

Music 290: Winter 2025
Special Topics: Introduction to Video Game Music
Course Outline

Instructor and TA Information

Instructor: Dr. Marina Gallagher

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Office Hours: by appointment (in person or online over Microsoft Teams)

Course Description

Calendar Description for MUSIC 290:

A special study of a selected topic in music. Consult department for details. [Note: This is a repeatable course, subject to different content; it may be completed a total of three times.]

Prerequisite: Level at least 2A

Course Description:

A survey of the history and conventions of video game music and how game music affects players. Topics include narrative, immersion, and interactivity; characterization of protagonists and antagonists; how music shapes players' perceptions of different types of locations; and the reception of video game music in modern society.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this course students should be able to:

- Describe the history of video game music and how game music has developed over time
- Situate video game music within broader historical trends in popular and film music as well as Western art music (instrumental and opera)
- Identify similarities and differences between films and video games and discuss the role that music plays in shaping the player's gaming experience
- Analyse video game music in terms of form, harmony, instrumentation, melody, etc. and discuss how these characteristics shape the player's experience and contribute to a game's narrative
- Compare and contrast the conventions and characteristics of different types of video game music, including but not limited to characters' themes, battle themes, and location/landscape themes, and discuss the effect that they have on players
- Discuss the social contexts and reception of game music in modern society through phenomena such as video game music concerts as well as performances and arrangements of game music by fans

Tentative Course Schedule

Week of...	Topic(s)	Readings	Assignments/ Assessments
6 January	Introduction & History of Video Game Music Part 1: Beginnings to 8-Bit	Alyssa Aska, <i>Introduction to the Study of Video Game Music</i> , pp. 13-20 (Chapter 3.1 to 3.4)	
13 January	History of Video Game Music Part 2: 16-Bit to the Introduction of 64-Bit (including PlayStation and Nintendo 64)	Alyssa Aska, <i>Introduction to the Study of Video Game Music</i> , pp. 20-36 (Chapter 3.5 to 3.11 and 4.1 to 4.7)	

Week of...	Topic(s)	Readings	Assignments/ Assessments
20 January	History of Video Game Music Part 3: GameCube PS2, and Xbox; the Early HD Generation (PS3, Xbox 360, Wii)	Alyssa Aska, <i>Introduction to the Study of Video Game Music</i> , pp. 36-43, 45-47, and 48-54 (Chapter 4.8 to 4.11, 4.13 to 4.14, and 5.1 to 5.2)	
27 January	History of Video Game Music Part 4: Recent History to the Present	Alyssa Aska, <i>Introduction to the Study of Video Game Music</i> , pp. 54-68 (Chapter 5.3 to 5.10) Courseware, pp. 1-3	Link for Concert Review submitted to LEARN Dropbox by Sunday, 2 February at 11:59 p.m. EST
3 February	Music, Immersion, and Interactivity in Video Games	Alyssa Aska, <i>Introduction to the Study of Video Game Music</i> , pp. 70-85 (Chapter 6.1 to 6.11) Courseware, p. 4	Discussion Post #1: due on Sunday, 9 February at 11:59 p.m. EST
10 February	Music, Immersion, and Interactivity in Video Games (continued) & Midterm Exam	Courseware, pp. 5-6	Midterm Exam Listening Portion: Wednesday, 12 February (in class) Written Portion: Friday, 14 February (in class)
17 February	Reading Week: No Class		
24 February	Methods of Analysing & Discussing Video Game Music	Courseware, pp. 7-12	Research Paper Proposal due on Sunday, 3 March by 11:59 p.m. EST
3 March	Characterization and Narrative in Video Game Music	Courseware, pp. 13-17	Discussion Post #2: due on Sunday, 9 March at 11:59 p.m. EST
10 March	How Music Creates a Sense of Place in Games: Location Music Part One	Courseware, pp. 18-28	

Week of...	Topic(s)	Readings	Assignments/ Assessments
17 March	How Music Creates a Sense of Place in Games: Location Music Part Two	Courseware, pp. 28-31	Discussion Post #3: due on Sunday, 23 March at 11:59 p.m. EST
24 March	Battle and Boss Battle Music	Courseware, pp. 32-36	Discussion Post #4: due on Sunday, 30 March at 11:59 p.m. EST
31 March	Reception of Game Music Outside of Video Games; Concluding Thoughts, Wrap-Up, and the Future of Video Game Music	Alyssa Aska, <i>Introduction to the Study of Video Game Music</i> , pp. 43-45 (Chapter 4.12) Courseware, pp. 37-39	Concert Reviews due on Sunday, 6 April by 11:59 p.m. EST

Texts/Materials

Required Texts: Alyssa Aska, *Introduction to the Study of Video Game Music* (available on Amazon.ca for \$16.44) and Music 290 Courseware (available for free through the University of Waterloo eBookstore – see link on LEARN)

A list of required listening pieces will be posted on LEARN every Friday for the upcoming week. Please complete assigned readings and listen to the pieces for each week before coming to class.

There are also several books on reserve at Conrad Grebel University College's Milton Good Library in case you would like to consult them during the term. Each book is available on a three-hour loan from the library:

1. Tim Summers, *Pixel Soundtracks: Exploring Video Game Music Through Twenty Games* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2024)
2. William Cheng, *Sound Play: Video Games and the Musical Imagination* (Oxford University Press, 2014)
3. Karen Collins, *Game Sound: An Introduction to the History, Theory, and Practice of Video Game Music and Sound Design* (MIT Press, 2008)
4. Melanie Fritsch and Tim Summers, editors, *The Cambridge Companion to Video Game Music* (Cambridge University Press, 2021)
5. Michiel Kamp, Tim Summers, and Mark Sweeney, editors, *Ludomusicology: Approaches to Video Game Music* (Equinox, 2016)

6. K.J. Donnelly, William Gibbons, and Neil Lerner, editors, *Music in Video Games: Studying Play* (Routledge, 2014)

There is also a special *Time* magazine issue on *Pokémon*, which is available for three-hour loans from the library.

Student Assessment

Component	Value
Midterm Exam	30%
Final Exam	40%
Concert Review	20%
Online Discussions	10% (4 discussions at 2.5% each)

Midterm Exam

The Midterm Exam will be held in-class the week of 10 February and will include a listening component as well as short-answer questions and a brief essay. The listening portion will be completed on Wednesday, 12 February and the short answer/essay portion will be completed on Friday, 14 February. The midterm will cover topics up to and including 10 February. An outline and additional information about the exam structure will be provided closer to the midterm date.

Final Exam

The Final Exam will be 2.5 hours long and will be held during the final exam period. It is non-cumulative and will only cover topics that were discussed after the midterm exam. It will include a listening component, short answer questions, and 1 or 2 longer essays. An outline and additional information will be provided later in the course.

Concert Review

The concert review gives you an opportunity to watch a full video game music concert by a professional orchestra/ensemble in person or online and write a report about the performance that is approximately 3-5 pages in length (double-spaced). Additional information and guidelines for the concert review will be provided in class and posted on LEARN. All concerts must be

approved in advance by the instructor, and I can also make suggestions if you are unsure which concert to choose. You will indicate which concert you will be reviewing by submitting the title and a link to the concert (if online) or performance information (day/time the concert will occur, if in person) to the LEARN Dropbox by **Sunday, 2 February at 11:59 p.m. EST.**

Concert reviews are due on **Sunday, 6 April by 11:59 p.m. EST to the LEARN Dropbox.** Late submissions will be accepted without penalty until 48 hours after the assignment due date. A penalty of 5% per day will be applied to submissions received more than 48 hours after the assignment due date.

Online Discussions

You will engage in four online discussions with your peers on LEARN during the term. Each discussion will be worth 2.5% of your overall grade. Additional information about the topic and requirements for each discussion will be provided in class and a rubric outlining expectations for the discussion posts will be posted on LEARN. Due dates for each discussion post are listed in the course schedule (please see above). Submissions received after 11:59 p.m. EST on the stated due date for each discussion will not be accepted.

Assignment Screening

No assignment screening will be used in this course.

Administrative Policy

Generative AI

This course includes the independent development and practice of specific skills, such as critical thinking, academic writing, and musical analysis. Therefore, the use of Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) trained using large language models (LLM) or other methods to produce text, images, music, or code, like Chat GPT, DALL-E, or GitHub CoPilot, is not permitted in this class. Unauthorized use in this course, such as running course materials through GenAI or using GenAI to complete a course assessment is considered a violation of [Policy 71](#) (plagiarism or unauthorized aids or assistance). Work produced with the assistance of AI tools does not represent the author's original work and is therefore in violation of the fundamental values of academic integrity including honesty, trust, respect, fairness, responsibility and courage ([ICAI](#), n.d.).

You should be prepared to show your work. To demonstrate your learning, you should keep your rough notes, including research notes, brainstorming, and drafting notes. You may be asked to

submit these notes along with earlier drafts of their work, either through saved drafts or saved versions of a document. If the use of GenAI is suspected where not permitted, you may be asked to meet with your instructor or TA to provide explanations to support the submitted material as being your original work. Through this process, if you have not sufficiently supported your work, academic misconduct allegations may be brought to the Associate Dean.

In addition, you should be aware that the legal/copyright status of generative AI inputs and outputs is unclear. More information is available from the Copyright Advisory Committee: <https://uwaterloo.ca/copyright-at-waterloo/teaching/generative-artificial-intelligence>

Students are encouraged to reach out to campus supports if they need help with their coursework including:

- [Student Success Office](#) for help with skills like notetaking and time management
- [Writing and Communication Centre](#) for assignments with writing or presentations
- [AccessAbility Services](#) for documented accommodations
- [Library](#) for research-based assignments

Territorial Acknowledgement: The University of Waterloo acknowledges that much of our work takes place on the traditional territory of the Neutral, Anishinaabeg and Haudenosaunee peoples. Our main campus is situated on the Haldimand Tract, the land granted to the Six Nations that includes six miles on each side of the Grand River. Our active work toward reconciliation takes place across our campuses through research, learning, teaching, and community building, and is centralized within the [Office of Indigenous Relations](#)

Mental Health Support

All of us need a support system. The faculty and staff in Arts encourage students to seek out mental health support if they are needed.

On campus supports

All of us need a support system. The faculty and staff in Arts encourage students to seek out mental health and counselling if they are needed. For counselling (individual or group) reach out to [Campus Wellness and Counselling Services](#). Counselling Services strives to provide a secure, supportive environment for students of all orientations and backgrounds. They offer confidential counselling for a variety of areas including anxiety, stress management, depression, grief, substance use, sexuality, relationship issues, and much more.

Other on-campus supports

- [MATES](#): one-to-one peer support program offered by the Waterloo Undergraduate Student Association (WUSA) and Counselling Services
- Download the [WatSafe app](#) to your phone to quickly access mental health support information
- [Empower Me](#): to access create an account on the Dialogue mobile app or on the web at www.studentcare.ca/dialogue
- [Sexual Violence Prevention and Response Centre](#) - supports all members of the University of Waterloo campus community who have experienced or been impacted by sexual violence.

Off campus supports

- [Good2Talk](#): Free confidential help line for post-secondary students. Phone: 1-866-925-5454
- Grand River Hospital: Emergency care for mental health crisis. Phone: 519-749-4300
- [St. Mary's Hospital](#) - 519-744-3311
- [Here 24/7](#): Mental Health and Crisis Service Team. Phone: 1-844-437-3247
- 988 Suicide Crisis Helpline: a 24/7 urgent mental health care three-digit helpline
- [OK2BME](#): set of support services for Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex, asexual (@SLGBTQIA+) and questioning kids, teens, adults, and their families in Waterloo Region. Phone: 519-884-0000 or e-mail ok2bme@caminowellbeing.ca
- [Sexual Assault Support Centre of Waterloo Region](#) - offers individual counselling to people of all genders, 16+ who have been sexually assaulted at any point in their lives. As well as short-term support for family members or friends of sexual assault survivors. Also, information and referrals

More information about resources and supports for students can be found online in on the [Faculty of Arts Student Support](#) page.

Anti-Racism Statement

The University of Waterloo does not tolerate racism or any other form of discrimination and expects campus community members to contribute to a culture where all members feel safe and valued. Any member of the campus community who has experienced racism or discrimination at the University is encouraged to review available processes for addressing their concerns under Policy 33 – Ethical Behaviour and to seek guidance from the Equity Office via email at equity@uwaterloo.ca or through their [website](#)

Academic freedom at the University of Waterloo

[Policy 33, Ethical Behaviour](#) states, as one of its general principles (Section 1), “The University supports academic freedom for all members of the University community. Academic freedom

carries with it the duty to use that freedom in a manner consistent with the scholarly obligation to base teaching and research on an honest and ethical quest for knowledge. In the context of this policy, 'academic freedom' refers to academic activities, including teaching and scholarship, as is articulated in the principles set out in the Memorandum of Agreement between the FAUW and the University of Waterloo, 1998 (Article 6). The academic environment which fosters free debate may from time to time include the presentation or discussion of unpopular opinions or controversial material. Such material shall be dealt with as openly, respectfully and sensitively as possible.” This definition is repeated in Policies 70 and 71, and in the Memorandum of Agreement, Section 6.

Intellectual Property

Students should be aware that this course contains the intellectual property of their instructor, TA, and/or the University of Waterloo.

Intellectual property includes items such as:

- Lecture content, spoken and written (and any audio/video recording thereof);
- Lecture handouts, presentations, and other materials prepared for the course (e.g., PowerPoint slides);
- Questions or solution sets from various types of assessments (e.g., assignments, quizzes, tests, final exams); and
- Work protected by copyright (e.g., any work authored by the instructor or TA or used by the instructor or TA with permission of the copyright owner).

Course materials and the intellectual property contained therein, are used to enhance a student’s educational experience. However, sharing this intellectual property without the intellectual property owner’s permission is a violation of intellectual property rights. For this reason, it is necessary to ask the instructor, TA and/or the University of Waterloo for permission before uploading and sharing the intellectual property of others online (e.g., to an online repository).

Permission from an instructor, TA or the University is also necessary before sharing the intellectual property of others from completed courses with students taking the same/similar courses in subsequent terms/years. In many cases, instructors might be happy to allow distribution of certain materials. However, doing so without expressed permission is considered a violation of intellectual property rights.

Please alert the instructor if you become aware of intellectual property belonging to others (past or present) circulating, either through the student body or online. The intellectual property rights owner deserves to know (and may have already given their consent).

Pronouns and chosen or preferred first name

Students can verify their chosen or preferred first name by logging into [WatIAM](#). Your chosen or preferred first name listed in WatIAM will be used across campus (e.g., in LEARN, Quest, WaterlooWorks, WatCard, etc). Your legal first name will always be used on certain official documents, such as diplomas and transcripts.

Students can view and change their pronouns in [Quest](#). Should you choose to include your pronouns in Quest, your pronouns will be accessible by instructors, advisors, and employees with access to Quest. If no pronoun is added, the field in Quest will remain blank.

Accommodating religious and spiritual observances

[Applies only to students taking undergraduate courses]

The University of Waterloo has a duty to [accommodate religious, spiritual, and other creed-based beliefs and practices](#) under the Ontario Human Rights Commission (2015) [Policy on preventing discrimination based on creed](#). Students may seek accommodations for missed course components on religious, spiritual, or other creed grounds. In such cases the students should please consult the instructor within two weeks of the announcement of the due date for which the accommodation is being sought. Students also may request accommodations for temporary absences from classes or other course-related activities to engage in prayer or other daily spiritual practices. Instructors are expected to make reasonable arrangements to respectfully accommodate such requests. The University of Waterloo has a number of [multi-faith spaces](#) that students can use for faith-based practices.

Declaring absences

[Applies only to students taking undergraduate courses]

Please see the [Academic Regulations](#) section of the Undergraduate Calendar for more details. Regardless of the process used to declare an absence, it is the student's responsibility to contact their instructor so that the instructor can determine how to accommodate the missed work.

Absences due to religious, creed, and spiritual observances

Beginning Fall 2024, students can submit a [Religious Observance Self-Declaration Form in Quest](#). This form allows the student to register dates of potential conflicts with coursework. Students are expected to record their absence within two weeks of announcement of the due date or scheduled examination date for which academic accommodation is being sought. Submission through Quest will notify your instructors of your absence.

Absences due to verified illness

For absences due to illness that are not pandemic-related, students need to obtain a [Verification of Illness or Extenuating Circumstances Process](#). Submission through the [Absence Verification System](#), once registered, will notify your instructors of your absence. Students should not submit their VIF or any other medical documentation to your instructors, teaching assistants, or other course personnel. To request and arrange accommodations, it is the student's responsibility to contact the instructor within 48 hours of the date of any missed course component, or as soon as the student is able to given their health condition.

Absences due to extenuating circumstances (e.g., bereavement)

For absences due to extenuating circumstances (e.g., bereavement, serious family illness), students submit a [request for absence due to extenuating circumstances](#) to the [Absence Verification System](#) for processing. Students use the form to submit supporting documentation, which will be considered in a comparable manner to a VIF. Official documentation is necessary before any action can be taken. Examples are plane/train/bus tickets, court documents, police reports, death certificates/obituaries/letters from funeral directors. To request and arrange accommodations, it is the student's responsibility to contact the instructor within 48 hours of the date of any missed course component, or as soon as the student is able to given their circumstances.

Self-declared absences due to COVID-related illness

Students can [self-declare](#) an absence on Quest due to COVID-related illness or a requirement to self-isolate. A self-declared COVID absence covers up to 10 days and no documentation is required. No in-person course activity is permitted during the period of a self-declared COVID absence. Participation in on-line components is permitted but should not be required if the student notifies the instructor that they are too ill to participate in the online work. Submitting the self-declaration through Quest will notify your instructors of your absence. It is the student's responsibility to contact their instructors within the first 48 hours after submitting their COVID-related absence, or as soon as they are well enough, to discuss arrangements for missed course components.

Self-declared short-term absences for any reason

Students can [self-declare](#) one short-term absence per term on Quest for any reason. A short-term absence covers two calendar days, and no documentation is required. The student has only one self-declared short-term absence per term and this absence can only be used during the formal lecture period. Self-declared absences cannot be applied to Laboratory (LAB), Clinic (CLN), or Studio (STU) course components. Submitting the self-declaration through Quest will notify your instructors of your absence. It is the student's responsibility to contact their instructors within the first 24 hours after submitting their self-declaration to discuss accommodations for missed course components.

Recording lecture

Use of recording devices during lectures is only allowed with explicit permission of the instructor of the course. If allowed, video recordings may only include images of the instructor and not fellow classmates. Posting of videos or links to the video to any website, including but not limited to social media sites such as: Facebook, Twitter, etc., is strictly prohibited.

University Policy

Academic integrity: In order to maintain a culture of academic integrity, members of the University of Waterloo community are expected to promote honesty, trust, fairness, respect and responsibility. [Check [the Office of Academic Integrity](#) for more information.]

Grievance: A student who believes that a decision affecting some aspect of their university life has been unfair or unreasonable may have grounds for initiating a grievance. Read [Policy 70, Student Petitions and Grievances, Section 4](#). When in doubt, please be certain to contact the department's administrative assistant who will provide further assistance.

Discipline: A student is expected to know what constitutes academic integrity to avoid committing an academic offence, and to take responsibility for their actions. [Check [the Office of Academic Integrity](#) for more information.] A student who is unsure whether an action constitutes an offence, or who needs help in learning how to avoid offences (e.g., plagiarism, cheating) or about "rules" for group work/collaboration should seek guidance from the course instructor, academic advisor, or the undergraduate associate dean. For information on categories of offences and types of penalties, students should refer to [Policy 71, Student Discipline](#). For typical penalties, check [Guidelines for the Assessment of Penalties](#).

Appeals: A decision made or penalty imposed under [Policy 70, Student Petitions and Grievances](#) (other than a petition) or [Policy 71, Student Discipline](#) may be appealed if there is a ground. A student who believes they have a ground for an appeal should refer to [Policy 72, Student Appeals](#).

Note for students with disabilities: [AccessAbility Services](#), located in Needles Hall, Room 1401, collaborates with all academic departments to arrange appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities without compromising the academic integrity of the curriculum. If you require academic accommodations to lessen the impact of your disability, please register with AccessAbility Services at the beginning of each academic term.

Turnitin.com: Text matching software (Turnitin®) may be used to screen assignments in this course. Turnitin® is used to verify that all materials and sources in assignments are documented. Students' submissions are stored on a U.S. server, therefore students must be given an alternative (e.g., scaffolded assignment or annotated bibliography), if they are concerned about their privacy and/or security. Students will be given due notice, in the first week of the term and/or at the time assignment details are provided, about arrangements and alternatives for the use of Turnitin in this course.

It is the responsibility of the student to notify the instructor if they, in the first week of term or at the time assignment details are provided, wish to submit alternate assignment.