

Note to grader: I've taken the liberty of attaching all the music mentioned in this paper that I have access to, so that it's more interactive. I suppose it's something that can be listened to while the paper's being graded.

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Video Game Music: Nobuo Uematsu and the Music of Final Fantasy

Abstract: "Because music evaporates as soon as it is produced, men, seeking permanence in life's ephemera, have long sought ways to record and reproduce it."¹ This paper examines the impact of video game music, using figures taken from various sources, and explains the effect culture has on its success. After focusing on the compositions of Nobuo Uematsu, It concludes with an analysis of Japan and the US, highlighting differences between the countries.

¹ Marcus, Leonard M., "Music, Recording of," *The New Encyclopedia Britannica: Macropaedia*, 15th ed., 1984, 12: 691.

Just as video games have evolved over the years, so too has the music that accompanies them. From the primitive bleeps and bloops of PacMan to the CD quality redbook audio seen in games like Xenogears and Final Fantasy X, video game music² now is a multi-million dollar industry, drawing in well-known artists and respected composers alike. Some of the biggest names in the video game industry are now the composers. This paper intends to address the differences in VGM by looking at Nobuo Uematsu, the composer of the music for all the Final Fantasies, as well as quite a few other Square role-playing games (RPGs). After examining a brief history of VGM, the paper looks at his influences, searching for an explanation for why his music has such a wide appeal. Finally, an analysis concludes the paper, looking at differences between American and Japanese VGM by considering culture as a factor.

The importance of VGM represents a major change in thought in the industry. Once believed to be secondary to actual gameplay and experience, VGM is now treated with as much respect as other parts of a game. Composer Rob Ross says, “Things have been changing and audio is being recognized as an integral part of the entertainment experience.”³

In fact, video game music has so increased in influence that the Grammys included them in the 43rd Awards in 2001,⁴ creating three separate categories for which video game music could be nominated: Best Soundtrack Album for Motion Picture, Television or Other Visual Media; Best Song for a Motion Picture, Television, or Other Visual Media; and Best Instrumental Composition for Motion Picture, Television, or Other Visual Media. “Other Visual Media” is the term designed to encompass video and computer games, multimedia and the future possibilities of the Internet into one tidy little package. For a game’s music to be considered, it has to be “commercially available as either its own separate music CD or stored in Red Book audio format on the game CD-ROM.”⁵ Though an album has yet to be nominated for the award, its inclusion shows a tremendous leap from the days of PacMan and Donkey Kong.⁶

A quick glance at the statistics shows how commercially successful video game music CDs can be. Utada Hikaru, one of the top-selling artists in Japan, performed in the introduction sequence for Square’s *Kingdom Hearts*. Entitled “Hikari” (and available at http://www.stanford.edu/~wlue/230_Hikari.mp3), the single sold over 850,000 copies in the five months following its release,⁷ demonstrating the commercial viability of VGM.

But to really understand VGM, one must look at Nobuo Uematsu. Born in Kouchi City, Japan on March 21, 1959, Uematsu received no formal music education. Instead, he taught himself the piano at the age of 12, later saying that he learned in order

² Throughout the paper, “VGM” will be used interchangeably with “video game music;” and “OST,” “OSV,” and “original soundtrack” will all correspond to the soundtrack for a game.

³ Ross, Rob. “Interactive Music...er, Audio,” accessed 3-16-03 at http://www.gamasutra.com/resource_guide/20010515/ross_01.htm

⁴ Poole, Steven. *Trigger Happy*, New York: Arcade Publishing, 2000, 9. In addition, the original proposal for the inclusion of VGM can be found at <http://www.gamasutra.com/features/20000225/proposal.doc>, accessed 3-16-03.

⁵ Marks, Aaron. *The Complete Guide to Game Audio*. Lawrence: CMP Books, 2001, 310.

⁶ For a more detailed history of VGM, please refer to Eric Pidkameny’s “Levels of Sound,” found <http://www.vgmusic.com/information/vgpaper2.html> and Matthew Belinkie’s “Video game music: not just kid stuff,” found <http://www.vgmusic.com/vgpaper.shtml>, as well as Appendix A.

⁷ http://www.music4games.net/n_kingdomhearts_utadahikaru.html, accessed 3-13-03.

to be like Elton John. After graduating from the University of Kanagawa with a music major, he decided to pursue a career as a composer, sending demo tapes to various companies in an attempt to get a job. He finally was hired to write music for radio commercials.⁸

Uematsu's big break came in 1985, when Mr. Sakaguchi, one of Nobuo's friends, invited Nobuo to work for Square, writing music for their video games.⁹ Though he didn't even know what game music was at that time, he went on to become the world's most recognizable VGM composer, composing music for more than 20 games and releasing over 30 CDs.¹⁰

In fact, Uematsu may be the first VGM composer to cross the line from a niche audience to more general acceptance. "In Japan, game score composers have attained 'rock star' status among their appreciate public. Rabid fans flock in mass to see appearances of their favorite video game stars and sales of video game soundtracks continue to top the charts, driving a whole other aspect to the industry."¹¹

Earlier, the statistics for Utada Hikaru's single were given. Yet when compared to Uematsu's influence, those sales seem insignificant. The FF7 OST reached number 3 on Japanese music charts¹² and according to Mr. Tomo Takebe, founder of the Musical World of Final Fantasy website, the soundtracks for FF7 and FF8 have both reached number one on other Japanese charts.¹³ More recently, "Suteki da ne," the main theme for FFX (which can be heard at <http://www.stanford.edu/~wlue/21 - Suteki da ne.mp3>), "made the top ten on the Japanese charts," in Uematsu's own words.¹⁴

When asked, Uematsu brushes off all claims of pop music, despite the success of all his compositions.

I don't want to join the competition of pop music. 'Eyes on Me' [the hit single from FF8, available at <http://www.stanford.edu/~wlue/20 - Eyes On Me.mp3>] is still game music, although it will be released as a single. I'm not a pops pro, either. Also, game music still doesn't have the characteristics to compete with them. I think it's up to the composers' choice. Some makers would try to create a commercial 'hit' of its music, like in the movie 'Titanic.' Others, like many of the European movies, totally separate from commercialism. That's why different composers will have different goals in game music, too.¹⁵

Yet the numbers that his compositions regularly pull clearly demonstrate his success. What appeal drives so many of his CDs onto top ten charts?

One important factor is his influences. When asked, he has mentioned Elton John, Vangelis, ABBA, Paul McCartney, and many other pop artists as key influences in

⁸ Shawn Struck's interview with Uematsu, <http://www.nobuouematsu.com/shawn.html>, accessed 3-13-03.

⁹ <http://www.nobuouematsu.com/bio.html>, accessed 3-13-03.

¹⁰ Eric Steffen's interview with Uematsu, <http://www.tc.umn.edu/~stef0063/interview.html>, or <http://www.nobuouematsu.com/steffen.html>, accessed 3-13-03.

¹¹ Marks, 8.

¹² Bob Rork's interview with Uematsu, <http://smashtech.net/view.asp?dn=58> or <http://www.nobuouematsu.com/bob.html>, accessed 3-13-03.

¹³ Takebe, quoted in Belinkie's paper.

¹⁴ GameSpot interview with Uematsu, <http://www.nobuouematsu.com/nobgs.html>, accessed 3-13-03.

¹⁵ Yoshitake Maeda's interview with Uematsu, <http://www.nobuouematsu.com/yosh.html>, accessed 3-13-03.

his music.¹⁶ In a recent paper on VGM, Eric Pidkameny says, “Much of Uematsu’s popularity seems to derive from his ability to apply pop music’s hooks and catchy melodies to orchestral music’s rich sound and presence.”¹⁷ Another paper on VGM explains the fusion of Western and Eastern music.

Mr. Tomo Takebe, founder of the Musical World of Final Fantasy website, proposes that Uematsu’s music has been so successful because it combines eastern and western styles of instrumental music. Japanese classical music tends to focus the listener on one particular voice. Every nuance of the soloist’s performance is meant to be savored.... Western instrumental music does not focus on the solo. Uematsu’s music satisfies both these cultures by providing a strong solo melody along with a strong chord progression. “The Final Fantasy main theme would sound fantastic only with chords, or only the solo,” Takebe says.¹⁸

A *Time* article provides a similar analysis. “To stand up to repeated scrutiny, his work is suitably complex (he uses drums, oboes, strings and synthesizers), but the melodic core is strong (he has released solo piano versions of some songs).”¹⁹

Other factors are more based in society and culture. Game music differs quite a bit between Japan and America, and Japanese VGM composers are much better known than American ones.

One explanation for this phenomenon comes from Matthew Belinkie’s paper on VGM.

All the major video game systems are produced in Japan, and when the industry was starting out, all the games were too. Japanese composers were the first game music pioneers, and defined what sound players came to associate with games. Although composers of other nationalities have since joined the industry, nearly all of the most popular games still come from Japan, and the Japanese composers remain the most well-known and popular. Fans seem to agree that Japanese scores are still the best. “It’s not that the Americans can’t produce great music. They indeed do a nice job with it,” says Jon Turner, a reviewer for Soundtrack Central, a website which imports game soundtracks to the United States. “But when you’re talking [in terms of impact], the Japanese fit the bill. The Americans have made decent efforts, but none of them are, in my opinion, up to the standards of the Japanese.”²⁰

The influence of Japan on VGM can be seen in other parts of Uematsu’s work as well. In an effort to increase awareness of VGM, Uematsu selected nine other VGM composers and had them write songs other than game music. Yet all nine gathered were Japanese,²¹ and Uematsu himself commented on the dearth of American composers, saying, “I’d like to make this a worldwide phenomenon, not just limited to Japan.”²²

Even American composers agree that Japanese VGM is generally of higher quality. Mike Pummell, a composer for Acclaim software, said, “It trickled down to us, actually. The Japanese were developing the most advanced game content up until about

¹⁶ Various interviews.

¹⁷ Pidkameny.

¹⁸ Belinkie.

¹⁹ http://www.time.com/time/innovators_v2/music/profile_uematsu.html, accessed 3-12-03.

²⁰ Belinkie.

²¹ Track list for Ten Plants, <http://www.chudahs-corner.com/soundtracks/tenplants.html>, accessed 3-13-03.

²² EGM interview with Uematsu, <http://www.nobouuematsu.com/nobegm.html>, accessed 3-18-03.

1993. American titles were really substandard on all levels. We kind of looked to the Japanese for visual technique and sound technique... The Japanese concept of what is a good game, what isn't a good game is still what we follow."²³

Culture, of such importance to the development of video games,²⁴ plays an equally important role in VGM. Video games are much more accepted in Japan than in the US, as businessmen play alongside schoolchildren in arcades throughout Tokyo. Even the audience for a VGM concert spans the age range. Describing a Bio Hazard (a Capcom video game) concert, Sam Kennedy writes, "Taking place in the large Sumida Triphony Hall in Kinshicho, Tokyo, Bio Hazard fans young and old came to the event—waiting in line to get in were young teenagers wearing shorts and T-shirts, and businessmen wearing their suits and ties."²⁵

In contrast is the US, where the main age group is 18-24 years old, and games are seen much more as entertainment for the young. "Video games constitute virtual playing spaces which allow home-bound children like my son to extend their reach, to explore, manipulate, and interact with a more diverse range of imaginary places than constitute the often drab, predictable, and overly-familiar spaces of their everyday lives,"²⁶ says Henry Jenkins, echoing a common view towards video games in America. At the core is the belief that video games are *play* and nothing more.

These differing beliefs demonstrate how much easier it is for the Japanese to identify with their characters, focusing on character development within the game. They can get caught up in the storyline, immersing themselves in the world of the game. This difference is also reflected in the type of games that people both develop and play in both countries. In general, Japanese tend to focus more on role-playing games (RPGs) like Final Fantasy²⁷ or Xenogears (both developed by Squaresoft, a Japanese company), while Americans focus more on games like the Civilization series (developed by MicroProse, Electronic Arts [EA], and Infogrames, all American companies) or the Sims and its spin-offs (developed by EA).

As such, the music that is developed for the games differs greatly on both sides of the Atlantic. Going back to Uematsu, an examination of the music he has written shows how strong themes generally dominate his work. Most of the games he has composed for have *leitmotifs* that are played whenever a certain character appears in the game. For an example, listen to Locke's theme (<http://www.stanford.edu/~wlue/04 - Locke.mp3>), which is played when he first makes an entrance, as well as every subsequent time he's the main focus of the plot. In addition, the music characterizes his personality, as well—a happy-go-lucky thief who is rarely serious.

Uematsu generally always has strong character themes in every game he composes for. A quick glance at the tracklists for the games he has composed for brings up such titles as "Terra," "Aeris' Theme," and "Garnet," names of characters from FF6

²³ Pummell, in Belinkie.

²⁴ See previous paper for STS145, "Different Culture."

²⁵ Kennedy, Sam. "Bio Hazard Orchestral Concert Report,"

http://www.gamespot.com/all/news/news_2450548.html, accessed 3-16-03.

²⁶ Jenkins, Henry. "COMPLETE FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT": VIDEO GAMES AS GENDERED PLAY SPACES, <http://web.mit.edu/21fms/www/faculty/henry3/pub/complete.html>, accessed 3-18-03.

²⁷ Interestingly, it was named such because it was the last game the Square could afford to make before going bankrupt. It was obviously successful enough to spawn eleven more in the series.

(FF3 in the US), FF7, and FF9, respectively. Noticeably absent is FF8, which Uematsu explained was different from the others.

I found that the effect of character themes weren't as great as I thought in FF6 and 7. It is reasonable to have character themes if each of the main characters have their own highlights in the game, but in FF8, the "main character" is focused in a single couple of Squall and Rinoa. Considering "Eyes On Me," I let the other characters take a step back music-wise.²⁸

But by FF9, character themes were back in. Garnet's theme is often cited as one of the most memorable pieces of the entire soundtrack.²⁹

In stark contrast is American VGM. The soundtracks to American-made games are dominated much more by background music, instead of specific character themes. Listening to the first and last tracks from Halo, one of the more recent US best-selling games developed by Bungie Studios (accessible at <http://www.stanford.edu/~wlue/01 - Opening Suite.mp3>, and <http://www.stanford.edu/~wlue/26 - Halo.mp3>), one immediately notices that the trend in American VGM is towards music that is driven by background orchestral music. Neither of these pieces focuses on a solo voice, instead using many different voices to compose the melody.

Some believe that culture doesn't have much influence on music. Darryl Duncan, president and CEO of GameBeat, Inc., believes, "[VGM has] no real cultural influences outside of the draw that a particular style of music might have. For example, any rap or hip-hop music is obviously going to have African-American cultural elements and will likely only be used in a game that is suitable, like an NBA basketball video game."³⁰

Yet even if that's true, people play different games in different cultures, and music certainly differs across video games and genres. So since only certain types of music are suitable for specific games, certain types of music will also only be suitable for specific cultures. The chain is one link longer, but the final analysis still holds. Duncan even says, "Music is a very universal language and it's just about what fits with the game's style."³¹

Players agree that music can be very genre-specific. One player says, "For games that require stealth, such as *No One Lives Forever*, I turn off the music so that I can listen to the footsteps of enemies nearby. I find music in [first-person shooters] (at least in the non-DeathMatch only types) breaks the suspension of disbelief for me when I try to be immersed in [that] particular FPS world. However, for RPGs music adds a lot to the mood of the setting. *Planescape: Torment* has one of the best music in a PC game."³²

And VGM composer attitudes are certainly different across cultures. Acclaim composer Pummell says, "I could care less about what the audience thinks about the music, because if you really do the music right, they're not gonna notice it. If nobody

²⁸ Maeda interview with Uematsu.

²⁹ Weekly Famitsu's interview with Uematsu, <http://www.nobuoematsu.com/nobrpg.html>, accessed 3-13-03.

³⁰ Duncan, Darryl. E-mail to author, 3-16-03.

³¹ Duncan e-mail.

³² Forum thread at

<http://www.evillavatar.com/redirected.asp?fromurl=http%3A//www.evillavatar.com/EA/Editorials/M43945/%23discussion>, accessed 3-16-03.

notices the music in any of your work; they don't mention it in reviews, they don't say anything about it, nobody talks to you about it; you're probably doing it right."³³

Contrast that to Uematsu's music, which is almost always commented on in reviews of games. A GameSpot description of VGM through the years says,

Square's wildly popular Final Fantasy series hits a new high with Final Fantasy VI (III in the US in 1999) for the SNES. A great example of Uematsu's brilliance, this soundtrack demonstrates the increasing sophistication of video game music. Character-specific leitmotifs recur throughout gameplay, and the sheer variety of styles employed is audacious. Uematsu is deservedly compared to film composer John Williams.³⁴

A complete discussion of film and game music is beyond the scope of this paper,³⁵ but a comparison with John Williams clearly demonstrates just how famous Uematsu has gotten. From his beginnings as a composer for radio commercials, he certainly has gained a lot of attention as a result of his compositions, with music that jumps out at the player, rather than fading into the background.

Even *Time* magazine has drawn the same parallel to Williams, recognizing Uematsu for his impressive achievements. A special feature identifying innovators in music fingered him along with four others, saying that his "music imbues Final Fantasy games with grandeur and depth, much the way John Williams' score helped propel Star Wars into hyperspace."³⁶

Uematsu's leitmotifs (and VGM in general) help serve another purpose as well. Since "digital environments are procedural, participatory, spatial, and encyclopedic,"³⁷ VGM can help make digital environments more participatory. When the player first meets Celes in FF6, or whenever she's part of the main action, her theme is played in the game (heard at <http://www.stanford.edu/~wlue/22 - Celes.mp3>). Winning a certain part of the game with Celes in the party leads to a specific piece of music being played. This aspect is taken even further in games like *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (done by another Japanese company, Nintendo), where the player actually *plays* melodies that cause certain events to happen, like turning day to night or summoning a horse.

Music also changes in response to what the player does. The *Time* article makes note of the changing music as a result of player input. "Unlike movie music, Uematsu's supple, heartfelt tunes loop endlessly—until the user moves to a new scene."³⁸ Creating music that transitions well from scene to scene is a challenge of any VGM composer, and Uematsu has created melodies that provide those transitions seamlessly.

The constant attention focused on Japan isn't meant to imply that VGM has no future in the US. In fact, an announcement just last week said, "Electronic Arts has announced that the first soundtrack it released as part of its EA SPORTS™ TRAX initiative ... reached Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) certified platinum status (one million units), making it the first videogame soundtrack ever to go

³³ Pummell, in Belinkie.

³⁴ http://gamespot.com/gamespot/features/video/vg_music/p5_01.html

³⁵ For a more detailed discussion of VGM vs. film music, please refer to Pidkameny's "Levels of Sounds."

³⁶ http://www.time.com/time/innovators_v2/music/profile_uematsu.html, accessed 3-16-03.

³⁷ Murray, Janet H. *Hamlet on the Holodeck*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001, 71.

³⁸ http://www.time.com/time/innovators_v2/music/profile_uematsu.html.

platinum as well as the most successful soundtrack in videogame history.”³⁹ Though the album was mostly established rappers contributing to the game OST, it still heralds many changes to come in the US VGM market.

Despite the differences in music across cultures, though, most composers (with a few noted exceptions) generally agree on the importance of VGM. George Sanger, composer for *The 7th Guest* and more commonly known as The Fat Man, says, “Audio, especially game audio, is a powerful weapon. When used properly, it has the power to involve, immerse, elevate, and reward. It has the power to excite. It can make an artificial world appear to be deeper, older, and much more complex and complete than it actually is.”⁴⁰

Uematsu often stresses VGM’s power to influence emotions. “My task is to make sure that I am able to express the emotions I want to, not just brushing up on my skills. I think it will be a shame if we won’t be able to cry as we play our own game.”⁴¹ In fact, an earlier interview quoted him as saying, “I couldn’t stop crying as I watched the FF8 ending. The graphics and sound created a beautiful harmony.”⁴² Though possibly an exaggeration, the quotes still show that there was a substantial emotional effect on him, the composer.

But just as video games are no longer confined to a single market, VGM is starting to spread across boundaries. There is a growing market for VGM CDs here in the US, as people begin to shed their preconceived notions of what games and game music are. Duncan says of VGM, “Whatever the differences are, they are narrowing and there soon will be little difference in my opinion.”⁴³ Uematsu himself has done much to break down the boundaries, achieving great success both at home and abroad. His compositions show that VGM really can be seen as art, stretching across almost every genre, and his success demonstrates that VGM can really be commercially successful.

A fitting end for this paper is to play the ending theme of FF6 (listenable at <http://www.stanford.edu/~wlue/15 - Ending Theme.mp3>), a classic to fans of Uematsu everywhere. Enjoy.

³⁹ EA Press Release, found at <http://www.info.ea.com/pr/pr300.doc>, accessed 3-13-03.

⁴⁰ Sanger, George Alistair (The Fat Man). “The Sound of Money (Down the Potty): Common Audio Mistakes in Kids’ Games,” accessed 3-16-03 at http://www.gamasutra.com/resource_guide/20010515/sanger_01.htm

⁴¹ Maeda interview with Uematsu, same URL.

⁴² Digicube questionnaire, <http://www.nobuouematsu.com/digi.html>, accessed 3-13-03.

⁴³ Duncan’s email to author.

Appendix A: History of VGM

It is difficult to find research papers on the history of VGM. The two mentioned in footnote 2 are two academic papers to address the issue, and a few books have been published on the subject. Aaron Marks' *The Complete Guide to Game Audio* is one of them. In addition to those, there are a few articles online that can provide a useful starting point. GameSpot has a brief timeline of VGM (http://gamespot.com/gamespot/features/video/vg_music/index.html). Another paper can be found at <http://www.seanspace.com/iSphere/scores.htm>, though it was found too late to be of any use in this paper.

Appendix B: Other resources for VGM

<http://www.chudahs-corner.com/> is a good site for finding track lists for different OSTs, as well as other information for specific CDs. Composers can be found at <http://gmi.rocketbaby.net/composers.html>, in addition to a few interviews with various composers. <http://www.nobuouematsu.com> contains quite a bit of information about Uematsu, as well as various interviews with him, and <http://www.fatman.com/index.shtml> is the home page for The Fat Man, composer for the music of The 7th Guest. For people interested in remixes of VGM, <http://remix.overclocked.org> has quite a huge selection from many different games, and the quality is generally very good (and what the author listened to in writing this paper). Gamesutra and GDC also both have audio sections.

Appendix C: Other Nobuo quotes that weren't relevant to the thesis, but were interesting.

“But then in Japan, it's hard to judge the true worth of music if it doesn't sound sophisticated enough. People here seem to reject what is from our own culture. Let's talk the 3-chord pipa (a lute) for example that has been with us for generations, but we don't know a single folk song that uses it at all. Instead, we have loads of Japanese who appreciates the foreign piano. And we seem to have a lot of copy bands popping up all over the country! I'm not a cynic, nor am I someone who hails at foreign imports, but I am in the music industry and such things flows in me.”⁴⁴

⁴⁴ From the FFX OST liner notes, an email exchange between Nobuo and Nojima, the lyricist for FFX. Translation by Etho, found on <http://www.nobuouematsu.com/nobnoj.html>