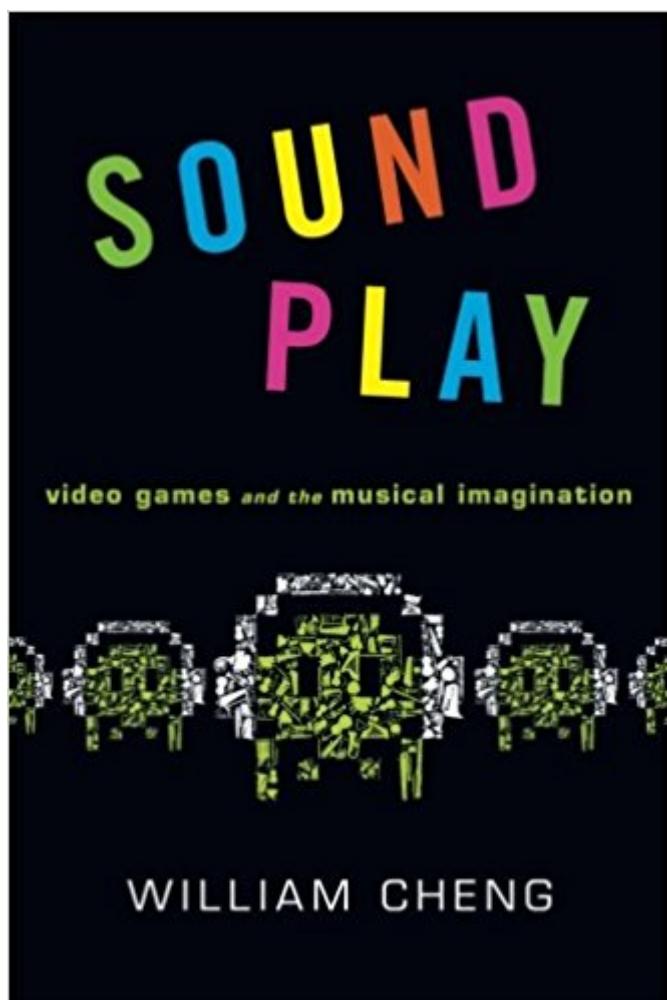


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# Sound Play: Video Games And The Musical Imagination (Oxford Music / Media)



## Synopsis

Video games open portals to fantastical worlds where imaginative play and enchantment prevail. These virtual settings afford us considerable freedom to act out with relative impunity. Or do they? Sound Play explores the aesthetic, ethical, and sociopolitical stakes of people's creative engagements with gaming's audio phenomena—from sonorous violence to synthesized operas, from democratic music-making to vocal sexual harassment. William Cheng shows how video games empower their designers, composers, players, critics, and scholars to tinker (often transgressively) with practices and discourses of music, noise, speech, and silence. Faced with collisions between utopian and alarmist stereotypes of video games, Sound Play synthesizes insights across musicology, sociology, anthropology, communications, literary theory, philosophy, and additional disciplines. With case studies spanning Final Fantasy VI, Silent Hill, Fallout 3, The Lord of the Rings Online, and Team Fortress 2, this book insists that what we do in there—in the safe, sound spaces of games—can ultimately teach us a great deal about who we are and what we value (musically, culturally, humanly) out here. Foreword by Richard Leppert. Video Games Live cover image printed with permission from Tommy Tallarico

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"William Cheng tackles the wild west of game audio and conquers it with a combination of academic scrutiny, coupled by a gamer's unadulterated love of the art. Sound Play could very well be a turning

point in the history of video game audio: the day when game audio came of age and inherited the mantle of serious art through the lens of scholarly analysis. With *Sound Play*, game audio finally has the academic credentials it needs to take its place among the other fine arts." --Christopher Tin, Grammy-winning video game music composer "As addictive and energetically conceived as its subject matter, *Sound Play* enables even non-gamers to navigate the sonic waves and kinetic pleasures of story worlds that challenge us to rethink the complexities of human agency, identity politics, and embodied performance." --Maria Tatar, author of *Enchanted Hunters: The Power of Stories in Childhood* and editor of *The Annotated Brothers Grimm* "A major contribution from a bold and brilliant new voice with exceptional interdisciplinary range. Cheng is a serious player: his virtuosic flair is fully matched by his technical rigor and depth of interpretive insight. *Sound Play* confirms that the New Musicology is truly out of beta." --Kiri Miller, author of *Playing Along: Digital Games, YouTube, and Virtual Performance* "Compelling from the first page, *Sound Play* is an engaging and sophisticated study of how audio--whether in the form of music, voices, noises, or effects--crucially shapes our experience of video games, and how gaming deeply informs our engagement with sound. But more than that, William Cheng's excellent new book demonstrates how the interrelation of sound and play in video games challenges us to think deeply about what it means to live in a world in which the virtual and the real are increasingly intertwined." --Mark Katz, author of *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music and Groove Music: The Art and Culture of the Hip-Hop DJ* "Captivating and inspired, probing and nimbly persuasive, playful yet bursting with profound insight, *Sound Play* is virtually and absolutely indispensable." --Charles Hiroshi Garrett, author of *Struggling to Define a Nation: American Music and the Twentieth Century* and editor-in-chief of *The Grove Dictionary of American Music*, 2nd edition

William Cheng is a Junior Fellow at the Harvard Society of Fellows. He lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

*Sound Play* is an excellent academic book for both the experienced gamer who wants to learn more about reading video games as a social text and for scholars and students who want to learn more about the increasing social significance of video games. Rather than discussing music and sound on a more surface level (as one might find in a trade book), this book takes a deep look into implications of the use (and misuse) of video game sound and music. It's definitely not stogy and jargon-laden, but it's very smart, astute, and frankly, fun to read. As someone who rarely finds time to play video games, I found it particularly helpful that Cheng carefully and insightfully walks you, the

reader, through the games he discusses as if he were sitting next to you as you played them, giving even the most unexperienced player/ludomusicologist a remarkably clear picture of how the music, ambient sound, voice acting (really any audio) in these games colors a critical reading of a video game. Not only are music and sound considered in terms of their impact on immersion and the player's experience, he digs into complex issues of gender, sexuality, and race/ethnicity, identity performativity and role-playing, ethics, and the significance of video game music and sound in a critique of these issues. His examples are among the most astute hermeneutic readings of video games and their sonic elements that I've found (I'm particularly impressed with his discussion of online player discussions regarding gender and sexual politics in TF2 found in Chapter 5). It's clearly among the best books on video game music and sound. I would STRONGLY recommend this book for music courses in which video games are discussed and for media studies courses of all sorts. Although Cheng expertly discusses music and sound in games in great detail (and includes some great transcriptions of excerpts from a few game scores), it's not too technical for non-musicians. In fact, I've already recommended the book to several of my students by virtue of the writing alone. Cheng is a beautiful writer; his prose is clear and concise, yet he paints a vivid picture in the imagination of the reader (which is apropos considering the subtitle of the book).

This may very well be my favorite book about video game music and sound to date. Cheng's writing is clear, engaging, and sprinkled with game-inspired fun (my favorite bit of prose involves a description of Silent Hill's soundscape as an "acoustic katamari"). More than that, Cheng's ideas about particular video games, game sound, and players -- informed both by ethnographic research and deep probing of his own experiences -- are amazingly insightful and provocative. Over the course of reading this book, I encountered critical questions and issues I had never closely considered, and I gained new perspective on some familiar and unfamiliar games and situations. And while this book is highly valuable from an academic perspective, it is also approachable -- vastly more so than many other academic books I have read. I highly recommend it for anyone interested in video games, game music/sound, and the people who play games!

This book is a thought-provoking, well-written, and diverse look at the many roles music and sound play in video games. In *Sound Play*, Cheng (an award winning professor of music at Dartmouth College) focuses not on the technological aspects of game music, or even in its history, but rather on the effects of music and sound on players. The topics he addresses touch on many of the most pressing issues in gaming today, and how those topics intersect with the aural dimension of gaming:

moral dilemmas reflected in the music of Fallout 3, gender issues in online play in Team Fortress 2, the nature of creative musical performance in The Lord of the Rings Online, and so on. The result is an always intriguing book that should be on the shelf of anyone interested in the serious study of game music, or of the role of games in modern culture.

I found this book to be a fascinating read. It is a thoughtful, articulate examination of music and sound in a range of video games, and makes you realize just how much the games we play extend to "real-world" political and social issues. You don't need to be a video game enthusiast to get something out of this book. It's a worthwhile read for anyone interested in music and contemporary society.

Wonderful selections by Cheng; very interesting read!

I read this book cover to cover right after it came out and I found it utterly engrossing. You don't have to be a video game enthusiast to appreciate Cheng's insightful analysis of the role of music and sound in our casual complicity with violence (through his example of Fallout 3 in Chapter 1) nor do you need to be an opera fan to appreciate his discussion of the opera scene in Final Fantasy VII (Chapter 2). Instead, what Cheng does is show how music criticism and games have much to teach each other about the ethical and psychological consequences of music, sound, play, and violence in our moment of the early 21st century. Every chapter has something valuable to say about how the immersive sonic environment of video games is changing our world. I was especially impressed by his discussion of perception of feminine voices in group play and their ramifications for closets of all kinds in Chapter 4. Taken with his discussion on musical trolling in Lord of the Rings Online (Chapter 5), and Cheng's book is especially timely as new revelations of harassment for women in video game industry emerge on a regular basis. This book should appeal to readers well beyond the musicology and video game studies.

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