finds himself in what Michelle M. Wright writes is the "Black collective in *history* and in the *specific moment* in which Blackness is being imagined—the 'now' through which all imaginings of Blackness will be mediated."⁴⁴ In this "now," Orpheus is wandering around in the past, present, and future in his grief over losing Eurydice. He is also stating implicitly the nonlinear passage of spacetime for black people, which Wright notes is "a matter of not simply backtracking along the progress narrative but recognizing that one is manifesting the past in the present moment."⁴⁵ The "now" is simultaneously found in his existence in Ancient Greece as he infamously looked back, with shadows of the Middle Passage appearing in the lyrics to echo other spacetimes, as well as reverberating grief heard everywhere all at once.

Musically, Orpheus's high-range singing is not only reminiscent of the castrati but also Black music traditions. More specifically, Alisha Lola Jones writes, "The Western preferences for high-singing male voices soaring above choirs in sacred compositions stemmed from an aesthetic of a metaphoric angelic and gender nonconforming sound. Such preferences for high-male singing in European music overlaps with the aesthetics

⁴⁴ Wright, *Physics of Blackness*, 14. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁵ Wright, *Physics of Blackness*, 74.

found in African-derived music styles in the United States such as rhythm and blues (R&B) and African American quartet music.”⁴⁶ She also notes the stylized melisma (or “runs” as they are called in gospel music vernacular) heard in both opera and gospel. These overlaps draw attention to an interesting perspective on Orpheus’s Blackness, considering that his voice is heavenly as a result of having learned from the god of music himself, but his music—specifically his lament—is not sacred by any means and is sung for his own sake. Furthermore, while Orpheus’s song does not fall neatly into one style, there are resonances of overlapping styles that can be heard, particularly the melismatic lines sung on the highest notes.

During gameplay, players have mentioned their surprise when Orpheus finally sings when returning to the House of Hades—even if it is a lament—as his voice and lyre fill the entire space in-game. A few players—including myself—even had Zagreus stand in place to listen to his song, as a result of being entranced by his ethereal and haunting voice while singing about his lost love. One Redditor asked, “is there any way to make Orpheus sing his lament again? [...] I just want to hear that voice again,” while on another Reddit post, a different user commented, “The first time he started singing I was so stunned I just stared at the screen and listened in awe.”⁴⁷ In fact, the rarity of Orpheus

⁴⁶ Jones, “Singing High,” 39–40.

⁴⁷ See u/matero1, “is there any way to make Orpheus sing his lament again?” r/HadesTheGame, Reddit, March 15, 2023, https://www.reddit.com/r/HadesTheGame/comments/11sbehe/is_there_any_way_to_make_orpheus_sing_his_lament/; and u/Ritosha_, “The Lament of Orpheus is an absolutely brilliant piece,”

singing has it that many players have stated that they would always stop to listen to whichever song he chooses to sing to fill the House of Hades.⁴⁸ One Redditor commented how his singing (as well as Eurydice's) is "the bane of speed runners. If you run into Orpheus and Eurydice your speed run is over because you just stay a while and listen," while another Redditor on a different post remarked, "I can't help but be drawn in and pause my assault."⁴⁹ It is significant that players have responded so viscerally to Orpheus singing, considering that it is a drastic change from the ambient music that normally plays in the House of Hades, which has no discernable melody, rhythm, or meter. Orpheus's songs hold power in that they overtake this ambient music, gaining control of how time passes in that space. The player-character and all other characters are brought into the musician's world to experience his spacetime, one that highlights his failure. When Orpheus sings, it shows the autonomy he has over his voice, something Hades has

r/HadesTheGame, Reddit, July 4, 2020,
https://www.reddit.com/r/HadesTheGame/comments/hla8iv/the_lament_of_orpheus_is_an_absolutely_brilliant/.

⁴⁸ Orpheus may choose to sing one of three songs at random, depending on the status of the player-character's relationship with him in tandem with other characters' relationship levels: "Lament of Orpheus," "Hymn to Zagreus" (unlocked after building a relationship with Dionysus), and "Good Riddance" (unlocked after building a relationship with Eurydice).

⁴⁹ See u/Puzzlehead-Engineer, comment on "Does anyone else just stop at Orpheus/Eurydice to listen to them sing?" r/HadesTheGame, Reddit, October 30, 2020,
<https://www.reddit.com/r/HadesTheGame/comments/jkr3ew/comment/galka5f/>; and u/ilyak_reddit, "anybody else just stop and listen to Eurydice and/or Orpheus sing for like 10+ minutes?" r/HadesTheGame, Reddit, March 27, 2022,
https://www.reddit.com/r/HadesTheGame/comments/tpwv94/anybody_else_just_stop_and_listen_to_eurydice/.

repeatedly tried to control through shame and punishment yet failed. The musician sings with such power that his music reverberates throughout the House of Hades and even outside the game itself, stopping players in their tracks.

In *Hades*, the myth of Orpheus is a continuation of a story that focuses on the reverberations of failure. These resonances manifest in multiple ways that are interlocking, ranging from his seemingly unconventional and monstrous appearance, particularly how it fails to uphold white masculinity; the lyrics of his unrestrained lament about losing Eurydice; to the high register of his voice, which simultaneously induces anxiety and allures players. In spite of failing expectations, the musician revels through performance in going against the grain to reveal the complex history and culture contiguous to a man's voice within different and overlapping contexts. Moreover, Orpheus finds his own way of reckoning with his circumstances by refusing to sing for Hades and, instead, sings of his own accord. In doing so, he reshapes the space that he inhabits—upending normative time—to put everyone in step with his musical time, both Mad and Black.

José Esteban Muñoz writes that melancholia for minoritarian subjects “is not a pathology but an integral part of everyday lives,” and that “it is a mechanism that helps us (re)construct identity and take our dead with us to the various battles we must wage in their names—and in our names.”⁵⁰ In addition to bringing everyone—player and

⁵⁰ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 74.

characters alike—into his spacetime, Orpheus presents the complexities of (re)constructing Mad and Black identity through his grief and melancholia in the afterlife that gives a glimpse into the push-and-pull that occurs when one is entirely out-of-sync with normative spacetime.

In the next case study, I continue to trace how normative time is troubled by the player—in this particular case, by me—and explore failure, albeit differently from Orpheus and *Hades* to, instead, focus on the mechanics and music.

Repeatedly Failing in *Celeste*

A few days have passed since I last played Celeste and quit in a state of rage.⁵¹ I open my save file and return to where I last left off—somewhere in the latter half of the third level—and sigh, remembering what exactly it is that I need to do: grab the strawberry before moving left to the next room (Figure 18). I try to remember how many times I failed to grab this one particular strawberry before rage quitting a few days ago. Eight times? Ten times? Probably more. My brows furrow as a sense of dread rises in me, knowing the number of deaths will increase during this playtime. This wouldn't be so hard if the tendrils and those godawful squirming blobs didn't exist, I think. If my avatar, Madeline, even grazes one pixel of a squirming blob, she immediately bursts into orbs, the sound of crashing cymbals confirming her death, all before being sent back to the start of the room. "Why did they have to add the tendrils on those ledges..." I

⁵¹ To rage quit is when a player becomes so angry with the game that they quit before completion (whether that be a puzzle, a level, or the game itself).

mutter as I mentally plan out the path I hope will lead to success. Unfortunately, the moment Madeline touches any of these tendrils, they transform into those squirming blobs the moment I move her away from where she landed.



Figure 18. One area of the third level with a floating strawberry surrounded by squirming blobs.

I take a deep breath. My mind drifts to the now all-too-familiar music. It is a distinct texture of synths primarily comprised of a growling bass, a harpsichord synth playing rising and falling sixteenth notes, and a high-pitched theremin that plays on the downbeats. There is so much musical interplay that distracts me from the actual gameplay. I bite my lower lip and my pulse quickens. The frequent use of rising and falling sixteenth notes throughout this game's soundtrack never fails to heighten my anxiety. I sigh as I try to shift my focus back to the game mechanics.

I jump left and dash up. I safely land on the middle ledge near the squirming blob, leaving enough space for myself when I return to this spot. I stand still and mentally redraw the path I need to take to the top ledge. I jump left again, but I press the dash key too soon and run straight into the squirming blobs to the left. Madeline bursts into orbs, cymbals crash, and I find myself back at the start of the room. It occurs to me that my chest feels tight. I exhale, realizing that I have been holding my breath for the past several seconds. I mutter with irritation, "I hate this game."

I try again, jumping and dashing with relative ease to the area where Madeline last died. I remind myself what I need to do for the first part: jump left, dash up and land on the middle ledge close to the blobs; jump left, dash up and land on the top ledge close to the blobs; small jump, dash right over the blobs to grab the floating strawberry; finally, land on the small patch of tendrils I avoided for this purpose. I take a deep breath but find myself distracted by the music again. "Just ignore it..." I tell myself. I hit what I thought was the jump key, but instead, it's the dash key. I run straight into those blobs on the ground and die. "앗, 씨발," I swear loudly, watching Madeline burst into orbs and hearing cymbals crash. I am back at the start of the room. Yet again.

I try again. Madeline bursts into orbs and cymbals crash.

I try again. And again.

And again.

I curse again. I throw my hands into the air, or try to, since I, instead, accidentally hit my hand against the edge of my desk in the process. I curse louder.

There are myriad reasons for my numerous deaths: I pressed the wrong key; I jumped too soon; I dashed too late; I landed in the wrong spot; my cat jumped up onto my desk to block the monitor at the worst possible time, meowing loudly for attention; I heard the pinging sounds of text messages; I got distracted by the music, which threw off the timing of my jumps. The reasons are seemingly endless. *Celeste* is (in)famously known among gamers who are familiar with the title for its difficulty due to the mechanics: the player must meticulously time each jump and dash, latch onto or land on a precise area of various surfaces. If they are off by a few pixels, Madeline bursts into orbs to signify her death and is sent back to the starting point of the room.

I begin with my experience of playing one part of a level to highlight the functions of failure. In discussing one's failure while playing video games, there is a desire to blame it on something or someone. Game studies scholar Jesper Juul expands on this and builds on psychologist Harold K. Kelley's attribution theory to consider how a player explains the reason for failure:⁵² they "can claim to be bad at this specific game or at video games in general, claim that the game is unfair, or dismiss failure as a temporary state soon to be remedied [through] better luck or preparation."⁵³ The reason behind my failures is

⁵² Harold K. Kelley theorizes three types of attributions to explain how certain causes are correlated to events: person ("caused by personal traits, such as skill and disposition"), entity ("caused by characteristics of the entity"), and circumstances (a result of "transient causes such as luck, chance, or an extraordinary effort from the person"). See Jesper Juul, *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games* (The MIT Press, 2013), 17.

⁵³ Juul, *The Art of Failure*, 19.

generally due to my poor gaming skills (and I feel okay admitting this, for the most part), but I *really* liked being able to place the blame on my cat, my friend's numerous texts, and the game's music, especially. I attributed much of my failures to what I was hearing as I played *Celeste*, both the music and the sound effects (such as the crashing cymbals); it became a distinct sonic space of failure and, with all frankness, emphasized that I just sucked at this game.

Failure is more than an event; it is something felt and personal. Juul considers the reflective state that a player finds themselves in when they fail, as it "gives the opportunity to consider why [they] failed (as long as [they] accept responsibility for failure)."⁵⁴ He goes on to present a rather optimistic idea on what a player can take from failure, stating that it "has the very concrete positive effect of making [them] see new details and depth in the game that [they] are playing," that a game can "help [them] grow: [they] come away from any *skill*-based game changed, wiser, and possessing new skills."⁵⁵ There certainly is a moment of reflection when one fails that can lead to newfound determination. However, Juul does not spend much time to acknowledge other feelings that come with failure, such as frustration, self-doubt, irritation, and rage. Sometimes, failure is not meant to be a moment of reflection. Sometimes, failure is sitting with ugly feelings, to borrow Sianne Ngai's term, which "[offer] no satisfactions of virtue, however

⁵⁴ Juul, *The Art of Failure*, 59.

⁵⁵ Juul, *The Art of Failure*, 59. Emphasis in original.

oblique, nor any therapeutic or purifying release.”⁵⁶ I do not feel much catharsis in this state of negativity, though I certainly find myself irritated and anxious for longer than I would like because they never quite go away. These “weaker and nastier” feelings, as Ngai describes them, are the reason for my eventual outbursts, the reason failure produces such a visceral and emotional moment.⁵⁷

I also place blame on one particular aspect of myself that is the cause of my failures: my music background. Returning to my frustrations with the game’s music, it is because I find that when I play, the distinct rhythmic patterns of the music are never quite in sync with the game mechanics, which, of course, follows its own rhythms. As a result, the conflict between music and gameplay hinders my playing because I find that I often subconsciously try to move to the beat of the music. Perhaps the real reason I am at risk of failing more is *because* of this music background, then, because I instinctively pay a little more attention to music and sound than the average gamer might.⁵⁸

It would be a lot easier to have the mindset of a speedrunner, many of whom pay little to no attention to the music in their race against time.⁵⁹ Game studies scholar Bo

⁵⁶ Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Harvard University Press, 2005), 6.

⁵⁷ Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 7.

⁵⁸ It goes without saying that not all players with music backgrounds will always pay attention to the music; some will ignore it almost entirely. For example, in my interview with Anya, who has a music background, she mentioned how she paid little attention to the music whenever she played games.

⁵⁹ Speedrunning is the act of finishing a video game as quickly as possible. Speedrunners must familiarize themselves with the ins and outs of a game, down to its glitches. In the case of *Celeste*, many

Ruberg proposes speedrunning to be a form of “queer play,” reflecting on queer spatiality and temporality, and how this form of play “appears to conform to mainstream notions of success yet contains within itself countless failures.”⁶⁰ A successful speedrun means the player cannot, at any point, fail, “because failure takes time.”⁶¹ Speedrunners have, without question, spent hours of their life repeatedly failing to accomplish something spectacular in one quick attempt. They run on their own logic and time, often meaning many elements of the audiovisuals recede into the background.

It really would make my life easier if I could do the same.

As I jump around and dash through various rooms, I eventually find the secret room that contains the cassette tape for the fourth level. I close my eyes and listen to the music—a thinly textured variation on the level’s main theme—and tap my foot along with the beat. The syncopated rhythms throw me off, initially, but once the melody kicks in, I find a flow. After several seconds pass, I feel confident enough to tackle this room and grab the cassette tape (Figure 19). I really have

speedrunners aim to set the record for the fastest playthrough of the main chapters. As of September 28, 2023, the fastest speedrun on record was accomplished by secureaccount at 00:25:19:919. See <https://www.speedrun.com/Celeste?h=Any&x=7kjpl1gk>.

⁶⁰ Bo Ruberg, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer* (New York University Press, 2019), 195.

⁶¹ Ruberg, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*, 195.

*no reason to even collect this, but my completionist tendencies compel me to risk adding to the death count that keep tally of the number of times I have failed.*⁶²



Figure 19. The cassette tape's location found in the fourth level of *Celeste*.

I jump up to the ledge that has one of those telescopes that can be spotted at a pier. The screen zooms out slightly, allowing me to move the camera to the left to see the path I would need to take to reach the cassette tape. Colorful pink and blue blocks alternate in appearing and disappearing on every downbeat. "All you have to do is follow the beat of the music," I tell myself. "Just follow the beat." I tap my foot to the beat again, watching the blocks alternate in appearance, then stop in order to focus on getting across the room. I take a deep breath then jump onto the first

⁶² In gaming culture, a completionist is a player whose goal is to experience everything a video game has to offer. This might mean collecting every object, finishing all side quests, earning all achievements, and completing hidden levels.

blue block, waiting for the next beat and the pink block to appear so I can latch onto it. On the next beat, the blue blocks appear again, and I quickly dash to the left to land on the next blue block.

I blink. “What am I supposed to do now — ” My question is cut off at the next beat, the blue block disappearing below Madeline’s feet, and I watch her burst into orbs. I groan. I should have traced out my path before jumping. I go back up to the telescope and watch the blocks alternate in appearance across the room, creating a map in my head to figure out when and where I need to jump and dash. I take a deep breath and exhale loudly.

I try again.

I jump on the first blue block, jump in time to grab the side of the pink block, then dash to the left to land on the next blue block. I jump up and latch onto the next pink block, dashing again, aiming to land on top of the next blue block... except I dash up too early and run straight into the spikes. Madeline bursts into orbs as cymbals crash, and she is sent back to the start of the room. I slam my fingers on the keyboard. I accidentally hit the dash key, sending Madeline to her death yet again. “No!” I yell, watching her magically reappear, ready to try again.

My pulse quickens. I try to ignore this as I find my footing by tapping to the beat of the music, this time against the table with the palm of my hand. You have a music background, I think. How are you so bad at this? Once I have a sense of the beat again, I lay my fingers on the keys, take a breath, and jump.

I jump on the wrong beat and miss the first blue block. Orbs and cymbals, yet again.
"Damn it!" I yell.

Considering my tendency to try and follow the beat of the music while playing, some would think I would be delighted to know that the cassette tape rooms *require* the player to time their jumps and dashes *with* the beat of the music. Some would think I would finally find some success as music and game mechanics work hand-in-hand to create puzzles that I would find easier... in theory. Yet, somehow, I manage to fail in these rooms even more than I do in the regular rooms. Here, I am put on the spot; my performance anxiety is heightened as I feel the pressure to play perfectly to the beat. *Celeste* manages to awaken a monster in me: my severe anxiety, one that has haunted me for a large part of my life, especially in performance spaces. Every time I enter the cassette tape room of any level in the game, I feel the same anxiety that builds similarly to my days when I walked on stage to perform at a piano recital, all eyes watching my every move as my fingers rested on a different set of keys. My anxiety would get the better of me; my finger slips, and I hit the wrong key on the piano, on the keyboard; I play faster than I mean to, dash sooner than I should have. I wince every time Madeline dies, offbeat.

Failure goes beyond the gameplaying experience, as it also addresses the ways in which Madeline, the protagonist of *Celeste*, struggles with her own irritations, anxieties, and outbursts that make her feel like a monstrous failure while on her way up to the summit of Celeste Mountain. Badeline, her doppelgänger, readily reminds the

protagonist that she should give up on this dream of reaching the summit, that the trials and tribulations are of her own making.⁶³ Failure is more than falling off ledges, into pits, touching spikes, or not circumventing various obstacles. Failure is Madeline's acute awareness of her depression and anxiety—her madness—which shape much of this game's story of what it means to not be able-minded. However, as the developer, Maddy Thorson, eventually revealed a few years after the game's release, this story is also as much about finding one's gender identity. Thorson writes, "When I wrote *Celeste* I sincerely still believed that I was cisgender, but I was nevertheless waist-deep in gender feelings (among other anxieties). [...] For my part, *Celeste* is about who I was, which includes that struggle for understanding [my own gender]." ⁶⁴ These "gender feelings" can be slippery and uncomfortable, especially as they entangle themselves with the feelings attached to madness.

The fingerprints of trans creators are all over *Celeste*. The composer, Lena Raine, is a trans woman who was closely involved in the game's development by finding ways to musically complement the narrative and mechanics.⁶⁵ In one interview, Raine draws attention to two particular tracks from the game, "Anxiety" and "In the Mirror," and

⁶³ The fifth level of the game leads to literal manifestations of monstrous creatures that chase after Madeline, as well as eyes embedded to the walls that stare at her every move.

⁶⁴ Thorson, "Is Madeline Canonically Trans?"

⁶⁵ Lena Raine, "Celeste Composer Lena Raine Talks Video Game Music, Philosophy, and Upcoming Projects," interview by Kevin Mersereau, *Destructoid*, May 14, 2018, <https://www.destructoid.com/celeste-composer-lena-raine-talks-video-game-music-philosophy-and-upcoming-projects/>.

works towards a musical depiction of an anxiety attack with the former track and Madeline's interiority with the latter.⁶⁶ At the end of the fourth level, "Anxiety" begins to play the moment the gondola unexpectedly screeches to a stop, resulting in Madeline's anxiety spiking then having a panic attack. Theo, her friend, attempts to rectify the situation, in hopes that fiddling with the maneuvering stick would do something, only for it to break. The soft, piano line is "completely engulfed in synths," as Raine explains, while tendrils that match the color palette of Badeline appear on the screen.⁶⁷ The engulfment of synths reflects Badeline getting the better of Madeline, until Theo intervenes with a breathing exercise to get Madeline out of her nightmarish headspace. The player is then asked to keep a feather floating within a box as it rises and falls, the synths eventually fading and being replaced by the piano, signifying that Madeline has calmed down (Figure 20).⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Lena Raine, "Interview: Composer Lena Raine Talks *Celeste* Soundtrack & Working in Game Audio," interview by Ryan Paquet, *Original Sound Vision*, February 5, 2018, <https://www.originalsoundversion.com/interview-composer-lena-raine-talks-celeste-soundtrack-working-in-game-audio/>.

⁶⁷ Raine, "Interview." See Figure 5 in particular from the previous chapter for reference to Badeline's color palette.

⁶⁸ If the player fails to keep the feather in the box, synths will continue to blare loudly.

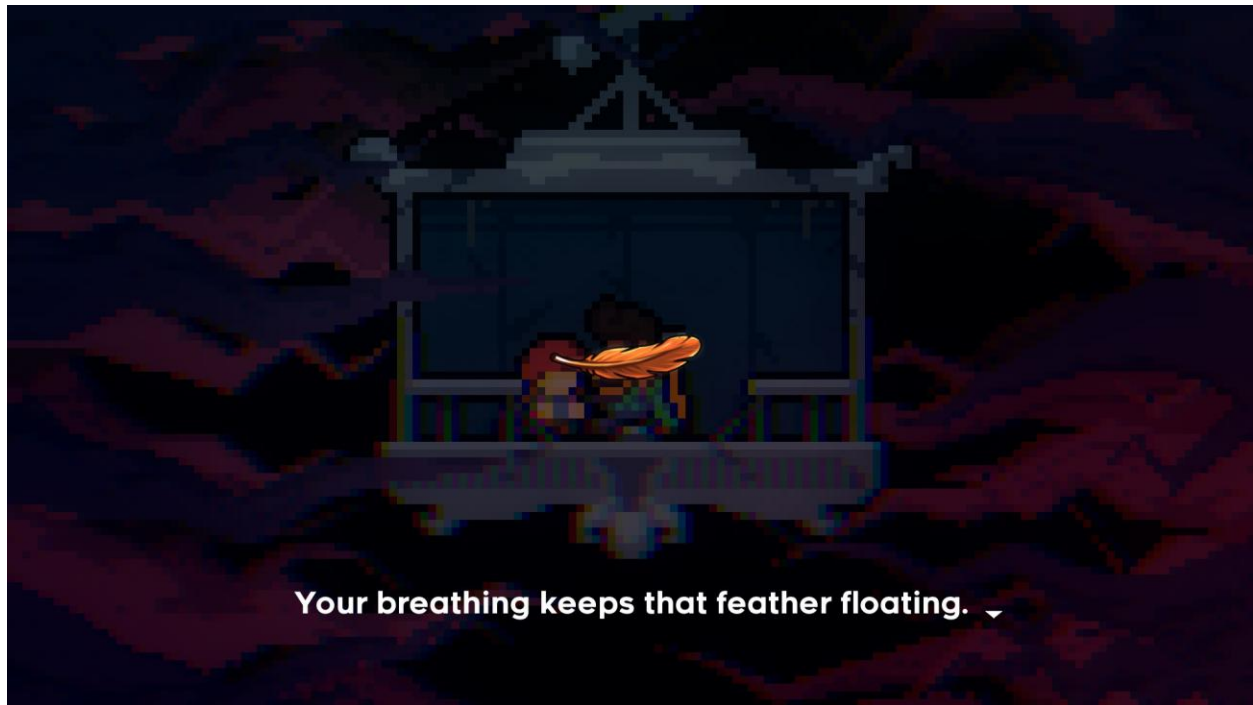


Figure 20. The player is eventually asked to keep a feather floating as a breathing exercise that would lean to Madeline calming down.

“In the Mirror” makes its appearance in the fifth chapter of this game, the track title referencing Madeline’s entrance into the mirror found on this level. The piano is entirely absent from this track as well, creating tension through the absence of an instrument that has, for the most part, grounded the player. The synths-heavy opening establishes a monstrous energy through its dense texture to depict Madeline’s anxieties before it transitions to a new section with quieter synths and, notably, the sound of Raine’s own whispering.⁶⁹ Reversing this particular section—a reversed recording of the music heard in the track, “Quiet and Falling,” from the same level—reveals that the whisperings are actual sentences reflecting Madeline’s thoughts:

⁶⁹ Raine, “Interview.”

Sometimes, I... don't really know what's going on anymore.
I... I don't... know who I am. I just... look in the mirror and...
I don't know who I'm looking at... or... who's looking at me.
I... think a lot about where my train of thought is going... and
it's not always a good place... and that scares me. I don't like
scaring myself... at all.

A mental spiraling occurs during this moment of quiet tension, revealing Madeline's fears of what one could interpret as her madness. However, the anxious whispers of gender dysphoria are also apparent: a desire to find any sense of direction and peace of mind when trying to make sense of one's gender ("I don't really know what's going on anymore"), a disconnect from one's monstrous body ("I don't know who I'm looking at or who's looking at me"), a deep anxiety and fear of the unknown that ripples from the possibility of being a failure ("I think a lot about where my train of thought is going, and it's not always a good place, and that scares me").

In other words, the anxieties of a trans woman are quietly revealed in reverse behind the mirror, upending normative time and space to then transform into a queer and disabled one. In doing so, it brings the player into a different mode of living in time. Queer time goes hand-in-hand with crip time as well as madtime, considering *Celeste's* attention to transness and madness through Madeline. Alison Kafer asks a series of questions reflecting this temporality: "What would constitute a temporality of mania, or depression, or anxiety? If we think of queer time as involving archives of rage and shame, then why not also panic attacks or fatigue? How does depression slow down time,

making moments drag for days, or how do panic attacks cause linear time to unravel, making time seem simultaneously to speed up and slam shut, leaving one behind?"⁷⁰ La Marr Jurelle Bruce responds to these questions through his theorization of madtime, as I discussed earlier in this chapter with manic time, depressive time, schizophrenic time, and melancholic time.⁷¹ However, Bruce also notes the dangers—and one could even interpret them as failures—of madtime: "Manic time might rush recklessly into danger; depressive time might become so deeply wedged in woe that it does not ever get free; schizophrenic time might be crushed between history's hurt and future's threat; melancholic time might collapse under the weight of the lost and dead that it carries."⁷² Many trans people follow these different modes of madtime—and sometimes simultaneously—feeling the horrors of the unknown and the deep sense of failure that hang over their heads with every misstep that leads to their death, sometimes literal death.

I also feel that failure hanging over my head.

It feels bad to fail, and this seems heightened for someone like me, who is neither cisgender nor able-minded, much like the protagonist of *Celeste*. I often feel like a failure, and a monstrous one, no less. In Madeline's mind and mine, we experience time and

⁷⁰ Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 37–38.

⁷¹ See Chapter 7 of Bruce's *How to Go Mad without Losing Your Mind* for an in-depth discussion on each mode of madtime and their applications in analyzing Black music in particular.

⁷² Bruce, *How to Go Mad without Losing Your Mind*, 229–30.

space differently from most other cisgender and able-minded people. I have drawn attention to the more fast-paced elements of the music in *Celeste* and how it induces anxiety in the previous chapter, but there are also slower tracks in this game to consider, such as “In the Mirror.” These are no less anxiety-inducing and should not be interpreted as moments of reprieve. For us, time never seems to follow a straightforward path, stay on beat, or maintain a steady tempo. My movements throughout this game are anything but fluid and stable. I constantly die and feel the pain and frustration of failing. Each time I run into Badeline and hear the synths associated with her, I am reminded of my bad gaming skills, reminded how it would be *so much better* if I were any good at playing video games. I am also reminded of my disabled and gender identity, wondering what it would be like if my brain functioned “normally” and I did not feel the weight of mania and depression on my shoulders, if I felt comfortable with the gender I was assigned at birth. Sara Ahmed reflects on this idea of being comfortable: “Normativity is comfortable for those who can inhabit it. The word ‘comfort’ suggests well-being and satisfaction, but it also suggests an ease and easiness.”⁷³ I will often wish for normalcy, easiness, and comfort, but none of these are readily given to me. Being a monstrous failure means that I am not given easy access to these things (or perhaps even allowed, for that matter); that

⁷³ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 147.

I have seemingly impossible desires for desiring comfort. *Celeste's* music reflects such failures wrapped up in a messy amalgam of feelings, often negative.

Lisa Merri Johnson writes of the importance of acknowledging the distress of failures, and that this is “embodied in lives gone haywire, symptoms run rampant, [and] personal lives devolving into uninhabitable havoc.”⁷⁴ Music seems to make everything go awry in *Celeste* for me. It does not follow the way I want to play this game and I continue to fail, but it follows the familiar patterns of madness and transness that entangle themselves with failure. Everything goes awry when you fail to follow normative time. However, it is clear from my repeated attempts and deaths while playing this game that I am okay with sitting with these negative feelings that come with failure. Disability studies scholar J. Logan Smilges writes, “What I find so comforting about queer negativity is not its disavowal of the future but its capacity to *pause* in the present. Negativity gives me time to mourn. It lets me feel my bad crip feelings as cripply as I want and sometimes as cripply as I can.”⁷⁵ Almost every time I die, I have to pause—even for a few seconds—to feel everything, and I will just let the music play in the background as I sit with my failure (because I suck at video games, because of the way anxiety gets

⁷⁴ Lisa Merri Johnson, “Bad Romance: A Crip Feminist Critique of Queer Failure,” *Hypatia* 30, no. 1 (2015): 264, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12134>.

⁷⁵ J. Logan Smilges, *Crip Negativity* (University of Minnesota Press, 2023), 25–26. Emphasis added.

the better of me due to the music and the mechanics, because of...), before collecting myself to try again.

Conclusion

This chapter sits in discomfort in its reflections on failure, particularly how it resonates for many individuals who fail to follow conventions and expectations set by the dominant culture. Failure can also reverberate through music, particularly video game music. However, much like video game music's ability to adapt and react to the circumstances presented, those who fall on the fringes of society also eventually find ways to adapt and make space for themselves, despite all difficulties and obstacles. Whether it be Orpheus's impassioned singing in *Hades* that enchants players and overtakes the space in-game, or perhaps on a more personal level, the difficulties of playing *Celeste* while coming to terms with the anxieties of its music. There is a contending with monstrous failure that occurs, of (eventually) feeling okay with going against these existing conventions and expectations to follow one's own sense of time. Furthermore, these bad feelings are not meant to be a moment of overcoming, as Sara Ahmed argues, "*but to learn by how we are affected by what comes near*, which means achieving a different relationship to all our wanted and unwanted feelings as an ethical resource."⁷⁶ In all the messy and bad feelings that come with failure, it comes as no

⁷⁶ Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Duke University Press, 2010), 216. Emphasis in original.

surprise, then, that despite everything they must face, monsters prove to be excellent shapeshifters due to their ability to deviate and adapt, finding new worlds and possibilities for themselves. The next chapter focuses precisely on what it means to make these new worlds and possibilities, and I will attend to what it means to embrace one's monstrosity and how this is achieved musically.

CHAPTER 4: MAKING A WORLD FOR MONSTERS

Love itself, the subversive gift, is an important public good, and loving is a significant political act, particularly among those stigmatized and marked as unworthy of love and incapable of deep commitment.

— Richard Iton¹

I begin this chapter with an epigraph by Black scholar Richard Iton, particularly to highlight the ways in which the stigmatized (i.e., the monster) have so frequently been deemed unworthy and incapable of love by the dominant culture due to their horrors and failures. Indeed, monsters closely carry these traits, but as I have demonstrated in previous chapters, they also play with them in ways that revel in their monstrousness. In other words, the monster loves and embraces all of their horrors and failures, in spite of the fact that it would further complicate how they are understood by humans.

In this chapter, I am interested in how monsters might “make, unmake, and remake” in their process of building toward a world for themselves, an otherwise and elsewhere that simultaneously is in and goes beyond the current world they/we live in.² I turn particularly to queer and/or racialized thinkers who have written about and

¹ Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 8.

² Dorinne Kondo, *Worldmaking: Race, Performance, and the Work of Creativity* (Duke University Press, 2018), 4–5. Kondo discusses the ways in which artists “make, unmake, [and] remake race in their creative processes, in acts of always partial integration and repair” to be a form of *reparative creativity*.

theorized utopia and worldmaking, especially the ways they have addressed the limitations of what the dominant culture has offered to historically marginalized groups. One crucial theorist for this research is José Esteban Muñoz, whose initial research on worldmaking in relation to a disidentificatory practice eventually expanded to his monumental monograph, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*.³ In *Disidentifications*, Muñoz defines worldmaking as a concept that “delineates the ways in which performances—both theatrical and everyday rituals—have the ability to establish alternate views of the world. These alternative vistas are more than simply views or perspectives; *they are oppositional ideologies that function as critiques of oppressive regimes of ‘truth’ that subjugate minoritarian people.*”⁴ A disidentificatory practice, then, is to “opt to do more than simply tear down the majoritarian public sphere. [...] Disidentification uses the majoritarian culture as raw material to make a new world.”⁵

Muñoz expands on these ideas in *Cruising Utopia* and states, “Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and *an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.*”⁶ His particular interest in the queering of hope and utopia was to position his case that “if queerness is to have any value whatsoever, it must be

³ See Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, particularly 195–200; and Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, 10th anniversary ed. (New York University Press, 2019).

⁴ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 195. Emphasis added.

⁵ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 196.

⁶ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1. Emphasis added.

viewed as being visible only in the horizon.”⁷ The horizon serves as an important detail in Muñoz’s theorization of queer futurity, especially to argue that utopia “has been an insistence on something else, something better, something *dawning*.”⁸ Furthermore, he emphasizes that “a generative politics can be potentially distilled from the aesthetics of queer failure. Within failure we can locate a kernel of potentiality.”⁹ In other words, queer worldmaking deliberately turns to failure to reach for that elsewhere.

Similarly, Jack Halberstam addresses the importance of failure in queer worldmaking, turning to low theory (a concept he takes from Stuart Hall) to propose “an ambulatory journey through the unplanned, the unexpected, the improvised, and the surprising.”¹⁰ Low theory is also about taking “eccentric texts and examples [...] that refuses to confirm the hierarchies of knowing that maintain the *high* in high theory.”¹¹ Through low theory, Halberstam is ultimately interested in undermining heteronormative understandings of success and argues that the inability to live up to these expectations—often through missteps and complete asides—can create avenues toward an alternative way of being and existing in the world.

⁷ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 11.

⁸ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 189. Emphasis added.

⁹ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 173.

¹⁰ Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke University Press, 2011), 15–16.

¹¹ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 16. Emphasis in original.

Turning to Black studies and worldmaking, I think of Kevin Quashie's understanding of Black worldmaking through his engagement with and considerations of various Black literature and scholarship to characterize aliveness.¹² Furthermore, there is his investment "to write about aliveness in a black world rather than life in the world as we know it—to write about aliveness in the aesthetic imaginary of black thought, which might help us attend to the poetic aliveness inevitable in each black human being."¹³ Quashie orients Black aliveness "toward towardness" and does so "through a discourse of relation and in the terms of material habitat enacted within the poetic," providing close analyses on the works of Black feminists writers such as Lucille Clifton, June Jordan, among others.¹⁴ Similarly to other scholars I have mentioned in this dissertation, he highlights the importance of temporality in relation to identity, specifically noting particular verbs that "constitute worldness, especially in the instance of the subjunctive, the syntax of *imagining*."¹⁵ The subjunctive clause "imagine a black world," then, holds significant value in that it "coheres with the imperative, where there is no disjuncture between the wish, the command, and the achievement."¹⁶

¹² He presents an expansive list of scholarship that delves into Black worldmaking and related ideas (e.g., Afrofuturism) and ties its importance to aliveness in a Black world. See Kevin Quashie, *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being* (Duke University Press, 2021), 159–61n11.

¹³ Quashie, *Black Aliveness*, 20.

¹⁴ Quashie, *Black Aliveness*, 26.

¹⁵ Quashie, *Black Aliveness*, 59. Emphasis added.

¹⁶ Quashie, *Black Aliveness*, 61.

Jayna Brown takes a slightly different approach from Quashie when it comes to Black utopia and worldmaking. Instead, she “take[s] the concept of utopia into a no-place, into an elsewhere,” using black speculation as her methodology to “jump into the unknowable” and consider alternative ways of being alive.¹⁷ Importantly, Brown’s desire to look elsewhere is due to Black people’s exclusion from the human category, which, as a result, makes it that they “have a particular epistemic and ontological mobility” that would allow them to “develop marvelous modes of being in and perceiving the universe.”¹⁸ Additionally, she argues, “Utopia is a part of *a continual becoming*, an embrace of change itself.”¹⁹ There is a clear engagement with a sense of time (and similarly to Muñoz’s reaching for and moving toward the future that is on the horizon), but Brown asserts that her use of the term utopia “does not rely on the idea of a future;” instead she thinks of time ungoverned by normative and linear chronologies.²⁰

The aforementioned scholars lay the groundwork for my own research to better theorize how monsters are making worlds for themselves, doing so in ways that push back on humans’ desires and expectations, such as acclimating the monster to become

¹⁷ Jayna Brown, *Black Utopias: Speculative Life and the Music of Other Worlds* (Duke University Press, 2021), 6.

¹⁸ Brown, *Black Utopias*, 7. I also think of Zakiyyah Iman Jackson’s discussion of Blackness in relation to the human, which she argues that “African diasporic cultural production [...] frequently alters the meaning and significance of being (human) and engages in imaginative practices of worlding from the perspective of a history of blackness’s bestialization and thingification.” See Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World* (New York University Press, 2020), 1.

¹⁹ Brown, *Black Utopias*, 113. Emphasis added.

²⁰ Brown, *Black Utopias*, 15.

human. It would make sense, then, that I would be in conversation with those who have written about repair—more specifically, those who have also engaged with how reparative reading has been theorized by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick—in my desire to shed light on the hopes and dreams of monsters who are just as worthy of love and care. Sedgwick writes:

No less acute than a paranoid position, no less realistic, no less attached to a project of survival, and neither less nor more delusional or fantasmatic, the reparative reading position undertakes a different range of affects, ambitions, and risks. What we can best learn from such practices are, perhaps, the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them.²¹

She proposes with hope that people will engage with these objects in ways that are nourishing. In the case of monsters, to read them reparatively is to seek pleasure for them, to provide them with hope, to let go of the anxieties that come with their ambiguity.

Similarly, Dorinne Kondo thinks about the reparative in the world of theatre, considering how it “reconfigures the shattered world into a mobile, always incomplete, integration.”²² For Kondo, reparation is a means to recognize the messiness that comes with the process of worldmaking. Furthermore, she acknowledges that to make “is not creation ex nihilo; rather, we make, unmake, remake race within specific cultural and

²¹ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 150–51.

²² Kondo, *Worldmaking*, 211.

historical political economies. Making can be quotidian; it does not automatically conjure the divine sublime.”²³ The monster, then, could work with what exists and have been given to them—both good and bad—to move toward repair.

Neither Sedgwick nor Kondo suggest a good–bad/either–or paradigm when proposing a reparative approach to the object that exudes hopefulness for something more. Both scholars (and others) recognize that it is possible—and, arguably, even a necessity—to “hold paranoia and repair in perpetual tension, recognizing that neither means (or feels like) much without the other.”²⁴ After all, as disability studies scholar J. Logan Smilges aptly notes, hope can feel good, “but it’s also and always contiguous with bad feelings because it emerges from lack, from want, and from need.”²⁵ The monster must contend with hope in the act of repair, understanding that this push and pull is an inevitability due to what is and is not made available to them.

There are certainly benefits to reading the monster through a reparative lens, as it reveals that they are more than a portent of horror and failure, and that they deserve just as much care and pleasure as the human. In a way, repair can also be read as an invitation for the human to rehabilitate the monstrous subject, which presents a possible window of opportunity to step into their shoes and empathize with them. It is here that I want to

²³ Kondo, *Worldmaking*, 29.

²⁴ William Cheng, *Just Vibrations: The Purpose of Sounding Good* (University of Michigan Press, 2016), 42.

²⁵ Smilges, *Crip Negativity*, 74.

intervene and reflect on the very nature of repair, especially to ask to what extent the reparative affords the monster to make a world for themselves, to come alive in their monstrosity? In addition, who actually benefits from reparative reading? Perhaps these questions lean toward Sedgwick's idea of paranoid reading, but I find that they are useful to consider why it is important to recognize the limitations of repair.

While she is not addressing the monstrous in her article, literary scholar Robyn Wiegman takes up the aforementioned questions to point out that "the current celebration of reparative reading as a form of intimacy, if not love of and for the object of study, must be understood—against its burgeoning reputation—as making rather significant demands on the object, *not against the authority and security of the critic but on her behalf*."²⁶ She continues on, writing that "reparative criticism takes shape around the *critic's affirmative dependency on the object* and seeks a dramatic revision of the political capacity of critical practice by casting such dependency in ethical terms, as a response to the object's experience and need."²⁷ In other words, the act of repair has more to do with the critic themselves than the actual needs of the object (and, in this dissertation's context, the monster). Wiegman explores the limitations of repair through her contending with her mother's diagnosis of bipolar disorder, concluding that, at the end of the day, "no

²⁶ Robyn Wiegman, "The Times We're In: Queer Feminist Criticism and the Reparative 'Turn'," *Feminist Theory* 15, no. 1 (2014): 17–18, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700113513081a>. Emphasis in original.

²⁷ Wiegman, "The Times We're In," 18. Emphasis added.

interpretation I can offer will help her claim a world building agency she can believe in. That need—which she has always stood for—remains my own.”²⁸

Relatedly, game studies scholar Bo Ruberg unpacks the rhetoric of “empathy” in video games—especially “queer indie games (and other video games by, about, or for marginalized people)” —to point out alongside other critics how this rhetoric “promotes a colonizing of affect: an invasion, occupation, and subjugation of other’s experiences. [...] As a proposition for what it should feel like to play video games, empathy is not so much about ‘understanding and sharing’ as it is about inhabiting: taking up residence in the experiences of another.”²⁹ Ruberg continues on to point out how empathy “has been constructed through discussions of video games, is frequently actually an invitation to feel *badly* for someone different.”³⁰ They further note how empathy is similar to allyship with how it “may be well-intentioned but is also self-congratulatory and self-serving.”³¹ I would argue that the act of repair frequently attends to empathy as a means to better understand the object, even *promising* that one *will* understand. In this chapter and, more broadly, this dissertation, I am not interested in arguing for humans to empathize with monsters, for them to try and understand what it means to be monstrous and exist in the

²⁸ Wiegman, “The Times We’re In,” 19.

²⁹ Ruberg, “Empathy and Its Alternatives,” 60–61.

³⁰ Ruberg, “Empathy and Its Alternatives,” 64. Emphasis in original.

³¹ Ruberg, “Empathy and Its Alternatives,” 64.

worlds that they have created for themselves. Instead, I make a case for humans to accept that they *cannot* fully repair or understand monsters, let alone be a part of their world, but that they can still learn to value the monstrous subject.

For this chapter, I find José Esteban Muñoz's theorization of disidentification to be useful, especially due to his focus on queer people of color and for his careful attention to intersectionality. Importantly, Muñoz notes the following: "Disidentification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship."³² These survival strategies are ways to manage and negotiate identity by recycling and remaking the dominant culture's ideas into the minoritarian subject's own or, in the case of this dissertation, the monster's own. I understand disidentification to mean an acknowledgment—perhaps even acceptance—of how the monster is defined and understood by humans and, from there, building toward an otherwise and elsewhere. While resonances of the reparative can be observed in disidentification, I find that it is more deliberately ambiguous due to the way it "works on and against dominant ideology."³³ It is equally mindful of the present and the future because of its reactive nature to the dominant culture, because disidentifying is aiming to survive at almost any

³² Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 4.

³³ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 11.

cost in order to achieve the love and worldmaking that are occurring and will (continue to) occur within and beyond what society has to offer.

In the following two case studies for this chapter, *Undertale* and *Hades*, I analyze the type of worldmaking that occurs in each game through their respective music, and how monsters embrace and become more than monsters as historically defined by humans. The music in both of these video games provides a window for players to understand the characters; it also asserts its distance to make clear that empathy is not desired in the ways in which it works in tandem with the narrative, mechanics, and/or visuals. While *Undertale* and *Hades* are video games from different genres—the former being an RPG while the latter is a roguelike—and drastically differ in audiovisual aesthetics, they both reveal the radical possibilities of letting monsters *be*.

Finding Queer Loves in *Undertale*

In the 2015 RPG *Undertale*, failure is tied to worldmaking, specifically queer worldmaking. Failure can follow the conventions of many video games and seem fairly obvious, which is when the “game over” screen appears each time the player-character loses all their health. However, I am more interested in how *Undertale* maps alternative ways to fail, often in a manner that not only subverts typical gaming expectations—especially that of RPGs—but also results in failing queerly. The queer nature of *Undertale* is supported by the music—particularly the themes and leitmotifs—to establish an otherwise for the inhabitants of the game’s main world, known as the Underground. I

turn particularly to theorizations of queer failure by Jack Halberstam and queer utopia by José Esteban Muñoz to inform my analysis of *Undertale* and its music.³⁴ More specifically, I look at the Pacifist Route—one of three routes that players will take—and the queer worldmaking that occurs.³⁵

First, it is crucial to highlight the prominence of queerness in *Undertale*. Queerness manifests in a number of ways, as game studies scholar Bo Ruberg writes, “ranging from the representational [...] to the interactive.”³⁶ For example, the protagonist (i.e., the player-character), Frisk, is a gender-nonconforming human child who is addressed with they/them pronouns.³⁷ In addition, other characters—all of them distinctly nonhuman—trouble cis heteronormative expectations of gender and sexuality. One such example is Mettaton, who first appears as a box-shaped robot, eventually transforming into a flamboyant humanoid robot later in the game (Figure 21).

³⁴ See Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, and Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*.

³⁵ In *Undertale*, there are three routes: Mercy, Neutral, and No Mercy. *Undertale*’s fanbase also refers to the Mercy and No Mercy Routes as the Pacifist and Genocide Routes, respectively. For this dissertation, I will be referring to these routes as Pacifist, Neutral, and Genocide.

³⁶ Bo Ruberg, “Straightwashing *Undertale*: Video Games and the Limits of LGBTQ Representation,” *Transformative Works and Culture* 28 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2018.1516>.

³⁷ At the start of *Undertale*, the player has the option to write in a name of their choice (with some exceptions). It is eventually revealed at the end that the player-character’s actual name is Frisk.



Figure 21. Mettaton first appears to the player-character as a box-shaped robot (top), eventually transforming into a flamboyant humanoid later in the game (bottom).

The queer monster of *Undertale* broadly reflects how numerous queer people in our world have been treated by the dominant culture as failures for their difference. Being queer also means to be what Sara Ahmed describes as being “out of line” and disoriented,

to make conventions and expectations “oblique.”³⁸ Furthermore, shame is often attached to queerness, with “the queer subject takes on the ‘badness’ as its own, by feeling bad about ‘failing’ loved others.”³⁹ To avoid feeling shame or being shamed, some queer people may feel forced to remain in the closet, where they will be unseen. In *Undertale*, the monsters’ difference resulted in the humans on the Surface forcing them into the Underground, which I argue serves as a metaphorical closet.⁴⁰ This analogy is reinforced in the game with the existence of a barrier that was put up to keep the monsters away from the human world (i.e., the dominant culture) and, thus, forcing them to stay in the metaphorical closet.

As for the interactive, perhaps the defining queer nature of *Undertale* is in its alternative way of playing, which is to encourage the player-character to move throughout the game without killing anyone and take what is known as the Pacifist Route. The Pacifist Route is antithetical to RPGs, the latter generally expecting the player to level up their characters during fights by killing and collect items that will strengthen them in order to succeed. However, *Undertale* fails to follow RPG expectations, and it does so in

³⁸ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Duke University Press, 2006), 67, 177–78.

³⁹ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 107.

⁴⁰ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (University of California Press, 1990), 67–90.

favor of progressing in a nonlinear fashion through a literal and theoretical queer space.⁴¹

The game draws considerable attention to the nature of failure through its three routes to reveal the relative definitions of success and failure. For many players, their first playthrough will land them on the Neutral Route, which reveals the issue of the success–failure paradigm.⁴² Players will often find themselves in shock after making some progress in the game when they discover that they should not have been following RPG conventions by leveling up their character through acts of violence; it results in their realization that they have been complicit in killing innocent monsters, leading to guilt and grief for the lives of the slain monsters. For a couple of examples, two Redditors shared in separate posts about their respective first playthrough experiences, with one stating how they “screwed up and did some bad things,” while the other user wrote how they “killed so many people and felt horrible about it.”⁴³ Their reflections reveal how the player who took the Neutral Route failed altogether to play *Undertale* with any success,

⁴¹ For foundational scholarship on queer time, space, and progress, see Freeman, *Time Binds*; Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*; and Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Harvard University Press, 2007).

⁴² It should be noted that this is under the assumption that players played *Undertale* without any foreknowledge of the game.

⁴³ See u/twitchyjay, “I managed a blind playthrough!” r/Undertale, Reddit, February 8, 2016, https://www.reddit.com/r/Undertale/comments/44t8fx/i_managed_a_blind_playthrough/; and u/DoctorMadcow, “Just finished my Blind Playthrough...,” r/Undertale, Reddit, May 31, 2016, https://www.reddit.com/r/Undertale/comments/4lx8k4/just_finished_my_blind_playthrough/.

whether that be by the game's definition (avoid killing anyone) or a typical RPG (deliberately kill everyone).

Many of these players who landed on the Neutral Route on their first playthrough often replay *Undertale* upon learning that there are two other routes: Genocide and Pacifist. To choose the Genocide Route is to fail playing *Undertale* by the game's logic. The player may have successfully played an RPG the "normal" way, but the game will repeatedly remind them of their failure to be merciful by punishing them emotionally for their violence. To choose the Pacifist Route, then, is to fail by choosing to play subversively and differently. The player failed to kill any enemies or boost their character's stats, choosing instead to show mercy to the monsters they encountered. Yet, by following these guidelines, the player successfully understood the underlying message of the game: "You never gained any LOVE, but you gained love." "LOVE," which is first introduced at the start of *Undertale* as a way to level up, is revealed to actually mean "Level of Violence." As Sans, a major character in the game, points out, "LOVE" is the wrong kind of love to acquire. Indeed, even at the very start of the game, one monster hints to the player-character: "If a monster does not want to fight you, please... Use some MERCY, human." As a result of failing to level up the player-character because they chose the Pacifist Route, the game ends up being relatively more difficult during combat, as they are more vulnerable to the monsters' attacks and, thus, are more prone to lose. However, the player-character's patience and decision to fail deliberately

results in their discovery of the loving community that the Underground's inhabitants have made for themselves.

Undertale's music plays a crucial role in the exploration of what it means to fail on the Pacifist Route. Furthermore, it connects Frisk to the various characters and locations they encounter in the Underground. I focus particularly on the main leitmotif, heard in the track, "Once Upon a Time," which I argue represents Frisk and their journey through the Underground to embrace queer failure, as well as an alternative way of living that celebrates queer loves. In doing so, the player-character experiences the opportunity to "revel in [...] fantastic failures."⁴⁴ The "Once Upon a Time" leitmotif becomes increasingly nuanced in the numerous ways it interweaves with other themes and leitmotifs. Through this musical journey of failure in this monstrous world, the player-character will discover that this queer way of living otherwise is a place filled with love that can be called "home."

It is important to note that the music of *Undertale* will adapt accordingly to whichever route the player is on. The Pacifist Route allows the player to hear the majority of the soundtrack and, importantly, how themes and leitmotifs interact with each other, especially the main leitmotif. The music heard on the Pacifist Route reveals the hopes and dreams of the nonhuman residents of the Underground, as well as the queer world that

⁴⁴ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 187.

they have made for themselves. The player-character discovers in their interactions with these monsters that they have diverse personalities, interests, and quirks that revel in the cringe and silly. The queer monster is no longer represented by atonality or dissonance, as is the common stereotype to represent them, but, instead, associated with cheerful and vibrant melodies.⁴⁵ Importantly, not only to *Undertale* but also to much of video game music in general, these musical cues fail to resolve. Instead, many tracks may “end” on an inversion of the tonic or any other scale degree that circles around it; other times, it will be abruptly interrupted by another piece of music, sound, and/or event in-game. The music’s failure to progress “normally” reveals a desire for a queer utopia, the “potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.”⁴⁶ It becomes the case, then, that the music heard on the Pacifist Route unveils a new world on the horizon brimming with unending queer loves and failure.

⁴⁵ Jack Curtis Dubowsky, *Intersecting Film, Music, and Queerness* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 174. See also the introduction of this dissertation, where I explain the history of how the monster has been musically coded.

⁴⁶ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

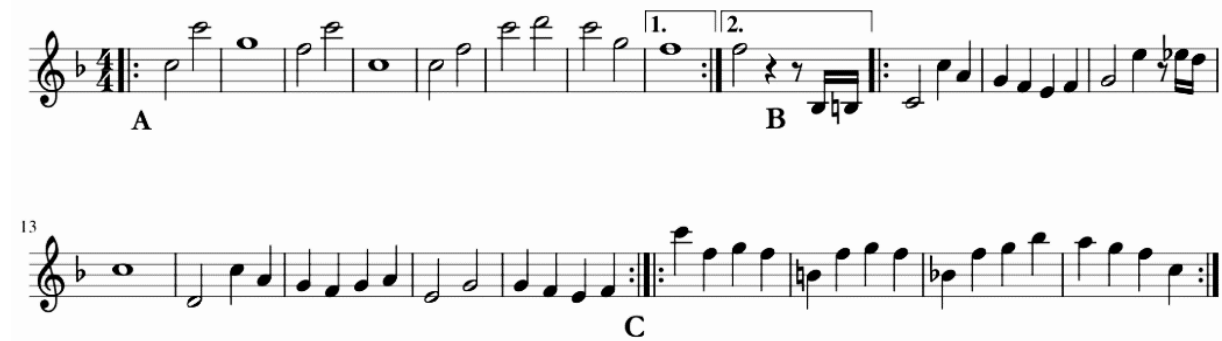


Figure 22. A transcription of the melody of “Once Upon a Time.” The three sections of the leitmotif are marked as A, B, and C.

The “Once Upon a Time” leitmotif has three distinct sections that the player first hears at the start of *Undertale* before they create their save file (Figure 22). The leitmotif manifests in various ways throughout the game, ranging from tempo to instrumentation, as well as its interplay with other themes and leitmotifs. However, the absence of music shortly after creating a save file gives the impression that this leitmotif was just a brief occurrence with little to no connection to the rest of *Undertale*’s music. The player may find that they have already forgotten how the leitmotif sounds even after the first few minutes due to their encounter with a talking flower named Flowey. Flowey greets the player-character in a cheerful manner, with bright and perky music that matches his demeanor. However, the player is deceived and set up for failure the moment the music is abruptly cut off, followed by ominous laughter from Flowey, who then attempts to murder Frisk (Figure 23). The result of Flowey’s actions makes it so that the player, especially if they are familiar with RPG conventions, should be prepared to defend and attack any enemies that appear in the future.

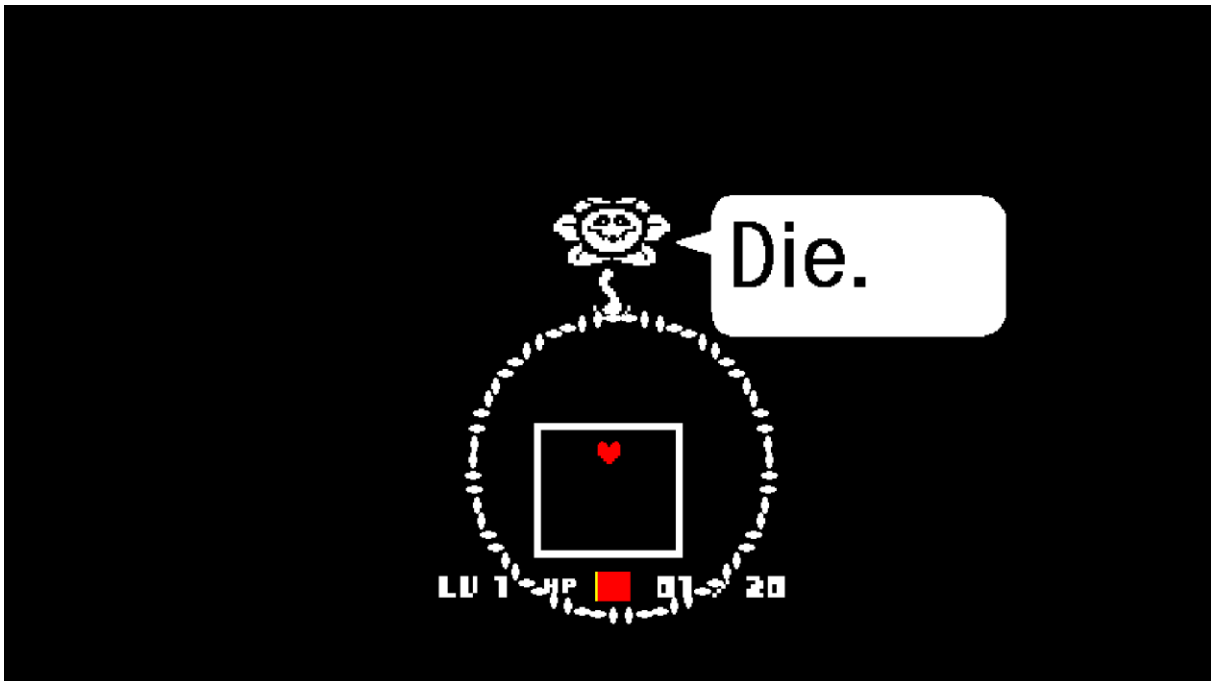


Figure 23. Flowey prepares to kill the player-character (represented by a red heart) with pellets.

Frisk is saved just in time by an anthropomorphic goat named Toriel, who knocks Flowey off-screen, then voices her concerns for the player-character's well-being. Shortly after, she guides them through the area, known as the Ruins, until they reach her house. Upon entering, the player will hear a slow, acoustic guitar variation of Sections A and B of the "Once Upon a Time" leitmotif, not only signaling to the player that this is a piece of music that they should familiarize themselves with, but also that they are in a safe space where they will not be attacked. Two additional cues establish this sense of safety: the visual cue of the lights being turned off in their bedroom when the player-character climbs into bed, shortly followed by a new instrumentation of Sections A and B of the leitmotif, this time from a music box. The combination of Toriel's motherly personality and the gentle, familiar-sounding music is a key moment in the development of the "Once

Upon a Time” leitmotif as a representation of Frisk’s journey in discovering the queer worldmaking that occurs in the Underground. The acoustic guitar and music box variations, titled “Home” on the soundtrack, imply that the player has found one type of queer love: familial. Toriel takes in Frisk, a human child, without question. In doing so, she orients herself queerly, “inhabiting the world by giving ‘support’ to those whose lives and loves make them appear oblique, strange, and out of place.”⁴⁷ She warmly welcomes Frisk to her home and, more broadly, the Underground, even while knowing that they — both Toriel and Frisk — are different.

When the player-character attempts to leave Toriel’s house, she tries to stop them by engaging in combat with them. As they will have learned from earlier encounters with “enemies” in the Ruins, though, showing mercy eventually leads to her conceding and letting them go out into the Underground on their own. After this event, the “Once Upon a Time” leitmotif does not return for some time in-game. In addition to being in an unfamiliar world brimming with monstrous entities, the player will bear in mind Flowey’s violence from the start of the game that will likely make them wary of every character and location; understandably so, considering the number of surprise encounters that will bring up the combat screen without warning. The player-character is repeatedly given the tempting option to follow RPG conventions in such moments. The

⁴⁷ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 179.

difficulty of the Pacifist Route is to work against these expectations and, instead, refuse to harm the monsters, even when they attack Frisk. As a result, *Undertale* rewards the player-character for their love and kindness with heartwarming events involving various monsters that result in the fostering of another type of queer love: platonic.

Queer platonic love can be found in many corners of the Underground.⁴⁸ The player-character can go on a failed date with an overzealous skeleton named Papyrus, during which they discover he has virtually no concept of how romance works and is actually looking for friendship; they can lie on the floor with a ghost named Napstablook to “feel like garbage” after failing to eat a ghost sandwich; and they can also fail to make spaghetti with a piscine humanoid named Undyne, who, in her attempt to become “besties” with Frisk through cooking, accidentally sets her house on fire (Figure 24). In all these interactions, the player-character fails in the silliest ways imaginable. These events are prompts to fail queerly, as Jack Halberstam describes: “to be underachievers, to fall short, to get distracted, to take a detour, to find a limit, to lose [their] way, to forget, [and] to avoid mastery.”⁴⁹ It means to “keep open the possibility of changing directions

⁴⁸ I differentiate “queer platonic” from “queerplatonic,” the former to mean a *queering* of the platonic. The latter term, on the other hand, originates from asexual and aromantic spaces and is understood to mean a relationship between significant others that is not romantic in nature, while still having the same level of commitment and structure as a typical romantic relationship. A queerplatonic relationship is generally considered to be a deeper relationship than a friendship. With that said, I recognize that there are overlaps between a queering of platonic relationships and queerplatonic relationships, particularly to highlight the non-normative nature of these relationships. For more on queerplatonic relationships, see Angela Chen, *Ace: What Asexuality Reveals About Desire, Society, and the Meaning of Sex* (Beacon Press, 2021), 118–21.

⁴⁹ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 120–21.

and of finding other paths, perhaps those that do not clear a common ground, where we can respond with joy to what goes astray.”⁵⁰ The deliberate choice to go astray has everything and nothing to do with *Undertale*, as it is simultaneously a failure to stay focused on the main storyline while also a success to choose to get to know these monsters instead.

⁵⁰ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 178.



Figure 24. Three events that the player-character can potentially experience with Papyrus (top), Napstablook (center), and/or Undyne (bottom).

Music also takes a detour with these events, and while they may not have much to do with these characters' respective themes, they still serve as important moments to celebrate queer joy and silliness. Bright and upbeat music—reminiscent of numerous soundtracks from dating simulation games—plays when Frisk goes on their failed date with Papyrus, attempts to make spaghetti with Undyne, and when going on a practice date with a reptilian scientist named Alphys.⁵¹ Intense, action-packed music plays when Frisk takes part in a snail race, while generic club music plays when they move under the covers of a hotel bed at the MTT Resort.⁵² Even interactions with minor characters have dedicated music to highlight the passing moments of queer joy, such as the cheerful and determined tune that plays when a small yellow bird carries Frisk over a small gap.⁵³ Each and every moment reveals the queer world that the monsters have made for themselves in the Underground. Sara Ahmed writes of how silliness can be instructive,

⁵¹ Dating simulation games (or dating sims) are a diverse video game genre that simulate dating, with the objective generally being that the player-character romances (usually) one of several non-player characters (NPCs) by building a relationship with them. While the average dating sim is focused on cisgender and heterosexual human relationships, there are many dating sims that break these norms, such as *Hatoful Boyfriend: A School of Hope and White Wings* (PigeoNation Inc., 2011), in which all datable NPCs are sapient birds (primarily doves and pigeons). It comes as very little surprise that the main track heard for all three events is titled "Dating Start!" in reference to the genre. Furthermore, during the player-character's "date" with Papyrus, the track will change to either "Dating Fight!" or "Dating Tense!" in response to the player-character's responses, much like music in some dating sims. In addition, while cooking with Undyne, the track will eventually change to "NGAHHH!!" (in which her leitmotif can be heard). During the practice date with Alphys, the track will eventually change to the track titled "Alphys" (in which her leitmotif can be heard).

⁵² The track that is heard during the snail race is titled "Thundersnail." The music heard when under the covers is not on the soundtrack, but the file name is called "mus_coolbeat."

⁵³ The track is even cheekily titled "Bird That Carries You Over a Disproportionately Small Gap."

that it is “coming to value that which is not valued, and in finding joys in places that are not deemed worthy.”⁵⁴ The player-character learns to embrace the silly and unexpected alongside their monstrous friends in what is actually a vibrant space that encourages a fostering of queer platonic love.

The “Once Upon a Time” leitmotif returns during Frisk’s second encounter with Mettaton, who wreaks havoc with the intent to kill them, and does so in a cheerful fashion. When the player-character finds themselves in the vicinity of the charismatic robot, this time on a cooking show (in)appropriately titled “Cooking with a Killer Robot,” an unrelenting, upbeat variation of sections A and B of the leitmotif eventually plays when they must fly skywards to grab a can of a human soul vegan substitute as an attempt to stop Mettaton from killing them for their soul.⁵⁵ The music that the player once connected to safety is now heard when they are possibly in imminent danger. However, they have no reason to assume they are in actual danger due to the support of Alphys, who guides them over the phone through Mettaton’s shenanigans. These puzzling events range from over-the-top questions on a mock quiz show with blaring, upbeat music playing in the background, to an unusually heartfelt aria that parodies the aria from the Japanese RPG, *Final Fantasy*

⁵⁴ Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 222.

⁵⁵ The track that plays while the player-character flies up to grab the can is equally as absurd and titled “Can You Really Call This a Hotel, I Didn’t Receive a Mint on My Pillow or Anything.”

VI (1994) (Figure 25).⁵⁶ The encounters with Mettaton are ones that evoke camp, which, as Jack Babuscio writes, “is often exaggerated. When the stress on style is ‘outrageous’ or ‘too much’, it results in incongruities: the emphasis shifts from what a thing or a person is to what it *looks* like; from what is being done to *how* it is being done.”⁵⁷ The appearance of the “Once Upon a Time” leitmotif becomes a part of the camp aesthetic with its interactions with Mettaton and his actions.

⁵⁶ The track that plays during the quiz show is titled “It’s Showtime!” The aria that Mettaton performs is the track titled “Oh! One True Love.” This aria specifically parodies “Aria di Mezzo Carattere” from *Final Fantasy VI*, which was released as *Final Fantasy III* in North America for the Super Nintendo Entertainment System. It was later rereleased as *Final Fantasy VI* for later consoles and platforms such as the Game Boy Advance and Steam. For an analysis of the legacy of this aria, see William Cheng, *Sound Play: Video Games and the Musical Imagination* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 57–91. For a more in-depth analysis of this aria, see Ryan Thompson, “Operatic Conventions and Expectations in *Final Fantasy VI*” in *Music in the Role-Playing Game: Heroes and Harmonies*, ed. William Gibbons and Steven Reale (Routledge, 2020), 117–28. For a brief analysis comparing these two arias, see Summers, *The Queerness of Video Game Music*, 38–41.

⁵⁷ Jack Babuscio, “The Cinema of Camp (*aka* Camp and the Gay Sensibility)” in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 122. Emphasis in original. For scholarship on camp and parody, see in particular Chuck Kleinhans, “Taking Out the Trash: Camp and the Politics of Parody” in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, ed. Moe Meyer (Routledge, 1994), 157–73. I thank James Ace for directing me to these sources.



Figure 25. Mettaton’s questions on his quiz show become increasingly and unnecessarily over-the-top. He eventually presents a long math problem that is evocative of standardized tests, of which players of certain age groups and nationalities may have unpleasant memories.

The leitmotif’s connection to camp continues even when the player-character finds respite at the MTT Resort, where they hear a more relaxed, Muzak version. Muzak (and similar kinds of “elevator” music), which has been lambasted by critics as being “vapid” and “cheesy,” is actually embraced at the MTT Resort.⁵⁸ As opposed to having its own leitmotif, the hotel’s use of the “Once Upon a Time” leitmotif is a moment of reflection for the player-character to consider the progress they have made on their journey. As silly as it may be to hear a serious (yet unserious) Muzak variation, it serves as a reminder of

⁵⁸ As Joseph Lanza writes, “But just mention the words *Muzak*, *easy-listening*, or even *contemporary instrumental*, and many critics will lash out with judgments such as ‘boring,’ ‘dehumanized,’ ‘vapid,’ ‘cheesy,’ and (insults of insults) ‘elevator music’.” See Joseph Lanza, *Elevator Music: A Surreal History of Muzak, Easy-Listening, and Other Moodson* (St. Martin’s Press, 1994), 2. Emphasis in original.

the equally silly encounters and experiences leading up to this point. It is a moment for the player-character to celebrate the sense of belonging that they have felt in building relationships since the start of the game.

The “Once Upon a Time” leitmotif makes a few more key appearances toward the end of *Undertale*. A crucial and turning point is a solemn variation that begins to play when Frisk enters New Home, where they can find Asgore, king of the Underground, and his house.⁵⁹ As the player-character heads towards Asgore, the supposed final boss, they run into multiple monsters—minor “enemies” they encountered earlier in the game—telling the story of the first human child who fell into the Underground, and the queer familial and platonic loves that formed between them and the monsters. They continue on to reveal the severance of these loves when the barrier was erected after the death of this unnamed human child. However, Frisk’s appearance and their time spent in the Underground suggests that a queer utopia filled with love is on the horizon once again.

The refiguration of queer loves is solidified by a mirroring that occurs visually and musically as Frisk wanders around New Home. Visually, the interior of Asgore’s house looks like a monochromatic version of the interior of Toriel’s house, with flecks of yellow appearing on the flowers in the former’s home. Musically, the tracks heard while

⁵⁹ The track that plays is titled “Undertale.” Asgore is another anthropomorphic goat who is eventually revealed to be the ex-partner of Toriel.

wandering around Toriel's and Asgore's respective houses are renditions of sections A and B of the "Once Upon a Time" leitmotif. However, Frisk has grown as an individual by the time they reach New Home, which is reflected in a relatively more complex musical texture than what was heard at the start of the game. In addition, the leitmotif is inextricably interwoven with the theme of Asriel, the son of Toriel and Asgore, who is also revealed to have given the greatest amount of love to the first human child by being the first to extend a hand to help them.⁶⁰

At the end of the Pacifist Route, the player-character successfully breaks the barrier, thus allowing the monsters back into the human world. However, this is at the cost of Asriel's life, who turns into a non-sentient flower. On this path of queer failure, a painful sort of failure seems to appear, as the player failed to save everyone from death. Before transforming, Asriel reassures Frisk that, despite everything, their journey through the Underground has led to lasting relationships, with various monsters expressing their love for the human child in myriad ways, as strange as these queer affections may be to the "normal" world. The player-character is then given the option to wander around the Underground once more to revisit locations and speak to more monsters before they step outside of the Underground with their found family. Should they choose to re-explore, they will clearly hear all three sections of the "Once Upon a Time" leitmotif for the first

⁶⁰ The player-character learns more about this during and after their "fight" against Asriel, who is revealed to have been Flowey.

time since the start of the game. Ultimately, this indicates Frisk's self-actualization as well as their readiness to embrace their queer monstrosity.

The last conversations between Frisk and the monsters are ones that express hope for a brighter future, further emphasized by the monsters' excitement to see the sun on the horizon with their own eyes. Apart from Frisk and Toriel, everyone returns to the Underground, though they do so in peace, knowing that they are free to leave their home and be "out" in the human world. When Frisk is alone with the first monster to extend love to them, Toriel asks if they want to stay in the human world or stay in the Underground with her. By choosing to go with her, the player-character fully claims the "Once Upon a Time" leitmotif as their theme of finding true queer love and belonging.

The credits that play at the end of the Pacifist Route reflect the culmination of the "Once Upon a Time" leitmotif in relation to the rest of the soundtrack. The credits reveal all the monsters the player-character encountered, as well as their statuses after the barrier was dismantled (e.g., Greater Dog is "excited by life's changes" and Napstablook is a "spooky DJ"). The credits also reveal what the major characters in-game are doing, with many of them finding the simple joys in life (e.g., Papyrus driving a convertible, as well as Undyne and Alphys being on what appears to be a date at the beach). Importantly, this wholesome ending is a quilt of the major themes and leitmotifs heard during gameplay, all of which build up to the "Once Upon a Time" leitmotif (Table 1). At the

climactic moment of the credits, a mountain surrounded by heart-shaped clouds is shown, which is where Frisk first fell into the Underground.

Themes and Leitmotifs Heard in “Bring It In, Guys!”	Timestamps (approx.)
Monsters	0:00 – 0:35
Papyrus	0:36 – 0:43, 0:47 – 0:52
Sans	0:41 – 0:46
Snowdin	0:53 – 1:28
Undyne	1:29 – 1:48
Ruins	1:49 – 2:14
Mettaton	2:15 – 2:43
Hotland / CORE	2:44 – 3:21
Asgore	3:22 – 3:35
Toriel	3:36 – 3:46
Frisk / “Once Upon a Time”	3:47 – 4:12

Table 1. Every theme and leitmotif that appears in the track, “Bring It In, Guys!” in chronological order.

Achieving the credits that play at the end of the Pacifist Route is both a success and a failure on the player’s part. It is a reminder that the player failed to follow RPG conventions by refusing to follow the genre’s rules, but, in this refusal, they successfully found love and empathy by embracing queer joy and silliness found in the Underground. Edmond Y. Chang writes of gaming queerly, or “queergaming,” to be one of hope and possibility:

Queergaming dances with the possibilities of noncompetitive, nonproductive, nonjudgmental play, as well as well as the uncertainty and inefficiency of glitches, exploits, and other goofiness and the desire for queer worlds as opportunities for

exploration, for different rules and goals, and even for the radical potential of failure.⁶¹

The Pacifist Route emphasizes such opportunities by reveling in its failure to comply to normalcy in favor of something radically different and uniquely queer. It celebrates the failure to effectively enhance one's stats to be stronger, a desire to be counterproductive by engaging in seemingly pointless activities, and an excitement for being an over-the-top joke in a world exclusively for monsters. Sara Ahmed writes, "The queer who is happily queer still encounters the world that is unhappy with queer love, but refuses to be made unhappy by that encounter."⁶² The Pacifist Route reflects what it means to be "happily queer" in spite of a world that wants to refuse such happiness. It is queer utopian practice, as José Esteban Muñoz writes, which "is about 'building' and 'doing' in response to that status of nothing assigned to us by the heteronormative world."⁶³ The Pacifist Route and its vibrant music reflect the queer world monsters have made for themselves that is extraordinary.

Undertale reflects the queer worldmaking that occurs to engage with an alternative mode of being in a cis heteronormative world. Building toward this queer world can be both an act of repair and survival, much of which is done by being in community with

⁶¹ Edmond Y. Chang, "Queergaming," in *Queer Game Studies*, ed. Bo Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 17.

⁶² Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 117.

⁶³ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 118.

fellow queer monsters who place love in all forms at the forefront. Even before Frisk's appearance, community existed in the Underground, which is why the residents were able to extend their love to someone new knowing what support existed for them; it was a matter of whether that individual would accept such love or not. bell hooks writes about the existing types of love in her book, *All About Love: New Visions*, to emphasize the connections that can be made particularly as a result of friendship and community: "Loving friendships provide us with a space to experience the joy of community in a relationship where we learn to process all our issues, to cope with differences and conflict while staying connected."⁶⁴ Such connections—which could also be called "care webs," as described by disability justice activist Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha to promote a sense of "collective responsibility"—present a new way of living and knowing that can be reparative but, ultimately, goes beyond it.⁶⁵ It is working with and against the dominant culture to embrace the monstrousness and failures of oneself and others.

In the following section, I continue to explore how another monstrous being builds a world for herself. If *Undertale* presents a "utopian blueprint for a possible future" for monsters, then in *Hades*, the player gets to experience how one can live and breathe freely not only for oneself but also for the collective.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (William Morrow, 2018), 133–34.

⁶⁵ Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018), 33 and, more broadly, 41–65.

⁶⁶ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 200.

Alive and Well in Hell in *Hades*

In *Hades*, there are four regions in the Underworld that the player-character, Zagreus, must traverse before he reaches the surface to escape: Tartarus, Asphodel, Elysium, and the Temple of Styx. Each biome has distinct tracks that will accompany the player as they hack and slash through numerous chambers to reach the region's boss at the end.⁶⁷ While there are musical differences between these biomes, what unites them is a hybrid music style that the composer, Darren Korb, has described as "Mediterranean prog rock Halloween," while also joking in one interview that "[m]etal comes from Hell, everyone knows this."⁶⁸ Korb turns to a theremin-sounding synthesizer, prog rock's complex rhythms and time signatures, heavy metal's timbres and imagery, as well as Mediterranean-inspired instrumentation (specifically necked bowl lutes such as the baglama, lavta, and bouzouki) to craft the musical landscape of *Hades*.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ By "hack and slash," I mean that the gameplay turns primarily to melee combat. Regarding chambers, each region (which can be treated as a large level) has a set number of chambers that the player-character must clear in order to make progress. Not all chambers have enemy encounters, with some offering combat-free zones that can range from a fountain room (where after the player-character collects the reward for this chamber, they must drink from the fountain to move on to the next chamber) to a shop run by Charon (where the player can purchase at least one of three random items).

⁶⁸ See Darren Korb (@DarrenKorb), X, December 6, 2018, <https://x.com/darrenkorb/status/1070873407133147136>; and Darren Korb, "'Metal Comes from Hell, Everyone Knows This'," respectively.

⁶⁹ Regarding the influences of Mediterranean instrumentation, see Korb, "'Metal Comes from Hell, Everyone Knows This'."

I am particularly interested in one chamber found in Asphodel due to the character who resides there: Eurydice, a dryad most famously known for being Orpheus's wife. Upon entering Eurydice's chamber for the first time, the player-character will immediately notice a drastic change in music style going from a densely textured soundtrack to a lone female voice singing in the distance accompanied by a stringed instrument. Even Zagreus will express surprise, saying, "What... singing... here?" especially considering the literally hellish landscape that Asphodel has become as a result of the River Phlegethon flooding the once verdant plains.⁷⁰ Players have also expressed their surprise online, mentioning how they even stopped to listen to the calm singing, eventually moving closer to the source to find Eurydice, who has made a cozy home for herself in Asphodel (Figure 26). Redditor MonitorCreative commented that hearing Eurydice's singing is "like a breath of fresh air," which received a response from another user, Full_Ad9666, about how her song is "a beautiful reprieve between all the slaughter."⁷¹ Furthermore, other fans have remarked how they wanted to stay in Eurydice's chamber for the song she sings.⁷² Subsequent encounters with the wood

⁷⁰ When the flooding occurred is never stated in *Hades*, but it is assumed to have happened at some point before the game's story.

⁷¹ See u/Full_Ad9666, "Does anyone else stay here just to listen to Eurydice?" r/HadesTheGame, Reddit, November 5, 2021, https://www.reddit.com/r/HadesTheGame/comments/qnn407/does_anyone_else_stay_here_just_to_listen_to/.

⁷² See u/Lollipop, "I could just stay with Eurydice forever!" r/HadesTheGame, Reddit, December 6, 2021, https://www.reddit.com/r/HadesTheGame/comments/ralavf/i_could_just_stay_with_eurydice_forever/; u/FrozenChaii, "I just got to Eurydice for the first time... and holy crap I just can't leave, she sounds so soothing." r/HadesTheGame, Reddit, October 16, 2021,

nymph will eventually reveal her backstory in *Hades*, as well as an opportunity to hear the backstory of the song she composed and regularly sings, “Good Riddance,” which serves as a stark contrast to the rest of the soundtrack. It eventually becomes clear that the song is her reflection of her decision to move on from the mortal past and her failures to find something more for herself, to create an otherwise where she can rest comfortably.



Figure 26. A closeup of Eurydice’s living space in Asphodel.

In this section of the chapter, I approach Eurydice’s worldmaking through her song, “Good Riddance.” I do so while attending to her racialization and the largely-absent conversation around her Blackness, despite its importance to understand the song. I

https://www.reddit.com/r/HadesTheGame/comments/q9rkgk/i_just_got_to_eurydice_for_the_firs_time_and_holy/; among many others.

consider Eurydice's autonomy after her death primarily through the lens of Black worldmaking and aliveness as theorized by Black scholars, Jayna Brown and Kevin Quashie.⁷³ Relatedly, I also turn to Saidiya Hartman's reflections on young Black women and their waywardness, especially in their tireless ways to reimagine another world for themselves.⁷⁴ These scholars have all discussed Black people—particularly Black women—imagining an otherwise and elsewhere surpassing our current spacetime. Here, I argue that “Good Riddance” symbolizes and celebrates Black aliveness and (re)imagining that are untethered from human expectations, that Eurydice is presenting a realized dream that demands something more than what has been given to Black people. I will first attend to how she has been portrayed in Western European art and literature compared to *Hades*. Then, I will consider the musical gestures that signify an imagining of another world, with the lyrics demonstrating the Blackness of Eurydice's aliveness and worldmaking. I argue that “Good Riddance” similarly “carr[ies] the world of worldmaking in scant space” like many short poems that Quashie has analyzed and celebrated, particularly the way they breathe to reveal the aliveness of the text and the poet.⁷⁵ I consider how this scant space not only means Eurydice's small corner of Asphodel, but also in the seemingly barebone music and lyrics of “Good Riddance,”

⁷³ See Brown, *Black Utopias*, and Quashie, *Black Aliveness*.

⁷⁴ See Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* (W.W. Norton, 2019).

⁷⁵ Quashie, *Black Aliveness*, 69.

which actually present a complex understanding of Black worldmaking and aliveness through Eurydice's eyes.

Before I discuss "Good Riddance" itself, I wish to first address how Eurydice is portrayed in *Hades*. Similarly to how I argued in the previous chapter that Orpheus is racially coded as Black in this video game, I understand Eurydice to be racially coded as Black as well. Eurydice's Blackness has also been noted by fans—though not many. Notably, X user, AnoriandGD, emphatically posted that Eurydice "is blackity black black," and that they would "not be taking questions right nor or, in fact, ever, because there ain't shit to discuss."⁷⁶ Similarly, Redditor, PuzzledLight, replied to a comment thread on fanart of Eurydice's Blackness with the following: "The features, the hairstyle, pattern of speech? Yeah, she's black. I found it cool to see that represented in a freaking nymph of all characters lol."⁷⁷

⁷⁶ See Josh "Anoriand" Fagundes (@AnoriandGD), X, January 14, 2021, <https://x.com/AnoriandGD/status/1349935567413391363>.

⁷⁷ See u/PuzzledLight, comment on "Broccoli Waifu," r/HadesTheGame, Reddit, November 8, 2020, <https://www.reddit.com/r/HadesTheGame/comments/jpvoq9/comment/gbj8p4m/>.



Figure 27. Eurydice as depicted in *Hades*.

Game critics have also noted Eurydice's Blackness, particularly because of the hairstyle PuzzledLight mentioned: tree branches shaped to look like an afro (Figure 27). More specifically, Ash Parrish noted in an article for *Kotaku* how Eurydice "is a Black woman crowned with a beautiful afro made from the branches and canopy of a tree," while Just Lunning commented in an article for *Inverse* on the beauty of "mythical, inhuman creatures" in the game, such as Eurydice with her afro "composed of tree

branches.”⁷⁸ It is particularly of interest to me that Lunning made note of Eurydice’s inhumanness, which is unlike Orpheus. I would further argue her noticeably inhuman characteristics to be a subtle yet pointed statement about the ties between Blackness and the nonhuman (i.e., the monster), especially considering the ways in which Black people have historically been excluded from Western notions and understandings of the human category.⁷⁹ This is notable to mention, considering depictions of Eurydice in Western European art, in which she is generally presented not only as human but also fair-skinned (Figure 28).⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Parrish, “Black Athena: How *Hades* Gets Its Gods Right;” and Just Lunning, “2020’s Most Beautiful Video Game Makes Diversity Divine,” *Inverse*, December 10, 2020, <https://www.inverse.com/gaming/best-video-games-2020-hades-best-art-music>.

⁷⁹ A significant contributor to this line of work is Sylvia Winter, who writes with the consequences of European colonization in mind. See in particular Sylvia Winter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41949874>.

⁸⁰ See Figure 15 in Chapter 3 of this dissertation to see another depiction of Eurydice by the French artist, Jean Raoux.

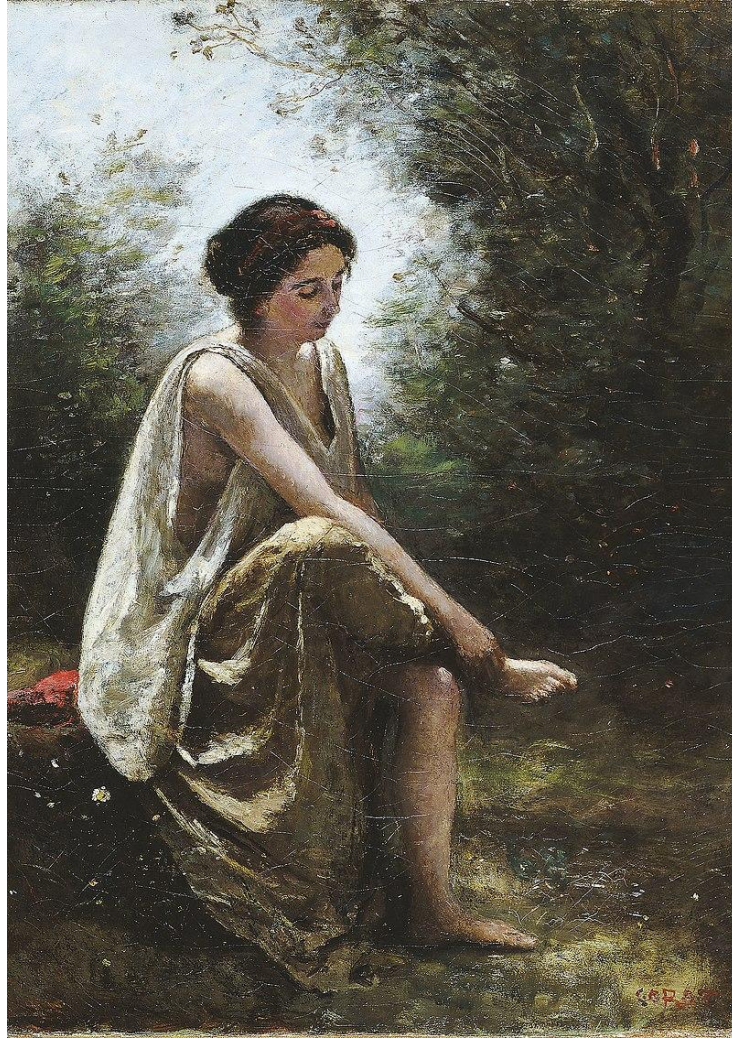


Figure 28. Eurydice in the oil painting, “Wounded Eurydice” (1868/70) by French artist, Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot (1796–1875).

It is worth noting that while many players have not commented on Eurydice’s Blackness, they have recognized her nonhumanness, albeit in a more joking manner, with several having commented on her appearance being similar to that of a broccoli. X user, secretbranch98, claimed that “eurydice in hades is just broccoli with some cheese melted on top,” providing images as evidence.⁸¹ Relatedly, a Reddit post by lacito11 had the

⁸¹ See Andrew Quar-Hunte-ined (@secretbranch98), X, February 21, 2022, <https://x.com/secretbranch98/status/1495791221163315202>.

subject “Is it just me, or does eurydice look like a broccoli?” with a few other users responding in agreement; yet another Reddit post had user, finnky, exclaiming “Wait, I’ve always thought she was broccoli????”⁸²

It is curious to me that my search on websites such as X and Reddit has resulted in more players remarking that Eurydice resembled broccoli as opposed to her Blackness, which I would argue is demonstrative of the likely subconscious anxieties that many of them have of recognizing the so-called “Other” along with the complex histories tied to difference. In other words, it would be easier to accept Eurydice as a piece of broccoli that is detached from more serious and supposedly fraught discourses related to race. With this in mind, I suggest that players’ disregard of Eurydice’s Blackness is what bell hooks describes as “consumer cannibalism” in her essay, “Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance,” in which she notes that it “not only displaces the Other but *denies* the significance of the Other’s history through a process of decontextualization.”⁸³ While players are not necessarily monetizing Eurydice’s appearance as consumers in the traditional sense, they do gain currency in the form of memes and jokes that fail to recognize her Blackness. It is essential that players take Eurydice’s racialization into

⁸² See u/lancito11, “Is it just me, or does eurydice look like a broccoli?” r/HadesTheGame, Reddit, March 7, 2021, https://www.reddit.com/r/HadesTheGame/comments/lzucou/is_it_just_me_or_does_eurydice_look_like_a/; and u/finnky, comment on “Just got this gem from eurydice 🥰” r/HadesTheGame, Reddit, October 19, 2021, <https://www.reddit.com/r/HadesTheGame/comments/qbe2hb/comment/hhc0imx/>.

⁸³ bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2014), 31. Emphasis added.

serious consideration in order to grasp the full meaning of “Good Riddance,” because a refusal to see her Blackness is also a refusal to consider the deeper connotations of her song.

In addition to the changes in her visuals to showcase her Blackness and nonhumanness, the writers of *Hades* also stepped away from Greco-Roman depictions of Eurydice to, instead, give her power and autonomy in-game, as opposed to portraying her as a helpless victim due to Orpheus’s failure in rescuing her. The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice has been documented by Plato, Apollodorus, Ovid, and Virgil, though the former two did so differently from the latter two. The Ancient Greeks, Plato and Apollodorus, only mention Eurydice in passing in their respective works and keep their attention on Orpheus (Table 2).⁸⁴

Plato, <i>The Symposium</i> (translated by Christopher Gill)	Apollodorus, <i>The Library of Greek Mythology</i> (translated by Robin Hard)
But they sent Orpheus, the son of Oeagrus, empty handed from Hades; they showed him only a phantom of the wife he’d come to fetch and didn’t give him the woman herself. They thought he was soft (he was only a musician) because he didn’t have the courage to die for his love like Alcestis, but found a way of entering Hades while still alive.	When his wife, Eurydice, died from a snake-bite, he went down to Hades in the hopes of bringing her up, and persuaded Pluto send her back to earth. Pluto promised to do so, provided that on the way up Orpheus never looked round until he had arrived back at his house. But Orpheus failed to obey him, and turning round, he caught sight of his wife, and she had to return below.

Table 2. Excerpts of the English translations of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth as told by Plato and Apollodorus, with bolded text highlighting when Eurydice is mentioned.

⁸⁴ See Plato, *The Symposium*, trans. Christopher Gill (Penguin Books, 1999), 11; and Apollodorus, *The Library of Greek Mythology*, trans. Robin Hard (Oxford University Press, 1997), 30.

The Ancient Romans, Ovid and Virgil, similarly place most of their focus on Orpheus in their respective works, but they give Eurydice more consideration in their telling of the myth by giving her actual dialogue. Most notably, she is noted for saying “farewell” (“vale” in Latin) to her husband before she returns to the Underworld (Table 3).⁸⁵ I place particular emphasis on “farewell” here, as Eurydice’s song, “Good Riddance,” begins with this very word. In *Hades*, the events that led to Eurydice’s death are retold through the game’s Codex, as well as in conversations between Zagreus and other characters, including the wood nymph. Importantly, though, the game turns to Eurydice’s life *since* death to explore the world she has made for herself. The Codex entry for Eurydice states how Hades “almost let her go. But when he finally refused, she grieved, but she did not despair. Even in death, she moved on with her life.”

⁸⁵ See Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. A.D. Melville (Oxford University Press, 1998), 226 (l.60–63); and Virgil, *Georgics*, trans. Peter Fallon (Oxford University Press, 2006), 92 (ln.494–498). For the Latin, see Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, ed. Hugo Magnus (F.A. Perthes, 1892; Perseus Digital Library), <http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:latinLit:phi0959.phi006.perseus-lat1:10>; and Virgil, *Bucolics*, *Aeneid*, and *Georgics of Vergil*, ed. J.B. Greenough (Ginn & Co., 1900; Perseus Digital Library), <http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:latinLit:phi0690.phi002.perseus-lat1:4.494-4.527>.

Ovid, <i>The Metamorphoses</i> (translated by A.D. Melville)	Ovid, <i>The Metamorphoses</i> (Latin)	Virgil, <i>Georgics</i> (translated by Peter Fallon)	Virgil, <i>Georgics</i> (Latin)
And she, dying again, made no complaint (For what complaint had she save she was loved?) And breathed a faint farewell , and turned again Back to the land of spirits whence she came.	Iamque iterum moriens non est de coniuge quicquam questa suo: quid enim nisi se quereretur amatam? Supremumque " vale ," quod iam vix auribus ille acciperet, dixit revolutaque rursus eodem est.	"What," she cried, "what wretched luck has ruined me—and you, O Orpheus, what burning need? Look, cold-hearted fate is calling me again; sleep draws its curtain on my brimming eyes. And so, farewell , I'm carried off in night's immense embrace, and now reach out my hands to you in vain—for I am yours no more.	Illa, "Quis et me," inquit, "miseram et te perdidit, Orpheu, quis tantus furor? En iterum crudelia retro Fata vocant, conditque natantia lumina somnus. Iamque vale : feror ingenti circumdata nocte invalidasque tibi tendens, heu non tua, palmas!"

Table 3. Excerpts of the English translations and the original Latin of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth as told by Ovid and Virgil, with bolded text highlighting when Eurydice says "farewell" (or "vale" in Latin).

It is of interest that Eurydice sings from the now-hellish landscape of Asphodel—a space that is visually reminiscent of how Western media (particularly from Hollywood) has depicted the depths of Hell—and has found something akin to utopia. In doing so, the oft-common understanding of utopia-as-heavenly-paradise is not applicable here, requiring the player-character to reconsider its meaning to be something more than meeting mortal and human expectations. Particularly for Black people, Jayna Brown argues that a Black utopia is one that destabilizes and abandons the idea of the human to, instead, "practice alternative ways of being alive."⁸⁶ It is to let go of earthly needs and

⁸⁶ Brown, *Black Utopias*, 7.

expectations and explore new ways of doing and imagining. This is even the case in the afterlife, where Eurydice has found life after death to demonstrate that she has not only survived, in spite of everything, but has also made a beautiful life for herself. I think of Saidiya Hartman's description of waywardness and the way young Black women persistently reimagine another world for themselves, particularly "the untiring practice of trying to live when [they] were never meant to survive."⁸⁷ In this case, Eurydice more than tried; she succeeded.

I now move on to the music of "Good Riddance," which is scant. The player-character will only hear the voice of a female singer and a stringed instrument, which Darren Korb stated is the baglama, a Turkish lute.⁸⁸ As a result, the song stands out for its significant departure from the "Mediterranean prog rock Halloween" and metal musical aesthetic that is primarily heard throughout the game.⁸⁹ Instead, "Good Riddance" may remind the player of music from the 1960s folk revival that happened in the United States and the United Kingdom.⁹⁰ On this note, it serves as a good reminder that much of this folk music finds its roots in Black music traditions, thus, grounding "Good Riddance" in

⁸⁷ Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 228.

⁸⁸ See Supergiant Games, "Hades – How to Play 'Good Riddance'," YouTube, October 3, 2020, video, 6:54, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dnq8dZYHtg>.

⁸⁹ There are some notable exceptions, such as Orpheus's songs ("Lament of Orpheus" and "Hymn to Zagreus"), as well as certain tracks tied to specific characters (e.g., Chaos with "Primordial Chaos," Charon with "Final Expense," and Thanatos with "Last Words").

⁹⁰ I thank James Ace for helping me identify the musical style that Korb may have been gesturing toward.

Black music, even if it does not seem to be the case on the surface.⁹¹ As Simon Frith writes about what is emphasized in folk music, it “was on the lyrics and their plain presentation; the central musical instrument was the voice and it was by reference to vocal conventions that sincerity could be judged,” with musical conventions including “the use of repetition and chorus and clichéd melody, the lack of vocal flourish, [and] the restriction of instruments (guitars, piano) to accompaniment.”⁹² Keeping Black music traditions in mind, the seemingly simplistic nature of folk music reflects the importance of a musical community, in which it makes it easier to take part in collective music-making. And, while I would not go so far as to say that “Good Riddance” has a clichéd melody, the other characteristics that Frith described are present. Korb’s intentions support this, as he has stated in an interview that for Eurydice’s musical style, he wanted hers “to be a more straightforward, simplistic style that was a little bit more accessible maybe or a little bit less flowery.”⁹³

⁹¹ I thank TJ Laws-Nicola for reminding me of this crucial point. See also Matthew D. Morrison, “The Sound(s) of Subjection: Constructing American Popular Music and Racial Identity through Blacksound,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 27, no. 1 (2017): 13–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0740770X.2017.1282120>; and Matthew D. Morrison, “Race, Blacksound, and the (Re)Making of Musicological Discourse,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 72, no. 3 (2019): 781–823, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jams.2019.72.3.781>.

⁹² Simon Frith, “‘The Magic That Can Set You Free’: The Ideology of Folk and the Myth of the Rock Community,” *Popular Music* 1 (1981): 162, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143000000970>.

⁹³ Korb, “‘Metal Comes from Hell, Everyone Knows This’.”

Regarding the instrumentation, the use of an acoustic instrument such as a baglama gesture toward folk sensibilities, particularly one reflecting the desire for a simpler, pastoral sound.⁹⁴ Korb's deliberate use of this Turkish lute is also reminiscent of many musicians' fascination with premodern and "foreign" instruments in popular music during the folk revival.⁹⁵ Furthermore, folk music has overlapping themes with psychedelic music, the latter drawing some inspiration from the former. William Echard makes note of these overlaps and writes of how folk music has "themes and features that are cognate with psychedelia," of which included "magic and mythical creatures" and "an anachronistic tone that can serve as a beguiling virtual world."⁹⁶ It is a stretch to say "Good Riddance" is a direct strain of psychedelic music, however, it is worth taking these genres' similarities into consideration, as well as the kind of music that people were listening to during the 1960s and 1970s, as many placed emphasis on the importance of interiority and contemplation of another spacetime; it certainly is the case for the reflective "Good Riddance" in imagining a new world.⁹⁷ As the music of Eurydice's song

⁹⁴ See Edward Macan, *Rocking the Classics: English Progressive Rock and the Counterculture* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 30.

⁹⁵ Regarding the use of premodern instruments, see Macan, *Rocking the Classics*, 37.

⁹⁶ William Echard, *Psychedelic Popular Music: A History through Musical Topical Theory* (Indiana University Press, 2017), 79.

⁹⁷ It is also worth noting that some of Korb's musical influences included music artists of this period, notably Led Zeppelin. See Korb, "'Metal Comes from Hell, Everyone Knows This'."

gestures toward one way of worldmaking, it is the lyrics that specifically reveals how Blackness is tied to the worldmaking that occurs.

“Good Riddance” immediately begins with Eurydice calmly singing, suggesting a refusal for a lofty, instrumental introduction to, instead, prioritize her voice and words.⁹⁸ She begins with her famous utterance, “Farewell,” though it is not to Orpheus, but, rather, “to all the earthly remains.” Her farewell is to an entire world (or what remains of it), demonstrating her willingness to untether herself from the mortal earth for something more. She continues to sing, “No burdens / No further debts to be paid,” reflecting that she no longer owes anyone anything in this new world she inhabits. This new world is a form of Black aliveness, which Kevin Quashie describes “is a world, a pursuit, and—most of all—an ethical habit that doesn’t traffic in debt, as in what we owe to each other. What we owe is to ourselves—love and generosity, the will and willingness to be better in our being.”⁹⁹ Eurydice finds relief in this new world of hers, where the only thing she is owed is the personal.

The first verse continues, this time with powerful imagery that encompasses the liberation she feels: “Atlas / Can rest his weary bones / The weight of the world / All falls away / In time.” Eurydice sings not only for herself but also for Atlas, and she does so in

⁹⁸ This is especially notable if one thinks of Orpheus’s lament, which I discussed in the previous chapter, as it begins with a somber introduction that he plays on his lyre before he begins singing.

⁹⁹ Quashie, *Black Aliveness*, 148.

defiance, knowing that he was meant to bear the weight of the world on his shoulders for eternity. However, in her new world, mortals' understanding of time on Earth is meaningless; instead, she suggests that there *is* an end to eternal punishment. Her voice soars upward to sing "Can rest his weary bones" before she begins her soft descent to sing about the weight of the world all falling away. Eurydice finishes the verse with a dream of radical freedom when she sings "In time," with this time she speaks of being the one found in her new world. Jayna Brown writes, "Utopian dreaming makes us think more seriously about the import of escapist fantasy and messianic wish. Escapism is a powerful form of refusal."¹⁰⁰ There is something messianic for Eurydice to refuse Atlas's punishment as eternal, to bestow him freedom from his punishment, to escape from the literal and metaphorical weight of the earthly world, much like she has. Then, when she sings "All falls away," there suggests a nothingness. Here, Brown's attention on Blackness as nothingness is useful, which she ties to the musician, Sun Ra, and the void acting as a central motif in his work: "Blackness is nothing—that is, anterior to ontological possibility, but only on earthly terms. *Nothing* is the 'freedom not to be,' the refusal to respect sovereignty or acquiesce to its terms. [...] [T]he void, the nothing, is generative. It holds virtual worlds within it. The void is infinite potential; out of the void comes sound. Sound is a material force; out of it comes music."¹⁰¹ And, from this nothingness found in the

¹⁰⁰ Brown, *Black Utopias*, 47.

¹⁰¹ Brown, *Black Utopias*, 174. Emphasis in original.

corners of Asphodel, Eurydice's song reveals the infinite and generative potential, especially so as her voice and the melody ascend slightly while singing "time," before they descend and end the verse on an unresolved chord.

The melody repeats as Eurydice moves on to the next verse, singing "Goodbye / To all the plans that we made." There is a clearer lyrical resolution than a melodic one here, as she acknowledges the earthly past with the simple past tense of the verb, "to make." In doing so, this demonstrates the finality of her time on the surface as opposed to a continuation of an event from the past (i.e., using the present perfect tense and singing "have made"). In Eurydice's world, the present and future are most important, as she continues to sing "No contracts / I'm free to do as I may." She affirms her freedom in the now with the present tense, "I'm," while also invoking the irrealis mood—a grammatical mood that expresses unreality, potentiality, and what is hoped—when she sings that she *may do* what she wants, unburdened by contracts and expectations. Kevin Quashie writes of one such irrealis mood, the subjunctive, and states that "*experience is subjunctive* because it merges what is deeply felt with what has not yet occurred. *Experience, then, is a state of suspension in the intensity of presence and possibility, a state of readiness and surrender.*"¹⁰² This state of suspension that Quashie speaks of comes through as she sings of the experiences to come, in the spacetime that she has defiantly made for

¹⁰² Quashie, *Black Aliveness*, 66. Emphasis in original.

herself, where she has escaped and created a path to an elsewhere. It is a wayward worldmaking, or, as Saidiya Hartman writes, “an ongoing exploration of *what might be*.”¹⁰³

In addition to a rejection of following a linear path from past to future, Eurydice’s subject changes from first-person plural (“we”) to first-person singular (“I”) in the second verse, presenting another form of upheaval to reflect the relationality of oneness—as Quashie theorizes—that reflects Black aliveness to be “the whole world of being,” a rejection of the individual, as this notion “is not possible for a black subject in an antiblack world, since blackness is always not only a collective designation but a collective indictment.”¹⁰⁴ Eurydice’s world is one that belongs to Black people who collectively depart from human plans for something greater, and they become one when she sings “I” emphatically. As significant as oneness is when she sings “I,” I also note the importance of a wood nymph coded as a Black woman making clear that “Good Riddance” is a song of her own creation, an emphasis of her autonomy. I do so, reflecting on Quashie’s understanding of “oneness through black female figuring, [...] where their ‘I am’ constitutes instances of beholding the immanence and transcendence of being.”¹⁰⁵

The second verse continues, this time removing all verb tenses to show a true detachment from linear temporality as understood by humans, as well as humanness as

¹⁰³ Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 228. Emphasis in original.

¹⁰⁴ Quashie, *Black Aliveness*, 147, 32.

¹⁰⁵ Quashie, *Black Aliveness*, 32 and, more broadly, 31–55.

a whole, which is further emphasized in the subject matter of the lyrics: “No hunger / No sleep except to dream / Mild and warm / Safe from all harm / Calm.” Mortal and human needs such as food and sleep are no longer needed in the afterlife, and especially so in Eurydice’s world. It is curious, then, that in addition to singing, the wood nymph is known for cooking, giving the player-character sustenance whenever they pass through her chamber.¹⁰⁶ For Zagreus, this is sustenance that is needed to survive the trials and tribulations of the Underworld before reaching the surface. For Eurydice, though, cooking is a state of dreaming, no longer seen as work or an obligation. In one conversation with Zagreus, he described Asphodel as having “searing heat.” However, Eurydice pays no attention to this, instead, commenting, “Searing’s just a cooking technique for me. Don’t need to sleep, either! I can just keep cooking up a storm. It’s not so bad!” In the depths of a fiery Asphodel, her world is anything but searing and, instead, is described as “mild and warm,” which she warmly sings as the melody softly descends to express a sense of safety as she dreams calmly and comfortably. In her world, Eurydice has found a beautiful Black dream that can expand to mean anything. On the note of beauty, Saidiya Hartman eloquently writes, “Beauty is not a luxury; rather it is a way of creating possibility in the space of enclosure, a radical art of subsistence, an embrace of

¹⁰⁶ The player-character will be given three options to choose from, each one giving a different power boost: Ambrosia Delight (up to two random boons that they have will be upgraded to the next rarity), Pom Porridge (up to four random boons that they have will gain a level), and Refreshing Nectar (the next three boons they encounter will have an upgraded rarity).

our terribleness, a transfiguration of the given. It is a will to adorn, a proclivity for the baroque, and the love of *too much*.”¹⁰⁷

Eurydice finishes singing the final line of the second verse, “Calm,” with a melodic contour that ascends over an expanded, arpeggiated dominant seventh inversion chord. Tension is then released when she shifts to the chorus as the melody resolves to its tonal center of C minor as she sings, “Good riddance.” The idiom, “good riddance,” carries the most emotion compared to her “farewell” and “goodbye” in previous verses. “Good riddance,” instead, expresses relief and gladness that someone has finally left her alone, emphasizing the release in tension that also occurs musically. She continues to sing, acknowledging who she is relieved to have out of her life: “To all the thieves / To all the fools that stifled me.” I am particularly interested in the use of the verb, “stifled,” as it carries more than one meaning for Eurydice: it is to not only figuratively hold her back, but to also make it difficult for her to breathe, a feeling of being smothered. Keeping in mind Eurydice’s Blackness, the attempt to stifle her resonates with the ways in which Black women in our world have been more than stifled, their lives lost simply because they were Black. Eurydice continues: “They’ve come and gone / And passed me by.” In her world, the people who have attempted to stifle her will have disappeared somewhere far from her, no longer capable of reaching her. She restates “Good riddance” before

¹⁰⁷ Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 33. Emphasis in original.

singing the final words of the chorus, “to all.” In singing “to all,” she is touching back on her earlier words: *all* earthly remains, *all* the weight of the world, *all* plans made, and *all* harm. It is at this point that Eurydice has shared that she no longer has ties to anything or anyone from the mortal and human world, that she is in an elsewhere that will let her grow and truly be alive.

Eurydice repeats the first verse, reconfirming her departure from Earth. The song eventually seems to end on the word, “Time,” which, like the first time it was sung, is dragged out. “Time” is expanded on the same dominant seventh chord inversion heard earlier before the song resolves to its home key of C minor (Figure 29). However, this resolution is not a perfect one, as Eurydice’s final sung note sits comfortably on an E-flat as opposed to a C. Rather than understanding this as a weak closure to the song, though, I interpret this as a gesture toward a life full of open-ended possibilities in the afterlife, one that does not require or call for resolution. This seems to be confirmed, too, when Eurydice begins singing her song again from the top, suggesting that there is no end. Should the player-character choose to stay and listen to the music instead of moving on to the next chamber, they will eventually learn that she will continue to sing “Good Riddance” seemingly *ad infinitum*. Much like the lyrics and Eurydice’s situation, the uninterrupted endlessness of this song suggests the radical possibility of living outside of time and space as understood by humans, one that is filled with her endless dreaming and aliveness.

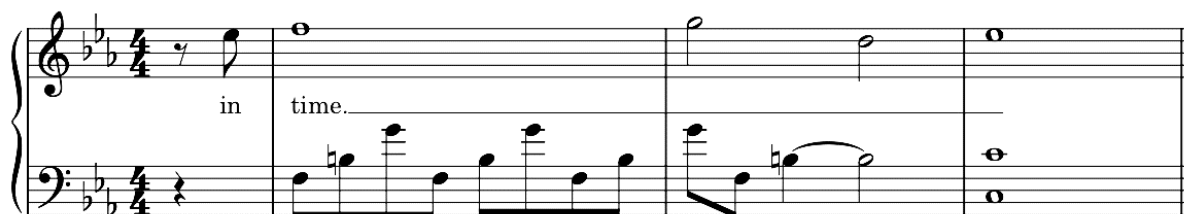


Figure 29. A transcription of the final bars of “Good Riddance.”

I step back to think more broadly about Eurydice’s worldmaking to reflect the kind of Black worldmaking that can occur in our world. Even though she is in a space that looks and feels as hellish as what Asphodel has become, she sings of liberation from mortality and human expectations, of creating a better world for herself. And, in spite of the fact that Black people have been living in a hellish and anti-Black world, many have found other ways of living and look toward another world made exclusively for their community. Together, Eurydice and the Black diaspora sing, “Good riddance to all,” as they come alive in another spacetime and find ways to *be* that cannot exist on human (and often white) conditions. In spite of the scant space that is given to Eurydice in Asphodel, to Black people in our world, the world they make is boundless and full of love and possibility.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I reflect on what it means to refuse repair for monsters, to allow them to live for themselves beyond what humans can offer. However, before I conclude, I must first emphasize a crucial point in my discussions up to this point, which is that human as an identity is relational; it is defined in relation to the monster. In her highly

influential lectures that were then adapted into a book, Toni Morrison asserts the relationality of whiteness to Blackness (or, in her words, the “Africanist presence”) in American literature, stating that it will always be “a dark and abiding presence, there for the literary imagination as both a visible and an invisible mediating force.”¹⁰⁸ In other words, the dominant culture can only exist by defining who the Other is. Similarly to the Africanist presence in American literature, I wish to assert that there will be a monstrous presence in video games and their music, as well as in media and music writ large. This was the case not only in the two case studies covered in this chapter but also in my other two case studies as well. Whether humans like it or not, monsters will always exist in the society constructed by them, because monsters are needed to define their humanness.

It raises the question, then, how humans are engaging with monsters living under the systems and logic of the dominant culture, of human society. In some cases, there may be a desire to somehow *fix* the monster, especially in a way that would have them meet particular and normative conditions set by humans. In other cases, there may even be an investment to try and better understand the monster, to *empathize* with them in hopes that this will allow the human to love the monster more, perhaps even use that learned knowledge to determine how best to acclimate the monster to human society.

¹⁰⁸ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Vintage Books, 1993), 46.

Ultimately, these all reflect instances of the human looking to *repair* the monster metaphorically, perhaps literally, and certainly in the Sedgwickian sense.

On that note, I return to the passage I quoted at the start of this chapter by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, specifically how the practice of reparative reading presents “the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture.”¹⁰⁹ I am particularly interested in how she describes reparative reading as successfully “extracting sustenance from the objects;” the implication that the act of taking something was done despite there being resistance. I also bring back Robyn Wiegman’s critique of repair, then, to highlight her point about the object’s relation to repair, which is that “the current celebration of reparative reading as a form of intimacy, if not love of and for the object of study, must be understood—against its burgeoning reputation—as making rather significant demands on the object, *not against the authority and security of the critic but on her behalf*.”¹¹⁰ Again, like Wiegman, I see reparative reading to be one that is not to the benefit of the object but, rather, the reader themselves.

The monster is ultimately in a position where they cannot follow the dominant culture’s logic entirely as themselves. They are in constant negotiation with their identity in relation to the world they must navigate, understanding the pressures coming from

¹⁰⁹ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 150–51.

¹¹⁰ Wiegman, “The Times We’re In,” 17–18. Emphasis in original.

humans for their existence. Reparative readings of the monster ultimately do little to nothing to benefit them, as this practice is primarily done by the reader or, in this case, the human. On the other hand, a disidentificatory practice allows the monster to work with the push and pull that comes with existing in the human's space, because it is about their practices of survival. Importantly, disidentification is a way for the monster to "[use] the majoritarian culture as raw material to make a new world."¹¹¹ Even if the raw material monsters find (or perhaps are given) is scant, it nevertheless allows them to build and progress, which, ultimately, leads to an otherwise and elsewhere for themselves.

José Esteban Muñoz writes, "The minoritarian subject employs disidentification as a crucial practice of contesting social subordination through the project of worldmaking. The promises made by disidentification's performance are deep. Our charge as spectators and actors is to continue disidentifying with this world until we achieve new ones."¹¹² Instead of allowing for the dominant culture to shape and mend them by human standards, monsters instead opt for something more for themselves that is to their own benefit and not necessarily meant to be fully understood, if at all. In the case of my two case studies for this chapter, a disidentificatory practice leads to a particular kind of worldmaking that "function[s] as critiques of oppressive regimes of 'truth' that subjugate

¹¹¹ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 196.

¹¹² Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 200.

minoritarian people.”¹¹³ *Undertale* presents an alternate view and *hearing* of a world that queerly depicts love and silliness as a means to push back against the idea that monsters require repair. *Hades* demonstrates the restrictions of repair in the afterlife through Eurydice’s aliveness that is also expressed through song, and especially because of her ties to Blackness. The world these characters have made for themselves reflect their capacity to move and live beyond what is afforded to them, showing the freedom to simply *be*.

¹¹³ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 195.

CONCLUSION: THE MONSTER, REIMAGINED

The one thing that the world's great wealth of monsters shares is that all of them insist that there is more to our world than what we can see and touch. The monster threatens, but also promises liberation—a liberation that itself can seem threatening.

— Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock¹

It seems appropriate to draw attention to a common thread connecting my four case studies in the conclusion of this dissertation: each story ends with their respective characters finding liberation in some shape or form. With that being said, the endings of all four video games are left relatively open-ended, leaving it up to the player's imagination to determine what might come next for these monstrous characters.

In *Celeste*, Madeline achieves her goal to reach the summit of Celeste Mountain, but she is not “magically better” as a result of this accomplishment.² Instead, she must sit with the messiness tied to her gender and disabled identity, as well as the fear of something bad potentially happening at any given moment. In *Hades*, Zagreus can reunite Orpheus and Eurydice and, in doing so, occasionally see the two singing together in

¹ Weinstock, “Introduction,” 20.

² Nathan Grayson, “*Celeste* Taught Fans and Its Own Creator to Take Better Care of Themselves,” *Kotaku*, April 16, 2018, <https://kotaku.com/celeste-taught-fans-and-its-own-creator-to-take-better-1825305692>. It should be noted that Maddy Thorson is referred to by her former name and pronouns in this article/interview. Thorson is also describing how reaching the summit does not mean the player-character is fixed, and that there is still going to be conflict within them.

Asphodel. What comes after their reunification in the afterlife is left ambiguous, though, especially due to the two musicians' story being a side quest that has virtually no impact on the main storyline. In *Night in the Woods*, Mae and her friends may have solved the town's mystery, but they also realize that this does not mean a clear path toward what comes next. Instead, there is lingering uneasiness that comes with the inevitability of having to grow up and face the uncertainty of the future. In *Undertale*, Frisk and the monsters finally get past the barrier and step out to the Surface; while the monsters are left to their own devices afterward, it is unclear what life has in store for them, especially if/when they interact with humans.

There will often be tension between monsters and humans, especially when there is a power imbalance, such as the dominant culture constructing the world they/we live in. This could lead to possible anxiety of unknown variables that might appear when coexisting in the same space, whether it be the monster's uncertainty of how they might be treated, or the human's uneasiness simply because of a monster's existence within proximity. The human's anxiety is one to examine, because it explains why monsters' liberation, then, can seem so threatening, as Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock suggests in this chapter's epigraph; it is because some of those unknown factors can reveal the ugliness of humanity that would upend the status quo.

To briefly step away from video games for a moment, let us look at the so-called "real world," more specifically, the United States, where I am based. For those who have

been historically marginalized in this country, liberation is a dream that has been whispered amongst them/us on numerous occasions since the supposed “discovery of the New World.” The dominant culture here has since regularly revised the definition of the monster—and, by proxy, the human—and continues to do so to this day. Marginalized peoples have seen glimpses of what liberation could look like, usually in the form of gaining rights or receiving legal recognition of some kind; I must emphasize *glimpses*, though, because the reality is that total liberation has yet to be achieved.³ It comes as no surprise, then, that those deemed monsters in US society look toward a revolution, as they are “feeling at odds with the world, or feeling that the world is odd.”⁴ Sara Ahmed describes such individuals as “affect aliens,” which she defines as “those who are alienated by virtue of how they are affected by the world or how they affect others in the world.”⁵ I would extend this definition to monsters as well. They are not adjusted to the society they are in because of who they are—indeed, they *cannot*—and so they look elsewhere and beyond what is currently offered.

Returning to my case studies, yet another common thread that connects these four video games is the idea of looking elsewhere and desiring more than what humans have

³ Total liberation becomes all the more complicated when stepping back to look at the United States in relation to the rest of the world, specifically the impact of American imperialism in the Caribbean, Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the Pacific Islands.

⁴ Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 168.

⁵ Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 164.

offered. In doing so, these games emphasize the significance of a community or collective—a world, even—that looks toward care. Put another way, this is what Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha calls “care webs,” as I described in my analysis of *Undertale* in Chapter 4 of this dissertation. Importantly, care webs “work from a model of *solidarity not charity*—of showing up for each other in mutual aid and respect.”⁶ Madeline may still grapple with her messy, negative feelings, but she approaches the ambiguous nature of the future, knowing that she has support from loved ones such as Theo. Orpheus and Eurydice find true peace in the afterlife as a result of the player-character’s deliberate choice to invest in their relationships with these two musicians, taking care in seeing them reunited. Mae and her friends understand that, even at an impasse, they still have each other to rely on for support. Last but not least, Frisk and the monsters have already communicated throughout the game that the community of care built in the Underground is one that ultimately helped them all flourish.

The music in each of the four video games discussed in this dissertation also emphasizes the importance of care in these particular shared spaces. I mean this figuratively or literally, and both within the game or outside of it, through its fans, creators, and even through me. *Celeste*, for instance, affords a community for trans people, with many finding each other through the music composed by a trans woman.⁷ In *Hades*,

⁶ Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work*, 41. Emphasis in original.

⁷ For instance, one Redditor, who self-identified as trans, commented how meaningful it was to learn that Lena Raine was trans as well: “It made all the music feel that much more special to me because when it

Orpheus and Eurydice spend a large portion of the video game on their own when they sing, but when they can finally sing together, they share what Kevin Quashie calls a “oneness” that would be “a call of a black world, a call that exists and vibrates beyond the scope of the rule of the world as we know it—an imaginary that inflects how we *can* behold ourselves and each other.”⁸ Toward the end of *Night in the Woods*, Mae and her friends find that rather than trying to make sense of what might come next, they choose, instead, to be together and make music together.⁹ Finally, at the end of *Undertale*, the various musical themes of characters and locations intertwine with the main leitmotif, emphasizing the unity of the monsters and the Underground with Frisk.

As Ahmed points out, though, caring is not easy. In fact, caring can be anxiety-inducing: “There is nothing more vulnerable than caring for someone; it means not only

made me feel emotions I knew it was coming from someone who might have had the same feelings I was struggling with.” See u/LaPaigeMaster, comment on “Why Chapter 9 means something to me,” r/celestegame, Reddit, September 16, 2019, <https://www.reddit.com/r/celestegame/comments/d4ubtd/comment/f0h0lqz/>.

⁸ Quashie, *Black Aliveness*, 143. It is also worth noting that when the player-character “beats the game” by completing the main story, Orpheus and Eurydice will sing a song titled “In the Blood,” which focuses on the importance of kinship.

⁹ I think of Alfred Schütz’s landmark essay about making music together, in which he argued that this “mutual tuning-in relationship [...] originates in the possibility of living together simultaneously in specific dimensions of time.” See Alfred Schütz, “Making Music Together: A Study in Social Relationship,” *Social Research* 18, no. 1 (1951): 79, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40969255>. Relatedly, I also think of Luis Manuel García-Mispireta’s idea of “vague belonging” on the dancefloor, and how music plays a crucial role by “providing a shared point of reference that enables partygoers to anchor their sense of belonging: *we’re here, feeling and enjoying this music together, and maybe that’s enough.*” See Luis Manuel García-Mispireta, *Together, Somehow: Music, Affect, and Intimacy on the Dancefloor* (Duke University Press, 2023), 5. Emphasis in original.

giving your energy to that which is not you but also caring for that which is beyond or outside your control. [...] To care is not about letting an object go but holding on to an object by letting oneself go, giving oneself over to something that is not one's own."¹⁰ In the context of video games, there will be uncontrollable moments in acts of care that change the course of the player-character's journey, where they may become disoriented, fall out-of-line, or even completely fail. Yet, monsters show that acts of care go a long way in building the relations you do in these video games. Furthermore, these care webs emerge in the music, revealing the new world(s) that monsters make for themselves, which demonstrate what more there is beyond the human world.

My goal with this dissertation was to show the existing complexities of the monster and, more broadly, how identity is constructed, all of which I argued could be traced through music and sound in indie video games. Across its four chapters, I have also shown in this dissertation what comes out of letting the monster *be* in all the divine messiness that comes with being monstrous, to avoid the need to repair them in the Sedgwickian sense. In Chapter 1, I investigated how players themselves were understanding identity/ies and representation through interviews and digital fieldwork. Chapter 2 considered the relationship between horror and the monster, particularly the need to look at the less pleasant elements of identity formation. Chapter 3 emphasized

¹⁰ Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 186.

the role of failure (as defined by the dominant culture) in monsters' lives through the lens of temporality/ies, though I ultimately argued that living as failures afforded them something more. I then expanded this idea in Chapter 4, which reflected how monsters found alternative ways of being by looking beyond what humans had to offer.

As I stated in the introduction, I am not arguing that the monster is a label marginalized people must adopt, but I do see it as a site of possibility to better understand how and why society (especially in the United States) approaches identity the way they/we do. Furthermore, I am not proposing for "better" or "positive" representation of particular identities. Instead, I argue that it is crucial for scholars to take serious consideration as to why it matters to look at what has socially and historically been considered less pleasant and uncomfortable, such as horror and failure. For monsters, it is especially the case that experiencing horror and/or failure is all the more powerful when it is done *together* with others who are in similar circumstances. It becomes all the more important for scholars to reflect on *why* the uglier elements matter.

Another goal I had for my dissertation was to further break down the barrier between game studies and game music/sound studies (i.e., ludomusicology). My considerations of identity through music in indie video games have intentionally leaned more into the sociocultural elements that shape what it is that players are hearing, rather than traditional music theoretical analysis. I do so, with the hope that it encourages both game studies scholars and ludomusicologists to look into what other avenues have yet to

be explored when discussing identity, music/sound, and video games. Particularly in the realm of game music and sound studies, this dissertation is a call for continued work on identity—regardless of whether the video games are mainstream or indie—especially in ways that push *away* from a need to humanize the Other, to only reflect on the good and positive. Instead, and again, I hope that there will be more consideration of the multifaceted nature of what it means to be messy and *monstrous*.

While my research has opened the door to musicological scholarship exploring indie video games, the monster, and identity formation, there is still much work that needs to be done. The four case studies that make up the bulk of my dissertation are, by definition, indie video games. However, one could argue the four I selected are the paradoxical description that is “mainstream indie games,” especially given the amount of media attention they have received compared to other indie titles that have not gained nearly as much traction.¹¹ Bo Ruberg has done significant work on this front by interviewing various queer game makers and artists in their monograph, *The Queer Games Avant-Garde: How LGBTQ Game Makers Are Reimagining the Medium of Video Games*, especially to demonstrate how these creators’ works “disrupt the status quo, enact

¹¹ As Óliver Pérez Latorre and Nadav Lipkin point out, there is significant tension and instability in the indie–mainstream divide, and increasingly so when websites such as *Kotaku*, *Game Informer*, among others place a large spotlight on indie video games alongside mainstream titles; or with companies such as Sony and Nintendo making indie titles readily available on their respective platforms. See Óliver Pérez Latorre, “Indie or Mainstream? Tensions and Nuances Between the Alternative and the Mainstream in Indie Games,” *Anàlisi* 54 (2016): 15–30, <https://doi.org/10.7238/a.v0i54.2818>; and Nadav Lipkin, “Examining Indie’s Independence: The Meaning of ‘Indie’ Games, the Politics of Production, and Mainstream Cooptation,” *Loading...* 7, no. 11 (2013): 8–24.

resistance, and use play to explore new ways of inhabiting difference.”¹² Subsequent research should endeavor to explore other indie video games that continue to push the boundaries of how identity could be depicted through music and sound, and relatedly, conduct interviews with the creatives involved in bringing to life the audio of these video games (whether that be in sound design, voice acting, composing, etc.).

For this project, I interviewed several people who semi-regularly play video games, as well as conducting digital fieldwork primarily on various subreddits. Future research might find more participants to interview for further analysis of players’ experiences, especially those who fall into specific demographics (e.g., players who have played specific titles, identify as being a part of an underrepresented group, etc.). More extensive digital fieldwork should also be conducted on websites besides Reddit. For instance, Tumblr (a social blogging platform), would be an interesting space to consider due to its distinct fandom practices compared to other online platforms.¹³ Ultimately, there are many opportunities for additional ethnographic work to be done that could lead to a far better understanding of identity in relation to music and sound in video games.

¹² Ruberg, *The Queer Games Avant-Garde*, 3.

¹³ See Louisa Ellen Stein, “Tumblr Fan Aesthetics,” in *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom*, ed. Melissa A. Click and Suzanne Scott (Routledge, 2017), 86–97. However, it is also worth keeping in mind the ethics of conducting research on Tumblr, especially “making sure to provide adequate context and accurate framing,” as well as being mindful of “its youthful user base.” See Akane Kanai, Crystal Abidin, and Matthew Hart, “The Challenges of Doing Qualitative Research on Tumblr,” in *A Tumblr Book: Platform and Cultures*, ed. Allison McCracken, Alexander Cho, Louisa Stein, and Indira Neill Hoch (University of Michigan Press, 2020), 125.

I conclude by returning to my personal investment and interest in monsters that I introduced at the very beginning of this dissertation. Monsters were part of the stories I grew up hearing and reading, but they also became my personal reality when I quickly learned what it meant to be different in more ways than one. I frequently felt disoriented, and for a very long time also felt out-of-place in the spaces I inhabited. In other words, I felt *lost*, not ever quite knowing what to make of myself or my interactions with what and who was around me, to the point that it became my norm. Sara Ahmed elucidates this feeling, explaining how “‘getting lost’ still takes us somewhere; and being lost is a way of inhabiting space by registering what is not familiar: being lost can in its turn become a familiar feeling.”¹⁴ Over time, this familiarity Ahmed writes about ended up becoming a source of comfort for me, especially as my social circle grew to include those who also similarly felt lost in some shape or fashion.

It took some time, but I eventually felt okay not quite being in-sync with everyone else, and I increasingly felt comfortable straying away from normative expectations and standards because I wanted something different, something more. As a result, it only made sense for me to turn to monsters. José Esteban Muñoz comments similarly and aptly suggests, “The time has come to turn to failed visionaries, oddballs, and freaks who remind queers that indeed they always live out of step with straight time.”¹⁵ Relatedly,

¹⁴ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 7.

¹⁵ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 149.

Jack Halberstam points out the value in losing one's way, along with how the desire to be taken seriously "means missing out on the chance to be frivolous, promiscuous, and irrelevant."¹⁶ I desired and continue to desire the strange and silly, finding pleasure and comfort in the weirdness of it all. Monsters opened doors for me to find and care for others who were also dreaming of something more for themselves in this odd world we live in without having to compromise.¹⁷

Music and sound in indie video games have worlds embedded in them that can reveal the stunning and terrifying nature of the monster, perhaps even subliminal, a term as equally fraught as the monster. A close listening to the variety of musics and sounds from these video games are not meant to serve as opportunities for humans to try and empathize with the monster, let alone humanize them. Instead, it is a chance for humans hear and experience something different or even transgressive, to eventually realize the beauty that comes with the monster finally breaking free to reveal what new possibilities exist.

¹⁶ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 6.

¹⁷ Not that there was much room (if at all) to compromise with the dominant culture to begin with.

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