Weaving Their Own Music

Hearing (and Queering) Gender in Video Game Scoring

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Music as a Mechanism for Gender from Cavalli to Uematsu

Discussions of gender and its musical signification are hardly new. It was in the 1980s that the wave of "new" musicologists began to push the rather insular field away from the hegemony of positivism and toward more hermeneutic frameworks, and it was Susan McClary who led the charge of feminist musicology with her 1991 monograph *Feminine Endings*. In the book, McClary argues for a more critical look into how music and musicological discourse engage with gender, looking particularly at ways in which femininity is portrayed in musical composition and narrative. Many of the methods for writing "masculine" or "feminine" music, she points out, find their origin in the seventeenth century, when opera began to flourish as the predominant genre of dramatic music. Composers at the time "worked painstakingly to develop a musical semiotics of gender," forming a set of conventions so "strikingly resilient" that "musical representations of masculine bravura or feminine seductiveness in Indiana Jones movies resemble in many respects those in [Francesco] Cavalli's seventeenth-century operas."[1]

Extending McClary's framework, Rebecca Fülöp has examined ways in which gendered musical conventions have persisted in the scoring of Hollywood films, with particular emphasis on those of the classical Golden Age of Hollywood (ca. 1930s–50s). This is manifested in the scoring practices for female characters which typically include lyrical melodies, high woodwind timbres, oscillating or arpeggiated accompaniment figures, lilting rhythms, and balanced melodic contours. Yet these elements, when separated from their narrative context, cannot be considered "feminine" or "masculine." Fülöp echoes McClary when she asserts, "To say music can 'be' either masculine or feminine, or that it can objectively represent a man or a woman, would be

[1] Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991; reprint ed. 2010), 7–8.

grossly to overestimate music as a representational art."[2] It is rather the long-held cultural associations of instrumentation and compositional practice, in combination with dramatic context, that produce gendered musical meaning. Fülöp points out that these associations are propelled in film music through instances of a Feminine Romantic Cliché, "a recurring musical theme [. . .] [that] acts as a characterizing music for a female love interest as well as the love theme for the film's romantic plotline."[3] In a discussion of Princess Leia's musical theme from *Star Wars* (1977), Fülöp says that this kind of scoring calls attention to a female character's "feminine rather than heroic attributes," exposing her "function as an essentially romantic and decorative character," stripping her of musical autonomy, and tying her musical identity to those for whom she offers romantic potential.[4]

These gendering practices have naturally been extended to video game music, which inherits much of its musical lexicon from Hollywood films and Western art music.[5] In fact, it tends not to be very original in its engagement with musical convention.[6] And while this allows gamers to easily pick up on musical signification and use game sound as equipment for gameplay,[7] it opens game music to the same patriarchal and heteronormative pitfalls that have plagued musical drama since the seventeenth century, even if composers may not knowingly be perpetuating the conventions. Investigating this engagement, Thomas B. Yee has applied Fülöp's

[2] Rebecca Naomi Fülöp, "Heroes, Dames, and Damsels in Distress: Constructing Gender Types in Classical Hollywood Film Music," Ph.D. diss. (University of Michigan, 2012), 47.

[3] Ibid., 31.

[4] Ibid., 2–3.

[5] Tim Summers, *Understanding Video Game Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 161.

[6] Isabella van Elferen, "Analysing Game Musical Immersion: The ALI Model," in *Ludomusicology: Approaches to Video Game Music*, eds. Michiel Kamp, Tim Summers, and Mark Sweeney (Sheffield, UK, and Bristol, CT: Equinox, 2016), 37.

[7] For discussions of game sound as Heideggerian equipment and the semiotics of game sound, see Michiel Kamp, *Four Ways of Hearing Video Game Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 57–64, 143–72.

Feminine Romantic Cliché framework to the *Final Fantasy* series (1987–), tracing composer Nobuo Uematsu's "uncannily consistent musical profile" for female characters across the franchise,[8] which sits among the most influential character-driven franchises in the video game industry. Whereas the music used for the series's male characters is varied and more closely communicates their personality traits, Yee shows that the music of *Final Fantasy*'s female characters generally falls back on the musical elements outlined by Fülöp: lyricism, gentle woodwind timbres, arpeggiation, and so forth. As with Princess Leia, this music seems to strip even the most idiosyncratic female characters of their traits and reduces them to objects of romantic desire for the male characters. This is particularly evident in the case of the female deuteragonists of *Final Fantasy VII* (1997), Aerith and Tifa, characters who, while possessing unique personalities and narrative arcs, are nonetheless relegated to the role of love interest by their musical themes.

The work of scholars to expose and define the conventions of masculine-feminine opposition in music also exposes that binary as a coercive and suppressive force. It is in fact violently so, as McClary's reading of Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony (1878) demonstrates. In the first movement, Tchaikovsky writes a story that breaks from the conventions of his Beethovenian predecessors who foreground a conflict between a heroic (or "masculine") principal theme and a weak ("feminine") second theme.[9] This break from convention led many theorists and musicologists such as Carl Dahlhaus to label the work a failure of symphonic composition. The movement's principal theme, which Dahlhaus calls "hardly suitable [. . .] for

[8] Thomas B. Yee, "Feminine Themings: The Construction of Musical Gendering in the *Final Fantasy* Franchise," in *The Music of Nobuo Uematsu in the "Final Fantasy" Series*, ed. Richard Anatone (Bristol, UK, and Chicago: Intellect, 2022), paragraph 8 under "Damsels and opera floozies: The construction of musical gender in the *FF* franchise."

[9] For a discussion of the terms "masculine" and "feminine" in regard to symphonic and sonata-allegro narrative structure, see McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 12–17.

establishing a symphonic movement,"[10] lacks the sort of confident energy of conventional first themes, but rather wanders indecisively and vulnerably. "It is marked with yearning," writes McClary, "with metaphysical angst in search of a moment of rhythmic or tonal stability."[11] Two other musical ideas vie for the principal theme's allegiance: a quiet, seductive, and chromatically slippery "feminine" second theme—in the vein of Bizet's music for Carmen—and the *fortissimo*, militaristic interruptions of what Tchaikovsky labeled "fate"—readable as the pressure of patriarchal and heterosexual normativity. Tchaikovsky's masculine theme, in its yearning for identity, is actively suppressed from both sides, pulled toward unfettered flexibility on the one hand and dominating rigidity on the other. The principal theme is exhausted by the violence of these themes, and it fails to find identity with either the hypersexualized femininity or patriarchal masculinity policed by conventional composition practices.[12]

And yet so much of the scholarship that has productively brought attention to this violence remains so focused on the masculine-feminine binary itself that adequate semiotic examinations of music which queers that binary are few and far between. Engaging with feminist and queer methodologies, this paper examines ways in which music communicates information about gender identities that fall outside of the heroic masculine and romantic feminine tropes that are so often discussed in scholarship. Through case studies of *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (1998), *The Legend of Zelda: Echoes of Wisdom* (2024), and Team Cherry's *Hollow Knight* duology (2017–25), I propose that video game music has become an increasingly rich site for the

[10] Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, trans. J. Bradford Robinson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 266.

[11] McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 71.

[12] Leslie Kearney discusses Tchaikovsky and his relationship to gender and sexuality, with particular interest in his identification with Joan of Arc in his opera *The Maid of Orleans* in "Tchaikovsky Androgyne," in *Tchaikovsky and His World*, ed. Leslie Kearney (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 239–76. Kearney writes that "One might conclude that this artist who seems to have a foot in every camp, straddling the fences of east and west, romantic and classical, nationalism and cosmopolitanism, masculine and feminine, has achieved the ultimate ambiguity in *The Maid of Orleans*." See page 241.

articulation of those unsung identities. Hearing gender and queerness in video game music requires a close phenomenological and semiotic attention to the inherited gendered conventions that have long held sway in musical thought and their active interpretation against the narratological and ludomusical dimensions of the games in which they appear. It also requires that we open our ears to expressions of identity that go beyond convention.

A Conceptual Toolkit for Gender and Queerness in Game Music

Before proceeding to the case studies, it will first be useful to assemble the methodological tools I will use in analyzing them. It is also important to reecho McClary and Fülöp and to reiterate that music does not have the ability to represent gender or queerness on its own. As Michiel Kamp and Chris Tonelli have observed, music does not contain meaning but rather affords it; it creates conditions in which listeners articulate meaning through persistent, culturally learned associations.[13]

This is the case with Fülöp's Feminine Romantic Cliché (henceforth "FRC") framework, examined briefly above. While arpeggiating harps and lyrical melodies can not be inherently "feminine," their use together (along with several other signifiers) has long been used to code romantic femininity in FRCs. Over time, the connection between FRC scoring and femininity has become naturalized, a status which feminist and queer musicologists seek to expose and undo. Yet a reliance on FRC practices to enforce gender runs so deep that even ostensibly rugged adventurers like Lara Croft are frequently depicted with the same signifiers that draw attention away from their heroic traits. This was certainly the case with Tifa in *Final Fantasy VII* and is evident also in the original *Tomb Raider* (1996). Even though Lara Croft's deeds and "visual

[13] See Michiel Kamp, *Four Ways of Hearing Video Game Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 51–57, 143–172; and Chris Tonelli, "Game Music and Identity," in *The Cambridge Companion to Video Game Music*, eds. Melanie Fritsch and Tim Summers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 328–30.

representation . . . [are] open to interpretations that highlight her strength and bravery,"[14] the music that follows her in her first adventure nonetheless leans heavily on pizzicato strings, soft woodwind timbres, arpeggios, and lyrical melodies. Using typical FRC instrumentation, the music portrays her, in Austin's words, "as demure and fragile."[15] Rather than affirming her expression of rugged femininity, the music that surrounds her undermines it and thus reinforces perceptions of Lara Croft as "a hypersexualized female caricature that is, essentially, 'eye candy.'"[16] In a game franchise that in many ways seeks to positively empower femininity and expand the representation of female protagonists in games, the dissonance caused by its musical clichés—in conjunction with Lara's preposterous character design—dismantles such aspirations.

The remainder of this section will expand on two primary conceptual areas that will be useful for the case studies to follow. The first of these has to do with Judith Butler and Jack Halberstam's work in the fields of gender and queer studies, specifically Butler's concept of gender performativity and Halberstam's queer failure. The second concerns the question of identity in video games and Tim Summers's theory of music's role in mediating the identities of game players and characters.

Gender Performativity and Queer Failure

The arguments presented in the case studies are heavily influenced by Judith Butler's performative theory of gender identity and expression. In works like *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler makes the case that gender is not an essential trait, but rather something performed and

[14] Michael Austin, "Orchestrating Difference: Representing Gender in Video Game Music," in *Masculinities in Play*, eds. Nicholas Taylor and Gerald Voorhees (Cham: Springer, 2018), 178.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Sheri Graner Ray, *Gender Inclusive Game Design: Expanding the Market* (Hingham, MA: Charles River Media, 2004), 33.

iterated upon. “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body,” they write, “a set of repeated acts within the highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.”[17] Thus through repeated gesture, speech, posture, dress, and other such performatives, one’s “body becomes its gender.”[18] At the same time, gender is often imposed from outside and idealized forms of gender performativity are constructed from social and cultural normatives.

Butler's performative theory has a natural kinship with Jack Halberstam's concept of queer failure. If gender is performed and iterated, then failing to perform it correctly—that is, not conforming to culturally policed, normative criteria of ideal gender performativity—becomes not a deficit of gender, but a productive kind of failure. “Under certain circumstances,” Halberstam writes:

> failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world. Failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well[.][19]

Butler concurs, saying that gender identities that “fail to conform to those norms of cultural intelligibility” are only seen as failures relative to that intelligibility.[20] The persistence of these gender identities, Butler writes, “provide[s] critical opportunities to expose the limits and regulatory aim of that domain of intelligibility,” affording ways for genderqueer people to find alternatives to idealized gender performativities.[21]

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[17] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990; reprint ed. 2007), 45.

[18] Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988), 523.

[19] Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 2–3.

[20] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 24.

[21] Ibid.

Both Butler and Halberstam's theories seek to dismantle what Butler calls the "matrix of intelligibility."[22] This matrix is composed of two predominant idealized gender performativities outlined by R. W. Connell: "hegemonic masculinity," the culturally dominating form of masculine performativity that subordinates all other expressions into itself, and its counterpart "emphasized femininity," an idealized feminine performativity that exists to accommodate hegemonic masculinity.[23] And as these genders are imposed culturally, they may also be constructed musically. The FRC, for example, enables readings of emphasized femininity: it defines female characters by their relationship to masculine characters, stripping them of autonomous identity and positioning them as objects of romantic desire.

Scholarship on alternative masculinities in game music has developed considerably in recent years, with examples examining how the music associated with characters like Tidus in *Final Fantasy X* (2001) and Joel in *The Last of Us Remastered* (2014) afford masculinities that depart from hegemonic norms and how they encourage the player to identity with them.[24] Equivalent frameworks for alternative femininities, on the other hand, have remained more absent from ludomusicological discourse. The games examined below offer such alternatives, depicting feminine identities that are not constructed in relationship to the hegemonic masculine conventions that have historically dominated game music and the emphasized femininity of the FRC.

[22] Ibid.

[23] For more on hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity, see R. W. Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 183–91; and R. W. Connell, *Masculinities*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 76–81.

[24] For the discussion on Tidus's musical theme in *Final Fantasy X*, see Yee, "Feminine Themings," under "*FFX*." For the discussion of Joel's musical characterization in *The Last of Us Remastered*, see Tonelli, "Game Music and Identity," 331–9.

Identity and the Character/Avatar

Tim Summers points to game music as a site of queerness along three axes—structural, timbral, and identity.[25] Of the structural and timbral axes, Summers points to game music's anti-normative composition via loops and the dynamic architecture of musical modules,[26] and the failure of game audio aesthetics like chiptunes to correctly sound like their analog counterparts and the persistence of their sound even as audio technology has advanced.[27] Summers's discussion of identity, however, is perhaps the most relevant to the present discussion. Central to Summers's identity framework is Adrienne Shaw's concept of the character/avatar, an envelope term that describes the spectrum ranging from fully determined player-characters to fully customizable player-avatars.[28] Player-characters, like Mario and Lara Croft, are "entities unto themselves that players then control."[29] Player-avatars, on the other hand, are designed by players prior to gameplay and represent the player within the game world. Games that use avatars include *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011) and *Baldur's Gate 3* (2023) in which players create their avatars from scratch in a "character creator."

[25] Tim Summers, *The Queerness of Video Game Music*, Cambridge Elements (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 3–4.

[26] Summers, *The Queerness of Video Game Music*, 8–26. Winifred Phillips discusses looping compositional practices at length in *A Composer's Guide to Game Music* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014). Modular analysis of game music has been developed predominantly by Elizabeth Medina-Gray and was first explored in Medina-Gray, "Modular Structure and Function in Early 21st-Century Video Game Music," Ph.D. diss. (Yale University, 2014).

[27] Summers, *The Queerness of Video Game Music*, 26–46. For more on the history of chiptunes and the nonlinear evolution of game sound, see James Newman, "Before Red Book: Early Video Game Music and Technology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Video Game Music*, eds. Melanie Fritsch and Tim Summers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 12–32; and Kenneth McAlpine, *Bits and Pieces: A History of Chiptunes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[28] Adrienne Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 102–3, 129–41.

[29] Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge*, 102.

The relationships between the player and their character/avatar promote different kinds of identification *with* and *as* the character/avatar that are blurred by the interactive nature of games.[30] Helping this blurriness is that "the motives of the player and the motives of the in-game character are neither wholly distinct nor wholly the same."[31] Similar to Jesper Juul's half-real theory of video games, that they exist between the real and fictional worlds,[32] this blurriness of identification allows the character/avatar to function simultaneously as the player's self and other. This is pushed further when games, as they frequently do, invite the player to control a game character with gender markers different from their own and to identify with/as them. "One potential way of exploring this transgendering," writes Helen Kennedy:

> is to consider the fusion of player and game character as a kind of queer embodiment, the merger of the flesh of the (male) player with Lara [Croft]'s elaborated feminine body of pure information. This new queer identity potentially subverts stable distinctions between identification and desire and also by extension the secure and heavily defended polarities of masculine and feminine subjectivity.[33]

Music, Summers argues, acts as "a kind of bridge between our identities," fusing the player's experience with that of the character/avatar. This is especially clear in moments of kinesonic congruity when sonic responses (and frequently onscreen events) are mapped directly to the player's gestural (kinesthetic) input.[34] Summers illustrates this through the tutorial

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[30] Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge*, 141.

[31] Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge,* 108.

[32] Jesper Juul, *Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

[33] Helen Kennedy, "Lara Croft: Feminist Icon or Cyberbimbo?" *Game Studies* 2 (2002).

[34] For more on kinesonic congruity, see Karen Collins, *Playing with Sound: A Theory of Interacting with Sound and Music in Video Games* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 35–38. Kinesonic congruity is an extension of Michel Chion's concept of synchresis in film music. A portmanteau of synchronism and synthesis, synchresis describes "the spontaneous and irresistible weld produced between a particular sound event and a particular visual event when they occur at the same time," a phenomenon with obvious applications to other audiovisual media such as video games and even computer interfaces. See Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, ed. and trans. Claudia Gorbman, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 64–65.

sequence of the 2013 reboot of *Tomb Raider*, pointing to the episode as a clear example of how kinesonic congruity links the player and the aforementioned Lara Croft. While Summers himself has "relatively little in common with Lara Croft's identity markers,"[35] he was nonetheless able to identify both with and as her:

> I do not feel what Lara feels, but music serves as an invisible shared common ground between us, where her emotional and physical experiences are musically articulated so that I share in them with her. It is a link across our identities and realities. This identification and affective sharing can run across gender lines.[36]

This identification was mediated predominantly by the mapping of Summers's actions at the controller, Lara's physical actions in *Tomb Raider*, and the sonic events that closely followed both. The synchresis of music and action affirms the player's identification with the character/avatar, and worked in *Tomb Raider* to blend Summers, "a man in [his] thirties, with Lara, a twenty-something woman."[37] As the bridge between the player and character/avatar, music acts as queering and often transgendering agent that allows the player to adopt the character's/avatar's identity as their own (or even to queer the idea of what it means to have an identity), even if that queerness or transness only exists in the half-reality of games.

[35] Summers, *The Queerness of Video Game Music*, 54.

[36] Summers, *The Queerness of Video Game Music*, 59.

[37] Ibid.

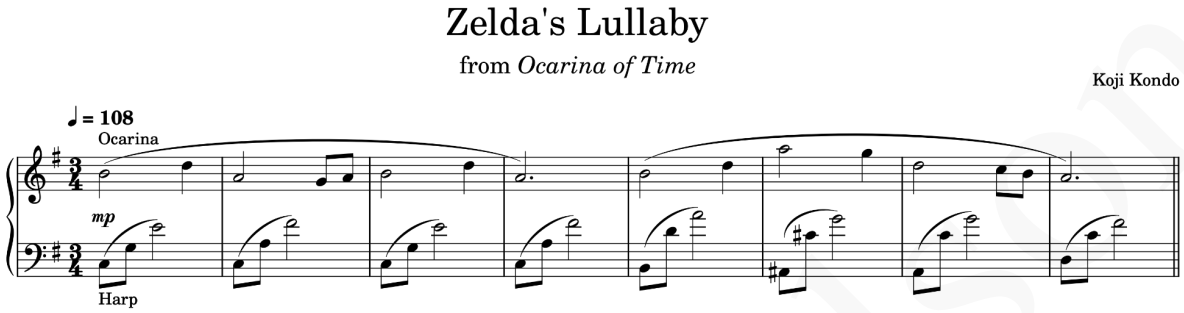
Alternative Masculinities: Zelda, Sheik, and Tetra

The *Legend of Zelda* series (1986–) has been built on normative gender roles since its beginning. Nearly every game in the series follows a familiar sword-and-sorcery narrative formula: an active male hero adventures through a fantasy world to save a passive female character and the world from a great evil. The titular Princess Zelda often takes on that passive role and has been represented with FRC scoring throughout the *Legend of Zelda* franchise. Consistent with its usage in early Hollywood scores and in conjunction with sword-and-sorcery tropes, the FRCs that surround Zelda reveal her role in the series, that of the damsel-in-distress and an object of romantic attraction. It also defines her role in relationship to the active, green tunic-wearing hero Link.

Princess Zelda

The musical theme that comes to represent Zelda is first heard in *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past* (1991). Already in this appearance, Zelda's theme bears many of the hallmarks of an FRC. It is composed of arpeggiated bass movement; balanced, up-and-down melodic contours; and a lyrical, waltz-like melody. The function of this music is to position Zelda within her narrative role as the object of Link's quest to "save the girl" and end Ganon's conquest of Hyrule. The theme reappears in *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (1998), here titled "Zelda's Lullaby," and plays whenever Link is in Zelda's castle courtyard or speaking with her one-on-one. This iteration of the theme, transcribed in **Example 1** below, is very much the same as it sounds in *A Link to the Past*, but doubles down on its cliché with the incorporation of synthesized legato ocarina and arpeggiated harp timbres. Link has the ability to perform the first three pitches of "Zelda's Lullaby" on his magical ocarina (**Figure 1**) as a symbol of his

friendship with the princess and connection to the royal family. The relationship between these pitches, a rising minor third followed by a descending fourth, composes what I will call the "Zelda's Lullaby" motive.



Example 1. The first eight measures of Zelda's Lullaby as heard in *Ocarina of Time*. The "Zelda's Lullaby" motive appears as the pitches B, D, and A in mm. 1–2 and 3–4. The motive is elaborated in the following four measures. All transcriptions are my own unless noted otherwise.

Figure 1. Link performs "Zelda's Lullaby" in *Ocarina of Time*. All screenshots are my own.

The FRC used as Zelda's musical theme follows her depiction within the narrative of *Ocarina of Time*. Link first meets Zelda in a courtyard within Hyrule Castle where she explains the treachery of the antagonist Ganondorf and her plan to thwart his schemes. While she

catalyzes the player/Link's mission in the game's first act, however, she remains largely passive, confined to her courtyard until Link has completed the game's first three dungeons. Once Link has done this, Ganondorf catches wind of Zelda and Link's plot, chases the princess into exile, and takes control of the kingdom. After this, Zelda fully takes on the role of damsel-in-distress. As an FRC, "Zelda's Lullaby" thus affirms her idealized feminine passivity and status as narrative object.

Sheik

However, Zelda is not the only character to be associated with FRC markers in *Ocarina of Time*. After a time skip that marks the beginning of *Ocarina*'s second act, the player/Link meets a mysterious and ninja-like warrior called Sheik, pictured in **Figure 2** below. Sheik takes on an active role, becoming one of Link's closest allies, guiding him through the last half of his journey, and teaching him songs that allow him to magically teleport across the world.

Figure 2. Sheik in the Ice Cavern.

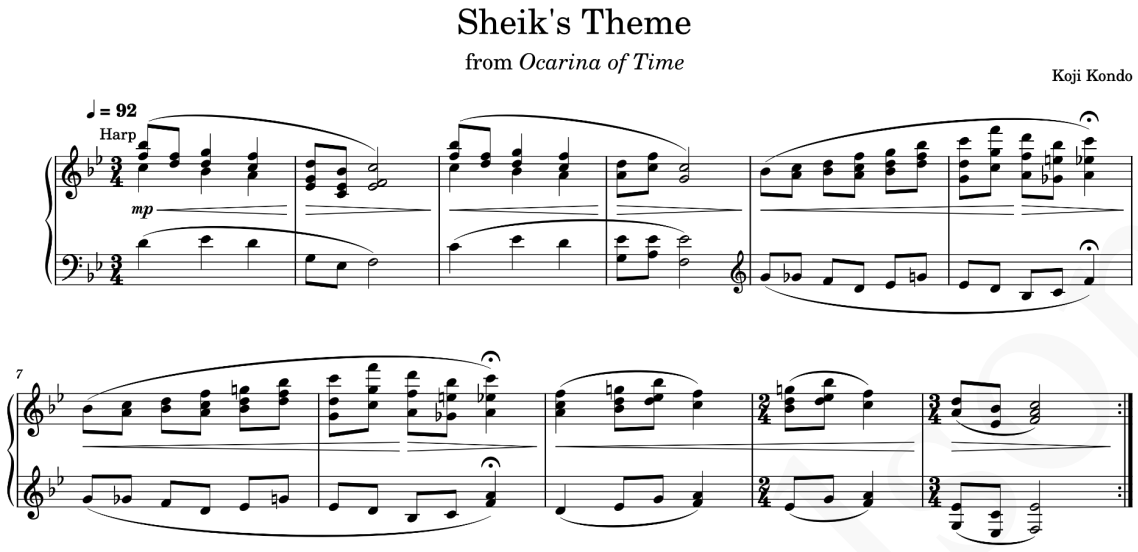
Sheik is later revealed to be the alter ego of the exiled Princess Zelda, but is not feminine-coded in the same way as her. In fact, Sheik is rather ambiguously gendered "for reasons spanning the technological [...], to the narrative [...], to the performative."[38] While the *Zelda* fanbase has long debated Sheik's gender as it pertains to the character's imagined body and tried to police it purely in terms of the male/female binary,[39] Chris Lawrence has examined ways in which Sheik's gender performance "constitutes a site of alternative masculinity" distinct from Sheik's body.[40] Lawrence argues that Sheik assumes masculine performatives along the lines of the fictional game world's gender roles and the character's active role in the plot. In these ways, Sheik "does" masculinity, to borrow Butler's terms.[41] At the same time, the fact that Sheik's gender may be read as ambiguous and alternatively masculine queers the hegemonic masculine-feminine binary that would otherwise dictate the character's gender identity.

[38] Chris Lawrence, "What if Zelda Wasn't a Girl? Problematizing *Ocarina of Time*'s Great Gender Debate," in *Queerness in Play*, eds. Todd Harper, Meghan Blythe Adams, and Nicholas Taylor (Cham: Springer, 2018), 99.

[39] It is due to this debate that I have refrained from referring to Sheik with a set of gendered pronouns. While Sheik is at one point referred to as "he" in *Ocarina of Time* and, as we shall see, Sheik does assume masculine performatives, it would be counterproductive to perpetuate the binarist debates that seek to prevent Sheik from performing nonconformist gender.

[40] Lawrence, "What if Zelda Wasn't a Girl?," 98.

[41] For Butler's discussion on "doing" gender, see *Gender Trouble*, 34: "[G]ender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed."



Example 2. Sheik's Theme. Measures 4, 9, and 10 present quotations of the "Zelda's Lullaby" motive.

Sheik's ambiguity is made more complex by the character's musical theme (**Example 2**), which in many ways assumes the scoring practices of an FRC. Most prominently, it is orchestrated with solo violin and harp. The plucked harp is perhaps the most significant timbre in the theme, implying the arpeggiation typical of FRCs while also making reference to Sheik's diegetic harp performances. A feminine-coded instrument in terms of the FRC, Sheik's harp is linked to Link's ocarina, an instrument which Michael Austin similarly notes for its feminine-coding.[42] Sheik's theme also makes heavy use of rubato, slowing down and lingering at the end of each phrase. The music even betrays the twist of Sheik's hidden identity with direct references to the "Zelda's Lullaby" motive (and its FRC baggage) at the end of the second phrase and before the theme loops. At the same time, it resists the FRC urge for symmetrical melodic contours and phrasing. In fact, in the final measures, quick metric modulations introduce a sense of rhythmic uncertainty that may well be read in relation to the uncertainty of Sheik's identity and gender.

[42] Michael Austin, "Orchestrating Difference," 178.

And yet this FRC itself does triple duty. While it subtly betrays the twist that Sheik is in fact Princess Zelda presenting as male, it also links Sheik to Link, two masculine-performing characters, with an apparent romantic connection. Just as FRC scoring assigns a romantic role to its subject, it also reveals the romantic lens through which a protagonist views the subject. As such, the FRC presented in Sheik's theme romanticizes Link just as much as Sheik, thus, affording a queer reading of their relationship. Sheik's music allows the player to queer Link, a character/avatar who may be named at the player's discretion. Tim Summers articulates his own reading of their relationship:

> The hybrid, de-essentialized identity of the character/avatar allows me agency; I can queer my characters, and music can help me do that. For all the heteronormativity of the *Zelda* storyline, my Link is gay, not simply because I am queer but because I am able to negotiate the performed identity of Link and take up this theme as representing romantic attraction between him and Sheik.[43]

At the same time, the use of an FRC as the sonic representation of Sheik risks essentializing Zelda's femininity. For when Zelda (as Sheik) presents as masculine, clichéd associations of music and gender continue to follow the character, undermining such presentation. While visual and performative aspects of Sheik's character present as masculine, this scoring musically codes Sheik as feminine. Yet it is perhaps this productive, Halberstamian failure to perform masculinity musically that allows Sheik to possess a unique gender identity that queers the masculine-feminine binary. Together with Sheik's active narrative role, Sheik's music presents an alternative version of masculinity to the hegemonic one that seeks to subsume all masculine expression into itself.

[43] Summers, *The Queerness of Video Game Music*, 61.

Tetra

Another alter ego of Zelda appears in *The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker* (2002). The leader of a band of pirates twice to three times her age, Tetra is a cold, no-nonsense character that takes an active role in the first half of the narrative (**Figure 3**). Like Sheik, this activity narratively associates Tetra with masculinity. This is heightened through several of Tetra's gender performatives, from clothing to stature to language to her leadership style. The performativity that Tetra practices can be considered a form of what Halberstam calls "female masculinity," a gender variation that is "not simply the opposite of female femininity, nor is it a female version of male masculinity."[44] Female masculinity—along with other alternative masculinities and femininities—delegitmizes the hegemony of the gender binary. In *The Wind Waker*, Tetra asserts authority over burly men, flipping hegemonic masculinity on its head, and unlike Zelda and Sheik, she is not accompanied by clichéd music. In fact, she does not receive any musical theme of her own. The lack of a musical identity conceals the mid-game reveal that, unbeknownst even to her, Tetra is Princess Zelda. When Tetra transforms into the princess of Hyrule and enters into a more passive role, she is retroactively tied to "Zelda's Lullaby," washing away any autonomy that Tetra may have had apart from her royal other self. Even as Tetra, she is often associated with the somewhat drunken music of her pirate crew. While not imposing romance or femininity on Tetra, this musical association links her identity to the masculine characters in much the same way an FRC would.

[44] Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998), 29.

Figure 3. Tetra questions whether Link is prepared for a swashbuckling adventure.

Discussions of alternative masculinities like those presented by Sheik and Tetra are productive. As Yee suggests, they delegitimize the primacy of hegemonic gender norms and promote diversity in gender performativity.[45] It is frequently the case in musicology and game studies, though, that an asymmetry exists in discussions of alternative masculinities and alternative femininities. In fact, Yee himself encourages further engagement with alternative masculinities in the concluding remarks of his chapter detailing how consistently femininity is emphasized in the *Final Fantasy* series.[46] In the two case studies to follow, I will examine more

[45] Yee, "Feminine Themings," paragraphs 4–5 under "Conclusion: Nobuo Uematsu's gendered musical legacy."

[46] Yee, "Feminine Themings," paragraph 3 under "Conclusion: Nobuo Uematsu's gendered musical legacy."

diverse performativities beginning with a discussion of Princess Zelda's heroic femininity in *The Legend of Zelda: Echoes of Wisdom*.

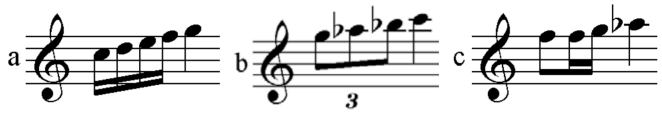
Heroism on Her Terms: Princess Zelda as an Active Feminine Hero in *Echoes of Wisdom*

As of writing this paper, *The Legend of Zelda: Echoes of Wisdom* (2024) presents one of the most progressive depictions of feminine heroism in the *Zelda* series. The typical gender normative roles of the *Zelda* storyline are swapped in *Echoes of Wisdom*; rather than controlling Link and rescuing the princess, Zelda takes on the role of character/avatar on a quest to save the world (and only incidentally Link) from the clutches of evil.

Figure 4. Zelda and her sidekick Tri traverse the overworld in *Echoes of Wisdom*.

The gameplay of *Echoes of Wisdom* requires the player/Zelda to explore a vast "overworld," an area that acts as a connecting hub between various other locations (see **Figure 4** above). In fantasy action-adventure games, such as those in the *Legend of Zelda* series, overworld scores typically include large melodic leaps (generally at the perfect fourth or fifth)

and major-mode harmonies that borrow liberally from the parallel minor key. These bold and tonally adventurous musical elements signify a sense of wanderlust commonly associated with exploring game worlds. The overworld music of the *Zelda* franchise has remained relatively consistent since its original game in 1986. Jason Brame points to three melodic figures that appear in and unify the overworld themes in the series, shown in **Examples 3a–c** below.[47] These motives, along with regular direct quotation of the original *Legend of Zelda* overworld music, have become convention in the series and allow players to readily recognize the sonic character of a *Zelda* game as well as the heroism it affords.

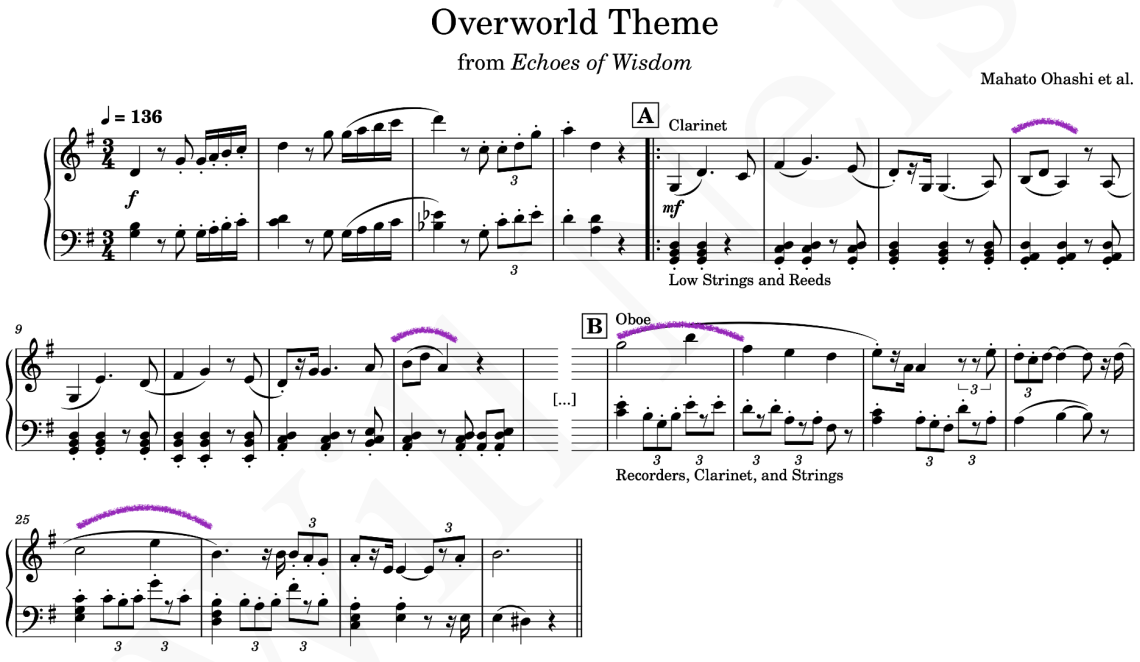


Examples 3a–c. Jason Brame's common *Zelda* motives. Transcribed by Brame.

These motives have historically been associated with the heroics of Link, the primary character/avatar of the *Zelda* franchise. In *Echoes of Wisdom*, however, they come to represent Princess Zelda as she takes on the mantle of hero. Yet they only appear fleetingly in the four measures of the overworld cue's introduction. The music that surrounds Link's quests does not come to represent Zelda's. Rather, Zelda's first solo journey receives its own theme, shown in **Example 4**. This is asserted from the very first melodic interval, a perfect fifth leap upward which inverts the series's typical downward leap. Woven into these heroic gestures are statements of the "Zelda's Lullaby" motive. In the A material (mm. 5–20), the motive appears as quick tags at the end of each phrase, played first by clarinet then by soprano recorder. In the B material thereafter, an oboe sounds the motive in its original rhythm, but quickly sutures it into a

[47] For more on how these motives unify the *Zelda* series, see Jason Brame, "Thematic Unity Across a Video Game Series," *ACT – Zeitschrift für Musik & Performance* 2 (2011).

new melody that leans on driving sixteenth note and triplet rhythms. The bass line is likewise driving, providing forward momentum that is particularly propulsive when it galops through triplets in the B section. That "Zelda's Lullaby" is sutured into the heroism evoked by the music around it reimagines the theme not as an FRC, but through the lens of Zelda's heroics. Through its history as an FRC, it also signals a retention of Zelda's femininity and asserts that her heroism is not a product of her reaching for masculinity, but rather that it comes through her femininity.



Example 4. Measures 1–12 and 21–28 of the Overworld/Heroism Theme in *Echoes of Wisdom*. Instances of the "Zelda's Lullaby" motive appear under purple arcs.[48]

The transformation of Zelda's FRC into a heroic theme mirrors in many respects Howard Shore's theme for Éowyn (performed by Miranda Otto), the heroic princess of Rohan and one of only three characters associated with a musical theme in Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings*

[48] It is important to note that, despite the omission of brass instruments in favor of woodwind and string timbres, the overworld theme does not necessarily represent the practices of FRC instrumentation. In fact, *Echoes of Wisdom* continues the visual and sonic aesthetics of the 2019 remaster of *The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening*. This includes a "toy box" graphical palette and heavy orchestration of woodwind ensembles and recorder consorts. Together, the visuals and audio support the overall playful aesthetic goal.

film trilogy (2001–3). Éowyn is notable in the trilogy (and the books on which it is based) for her active role in the plot and her drive to accomplish great deeds and become a leader in the world of men. Indeed, in the third film, she poses as a warrior to join the armies of Rohan in a climactic battle where she deals the final blow to one of the trilogy's central villains. Éowyn's music does not adhere to FRC scoring practices—in fact, it is often performed by French horns. Rather, it more closely follows the development of her character throughout the films. In Fülöp's words, "it is (basically) lyrical and modal in character and derives from the majestic 'Rohan' theme, making it more in line with the patriotic, heroic themes typical of male characters."[49] It is also both graceful and uncertain, wandering through a series of ascending and descending leaps. Crucially, it does not sideline her or reduce her to a romantic feminine role, though simultaneously asserting, as she herself proclaims in *The Return of the King* (2003), "I am no man!" Éowyn's music is neither feminine in the idealized, emphasized FRC convention nor is it conventionally masculine. In this case as in that of Zelda in *Echoes of Wisdom*, the transformation or eschewing of FRC norms empowers women characters to be heroes without taking on the musical lexicon that is commonly associated with men. Zelda and Éowyn neither engage with emphasized feminine performatives in these cases, nor do they engage with the kinds of alternative masculinities practiced by Sheik and Tetra. Rather, they and the music that they are associated with are marked with alternative forms of femininity and destabilize the passive femininity that hegemonic masculinity seeks to police. They are feminine heroes in their own right and their music portrays them as such.

[49] Fülöp, "Heroes, Dames, and Damsels in Distress," 328.

Genderlessness and Self-Actualized Femininity in the *Hollow Knight* Series

Developed by Team Cherry, the *Hollow Knight* series (2017–25) ostensibly revolves around the collapse and decay of insect civilizations due to destructive politics, colonialism, and religion, but has also been a prominent site of queer gender identities. The series's treatment of gender is unusual in the gaming industry in that it largely avoids categorizing its characters into normative gender identity groups, but rather treats gender diversity and queer relationships as normative. In *Hollow Knight* (2017), for example, the protagonist is agender and the primary supporting character is a feminine warrior whose music refuses feminine coding. Composer Christopher Larkin's musical themes actively participate in this refusal, constructing affordances for gender performativities and identities that do not adhere to conventional methods.

Mentioned above, the protagonist of *Hollow Knight* (hereafter, "*HK*"), referred to by its developers as "the Knight," is explicitly depicted as genderless. This reflects the Knight's origins within the narrative: it was begotten as a "Vessel," a being deliberately devoid of selfhood, in an attempt to contain a civilization-destroying infection. Unlike many of the characters discussed above, the Knight does not receive a personal musical theme. Instead, it is musically associated with the slow, melancholic theme for Hallownest, the ruined kingdom the Knight traverses. The first time the player hears this theme is on the game's title screen where it is arranged for only two voices—a melody and bass line in counterpoint—played by a solitary piano set to heavy reverb. This reverb lends a sense of vacuous space that, in keeping with the game's title, affords a sense of hollowness. The Knight shares this thematic connection with its sibling, the eponymous Hollow Knight, who succumbs to the infection and serves as one of the game's final bosses. In the climactic battle with the Hollow Knight (**Figure 5**), the Hallownest theme appears

first menacingly as the Hollow Knight fights against the Knight. The theme turns tragic when the Hollow Knight comes to its senses and sacrifices itself to save the kingdom. The shared theme obscures the distinction between the two knights and their countless Vessel siblings encountered throughout the game. That the Vessels are united by a collective lack of musical identity points to a possible semiotics of genderless identity. The Knight and its Vessel kin are able to have a shared (non)musical identity without the baggage of gendered musical conventions. This also positions them in direct contrast to Hornet, who is explicitly referred to in *HK* as "the Gendered Child" and receives her own music.

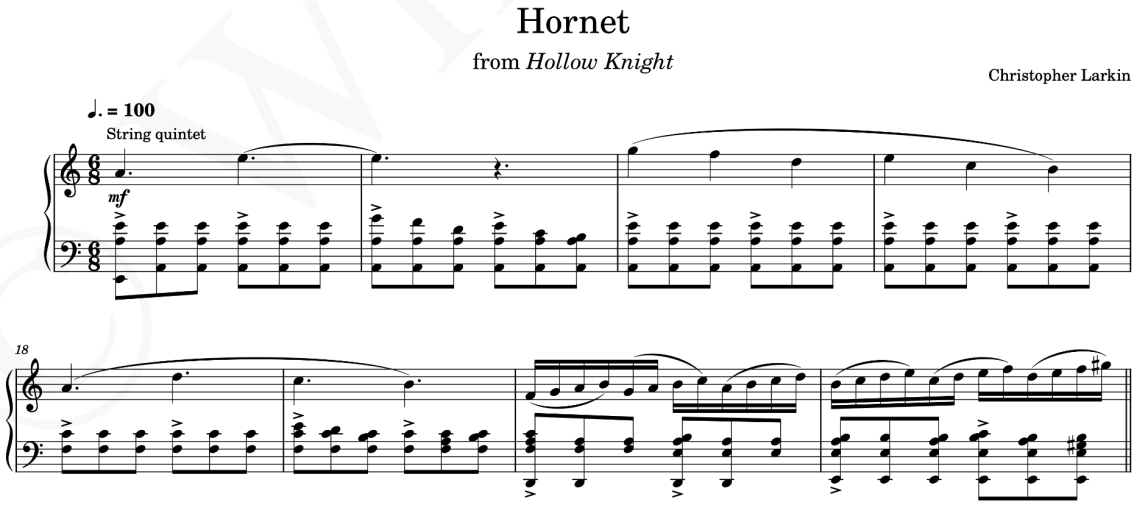
Figure 5. The ultimate battle between the Knight (left) and the Hollow Knight (right).

Hornet, "the Gendered Child"

On its journey through the ruins of Hallownest, the Knight encounters the warrior Hornet (**Figure 6**), who faces the Vessel in single combat a number of times before eventually becoming an ally. It is later revealed that Hornet is the half-sister of the Knight and Hollow Knight, sharing

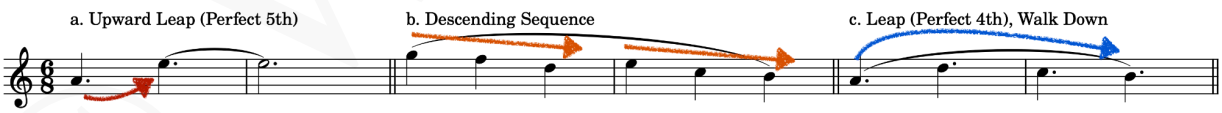
the same Wyrm-deity father. The distinction between the Vessels' genderlessness and Hornet's feminine gender is reflected in her music. While the Knight has no personal theme, Hornet has one of the most distinctive in the series.

Figure 6. Hornet (center) threatens the Knight at their first encounter.



Example 5. Measures 14–21 of Hornet's battle theme.

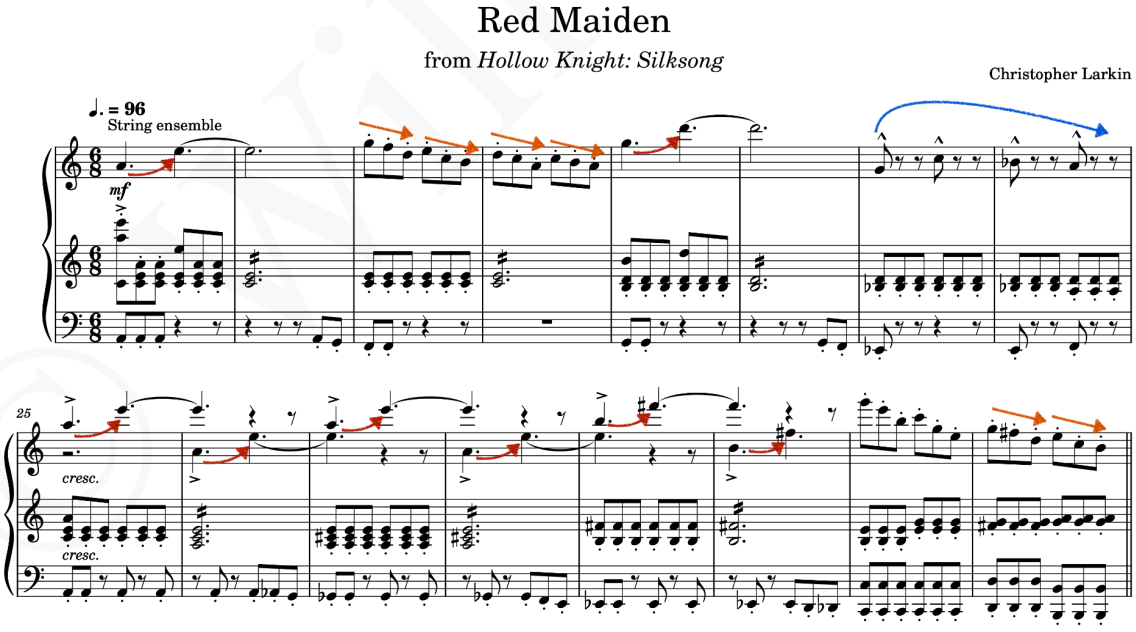
The battles against Hornet are among the most challenging in *HK*. This is affirmed by Hornet's music, which portrays her as a formidable opponent and later ally. She is scored with harsh timbres from strings playing toward the bottom of their bows, strong accents and staccatos, disorienting hemiola, frenetic sixteenth note runs, and powerful rhythmic unisons (see **Example 5** above). Three main melodic motives, shown in **Examples 6a–c**, compose her theme: an upward leap of a perfect fifth; a sequence of descending pitches, typically woven in the middle with a cambiata; and a perfect fourth leap followed by stepwise descent. Together, these motives construct a musical identity that is assertive, angular, and rhythmically driven. In many ways, Hornet's theme is the antithesis of FRC scoring. This is not music that codes Hornet as "feminine" in the emphasized FRC convention, nor does it position her in a romantic role relative to a masculine protagonist (which the game does not have). Rather, it describes her daunting ability as a warrior and the formidable presence she projects in combat. But like Zelda's heroic theme above, neither does it depart femininity by reaching toward masculinity. It does not fall back on the bombastic and militaristic brass timbres that sought to regulate the symphonic hero's masculinity in Tchaikovsky's Fourth, nor does it attach her to heroic topics that are commonly tied to masculine characters.



Examples 6a–c. The three "Hornet" motives.

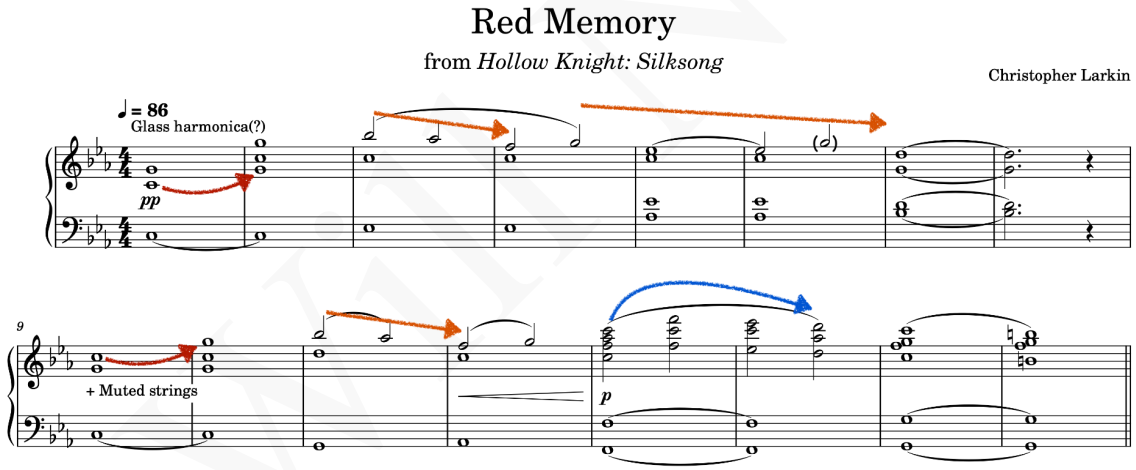
When Hornet becomes the protagonist character/avatar in *Hollow Knight: Silksong* (2025), she and her music experience two crises of identity. The first of these occurs when she is captured and imprisoned in the Slab, a prison in the kingdom of Pharloom. The Slab's wardens strip Hornet of all her belongings—her weapons, tools, and cloak—forcing her to break free

from the prison with nothing but her fundamental abilities. The first time the "Hornet" motives appear in *Silksong* occurs when Hornet finds the wardens who imprisoned her and stole her equipment. After swiftly killing a warden masquerading with Hornet's gear and reclaiming the material markers of her warrior identity, a battle ensues between Hornet and the prison wardens. The battle is scored by a cue titled "Red Maiden" (**Example 7**), a title associated with Hornet throughout the game. Mirroring the process by which Hornet reclaims her equipment, the three "Hornet" motives rebuild themselves in the "Red Maiden" cue, performed with a string ensemble. This reassembly culminates as the first motive sounds in quick succession, layering over itself and rising a major second in a way that uplifts Hornet and reflects the reclamation of her warrior identity. In this episode, Hornet refuses to allow the wardens to strip her of her agency and the music affirms this by not leaning into scoring conventions that would strip her of musical autonomy.



Example 7. Measures 17–32 of the "Red Maiden" battle cue. "Hornet" motives are marked with arrows.

Hornet's second identity crisis occurs in *Silksong*'s final act, when she must delve into her memories to find the way forward. This memory sequence, called "Red Memory," takes her through four encounters with the maternal figures who shaped her—the Weavers, Herrah, Vespa, and the White Lady—each of whom represents a different claim on her identity.[50] The Weavers, a tribe of deified spiders, demand she prove herself as one of them and seek to exploit her to maintain their power; Herrah, Hornet's birth mother, urges her to resist others' attempts to shape her future; Vespa, Hornet's bee-queen adoptive mother, trains her for combat and bids she claim her own power that others might not take it from her; the White Lady, Hornet's ethereal stepmother, regrets the various pulls on her identity, but acknowledges she has the strength to weave her own fate.



Example 8. Measures 1–16 of the "Red Memory" cue. "Hornet" motives are marked with arrows.

The music that accompanies the Red Memory sequence, shown in **Example 8**, metrically stretches each of the "Hornet" motives. The accented string timbres and rhythmic drive of both of Hornet's battle cues are replaced in the "Red Memory" cue by sustained whole and half notes,

[50] Different approaches to motherhood are among the central narrative themes in *Silksong*. For more on this and other narrative themes in *Silksong*, see E. B. Hutchins, "One of the Most Progressive Games of the Decade is About Bugs. No, Seriously," *Comics Beat* (December 19, 2025).

lush beds of harmony provided by strings, and what sounds like a glass harmonica, an instrument whose ethereal, singing quality evokes the introspection inherent in the narrative episode. As the melody slowly unfurls, the intervallic contour of the "Hornet" motives become readable, yet they are far from Hornet's musical identity established in *HK* and the "Red Maiden" cue. Mapped to Hornet's memory of the shaping of her identity, the motives as presented in "Red Memory" represent the coalescence of her musical identity, woven together as she crafts her own destiny. In weaving her own identity and music, Hornet is not musically tied to any other character as Zelda and Sheik are through FRC scoring or Tetra and the Knight are through a lack of a personal theme. By eschewing the early Hollywood conventions that continue to hold sway in audiovisual scoring, Hornet is able to have musical autonomy.

Conclusions

Under the lexicon of early Hollywood and Western art music conventions, feminine performativities beyond the emphasized or hypersexualized kinds are rarely represented. McClary prominently exposed this in her discussion of Micaëla and Carmen in Bizet's opera *Carmen* (1875).[51] Film has begun to make strides in this area in recent years, allowing characters like Éowyn and the protagonist Rey of the *Star Wars* sequel trilogy (2015–2019) to have musical themes that distinguish them from other characters.[52] At the same time, many of the old gendering mechanisms—such as Fülöp's Feminine Romantic Cliché—still hold sway. This is evident in films as recent as Guillermo del Toro's *Frankenstein* (2025) and James Gunn's *Superman* (2025). And this is certainly still the case in video games. Apart from *Echoes of*

[51] McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 56–69.

[52] For more on Rey's Theme, especially as it compares to Princess Leia's, see Yee, "Feminine Themings," paragraph 5 under "Introduction."

Wisdom, "Zelda's Lullaby" and the *Zelda* narrative formula continue to reduce Zelda to an object of narrative and romantic pursuit in *The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom* (2023) as it has done since *A Link to the Past*.

Yet video games increasingly offer valuable alternatives to conventional gendering practices. In *Echoes of Wisdom*, the transformation of FRCs allow Zelda to claim a musical heroism distinct from the series's male protagonist and to musically perform heroic femininity. Even the lack of personal themes allows the protagonist and antagonist of *Hollow Knight* to share sonic performativities of genderlessness. Crucially, the *Echoes of Wisdom* and *Hollow Knight* examples above do not masculinize female characters to give them musical autonomy. The affordances of their music are more in line with their versions of heroic and warrior femininity in the way they are constructed narratively and motivically and pave the way for a greater semiotics of gender diversity in music. But these affordances need not be intentional. In the same way that queerness does not require intentionality on the part of game developers and composers for "queerness to be powerfully evident,"[53] the intentional construction of gender performativities does not require intention for players to read their character/avatars along diverse articulations of gender. In its ability to afford meaning through and without scoring conventions, music mediates the relationship between characters and players and allows players to construct such articulations.

Musicology and game studies would benefit from further attention not only to alternative masculinities, as Yee suggests,[54] but also to femininities beyond the emphasized and romanticized that have so often been discussed without much room for alternatives. It is through both of these discussions that hegemonic and idealized notions of gender may be delegitimized

[53] Summers, *The Queerness of Video Game Music*, 3.

[54] Yee, "Feminine Themings," paragraph 3 under "Nobuo Uematsu's gendered musical legacy."

and lead to more varied depictions of characters and their music. In addition to the motivic and semiotic analyses along the lines of conventions such as the FRC, phenomenological approaches will be essential in future studies of player-character/avatar interaction and the construction of gender and identity in video game music.

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