ENTERTAINMENT   ESPORTS   XBOX

PLAYSTATION   NINTENDO   PC   MOBILE
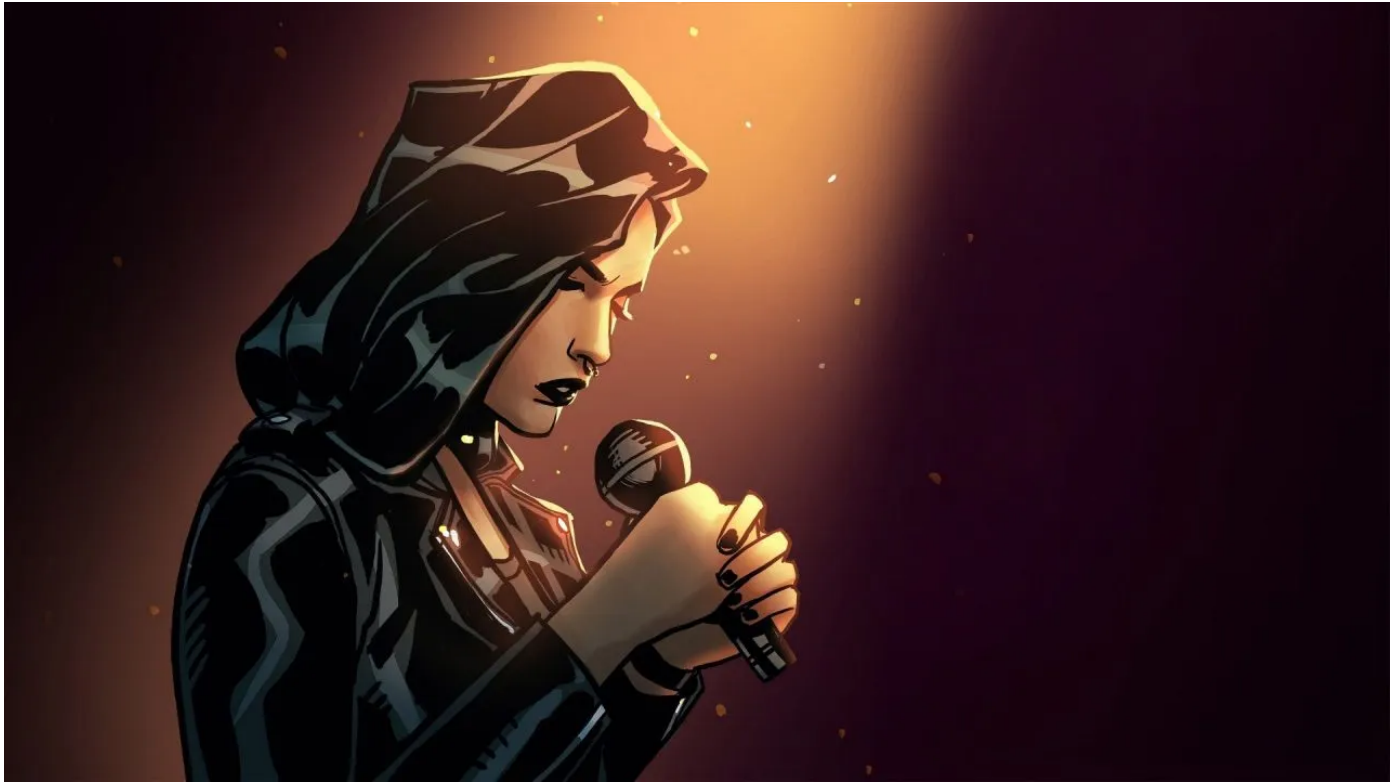
IN REAL LIFE   RETRO

KOTAKU AU

Bleeps, Blops, And Orchestral Arrangements: Why Australian Video Games Music Just Hits Different

Share

Josefina Huq

Published 9 months ago: September 30, 2023 at 8:49 am

Earlier in September, an audience at Hamer Hall was treated to Indie Symphony: Videogames in Concert, with live orchestral renditions of some of the best indie video game scores. The second half of the program was dedicated to music composed for Victorian games, including *Necrobarista* and *Hollow Knight*. The games were adapted specifically for the event, all except *Stray Gods*, as Orchestra Victoria had already recorded for every song of its soundtrack.

Composer and broadcaster Meena Shamalay excitedly guided the audience through the evening, stressing the significance of such an occasion: "In the days of the first video games all we could fit into those early consoles were single synthesisers with electrical charges dancing upon their circuitry. Now, a video game score is anything you can imagine."

The existence of *Stray Gods* is indicative of the ranging possibilities of indie game music being composed in Victoria, not merely as emotional backdrop to gameplay, but as a central mechanic and narrative engine. I spoke with composer and writer Dan Golding about the special qualities of video game music, the cleverness of *Stray Gods*, and why Victoria seems to be killing it in video game composition.

Video Game Music

"I've watched a lot of international video game concerts, and I honestly think what Orchestra Victoria did was up there with the best," Golding said. Not only was Hamer Hall packed to capacity, the audience gave a standing ovation at the end of the *Hollow Knight* suite, originally composed by Christopher Larkin. "His quality of music is so far above most other kinds of music being churned out in Australia."

"Another thing that made Indie Symphony so remarkable is that it's just so unusual to hear Australian video game music." There have been similarly successful video game music events (such as Golding's own score from *Untitled Goose Game* being orchestrated), but Indie Symphony is already being observed as, what most people hope is, the start of more culturally significant showcases of Australian video game music. "Original Australian compositions in an orchestral setting are things that symphony orchestras love to do, but there's not really a huge audience that will pack out Hamer Hall. As much as I'm sure everyone would love there to be, that's just not the reality."

One has to wonder what exactly makes this incredibly niche space of video game compositions and orchestral performances so successful. "I think it's the quality of the music. People wouldn't give a standing ovation at the end if they didn't love what they just heard, but I think as well the culture of the audience around video games is different to other media." Golding credits the agency involved in playing a game, as well as the multimedia sensations that usually occurs in personal spaces such as the home. "There's a real embrace of it. You spend so much time in a game, so you're much more likely to become familiar with the music and have an almost intimate experience with it. It becomes intertwined with your nostalgia for a game so much more powerfully."

Golding also believes that music "depends on the needs of its media forms." Comparing film scores to video game compositions shows distinct differences. "Games and music have always had a really interesting and unique relationship. It's interactive. It's not just there to tell you about mood and narrative as it is in film, it's also there to tell you about what you have to do. Like, if you're being

attacked by enemies, the action music plays. When they're all defeated, the resolution music plays. I think there's always been a level of complexity there."

Stray Gods

The most recent Australian musical to receive global attention has not come from a run of live theatre performances, but from the screens of gaming devices. Initially, I did not allow myself to get excited for *Stray Gods*. Ambitious is the word I would have used to describe its premise; a musical RPG visual-novel, which sees the player solving a murder-mystery through song to appease the ancient Greek Gods living covertly in a metropolis. I was skeptical, unable to see how creators would blend the rules of these worlds. How could they combine effective game mechanics with musical tropes, and somehow keep the gameplay and narrative intact?

Off the back of my third playthrough, I can admit that I should have trusted Summerfall Studios, not just for the pure audacity of making such an ambitious game for a niche subset of people, but largely because they were making it in the intersecting environments of music, arts, and game development in Victoria.

"Stray Gods is such an obvious example of game developers being interested in more than video games. It's so crucial, and something that I really wasn't seeing a lot of ten years ago," Golding says, "I love that it's so obviously taking cues and inspiration from musicals and drawing inspiration from things that aren't the usual kind of video games fodder."

Instead of being confined to what video games typically look and sound like, Summerfall Studios seemed to flourish in its freedom as an independent team, playing with a range of art forms from the comic-book style designs, to the much-celebrated composer Austin Wintory collaborating with Montaigne, Tripod, and a whole orchestra.

In addition to the stunning visuals and audio, the roleplaying element is especially impressive. "The way to get the most effective kind of experience is to replay it. The wild variability of the game really only becomes clear when you choose things for the second time,'" Golding noted.

The plot of the game can drastically change depending on the musical choices made. This can only be realised with subsequent play-throughs and confirms how deeply intertwined the music is with the narrative. As Shamalay remarked, "wrapping my head around the infinite depth of musical possibilities nearly broke my brain." This array of choice in-song is an aspect that some critics disliked; should they be faithful to the tone of the tune, or change it to fit the story they desire? Yet, this element is what keeps it engaging and 'gamey'. The pressure of making hard choices (with a timer attached) is a friction that makes for excellent gameplay.

"*Stray Gods* is a singular achievement. There have always been music video games in the sense of

bringing music to the fore, but a branching narrative system of song? Who's done that before!?" Golding has seen similar proto-mechanics in other games, but says that it's largely like "drawing in crayon compared to the basilica painting that is *Stray Gods*."

Evolution of Melbourne Game Music

Many consider video game music to still be an emerging cultural force, but big shifts have already occurred, including the transition from the 'bleeps and blops' of *Tetris* to the diverse scores we are hearing today. Golding believes that part of this is due to changing technologies and the ways we now consume and interact with them.

"Since video games became powerful they became capable of streaming music rather than generating music." At the same time of the collapse and rebirth of the music industry, Golding says that "games have gone from pretty locked in ecosystems to today, where we've had the mobile revolution." Because of the ability to fit more complexity into a game and the ease in which you can create and access music, there is more fluidity between the two fields.

Melbourne is where we can truly see the strength of this relationship. "Melbourne has always sold itself as a music city, and so the fact that it has become a game city (again) isn't particularly surprising, as it's very easy to intertwine those two cultures. To think, hey, we're making games in a music city so let's tap into that." This change could explain why Victoria is such a powerhouse of video game music, as Golding describes that "both the games and the music sectors have undergone the most radical transformation possible alongside the kind of music for video games changing dramatically."

It is partly the reason why games like *Stray Gods* can not only exist but thrive here. Outside of gameplay, there is a culture that means events like Indie Symphony are feasible and successful alongside the gigantic, musically-stacked program for this year's Melbourne International Games Week. Much of the playful genre-bending is also a result of a thriving indie game scene which Golding says "lends itself to being creative with music because you're not working within a big studio system that has established ways of working. You have the ability to step back and go, what could the music do?"

Dan Golding will be presenting at this year's High Score conference as part of games week, where he and Brendan Keogh will be discussing The Australian Music in Games Benchmark and probably gushing some more about the Australian video game music scene.

"I don't want to use the phrase 'punching above our weight' because it's so hackneyed. But like... that's what is happening."

The Cheapest NBN 1000 Plans

Looking to bump up your internet connection and save a few bucks? Here are the cheapest plans available.

More From Kotaku Australia

[Video Games Get Orchestral In Melbourne, And I Get Jealous](#)

[Gussy Your Tailfeathers, Untitled Goose Game Is Getting An Orchestral Show](#)

[Pro Figure-Skater Uses Chrono Trigger Music, Sadly Does Not Win](#)

[No New Wing Commander Games? Let's Remake The Music Instead](#)

About the Author

Josefina Huq   ⌖ Post   ✉ Email

Comments

Leave a Reply

Your email address will not be published. Required fields are marked *

Comment *

Name *