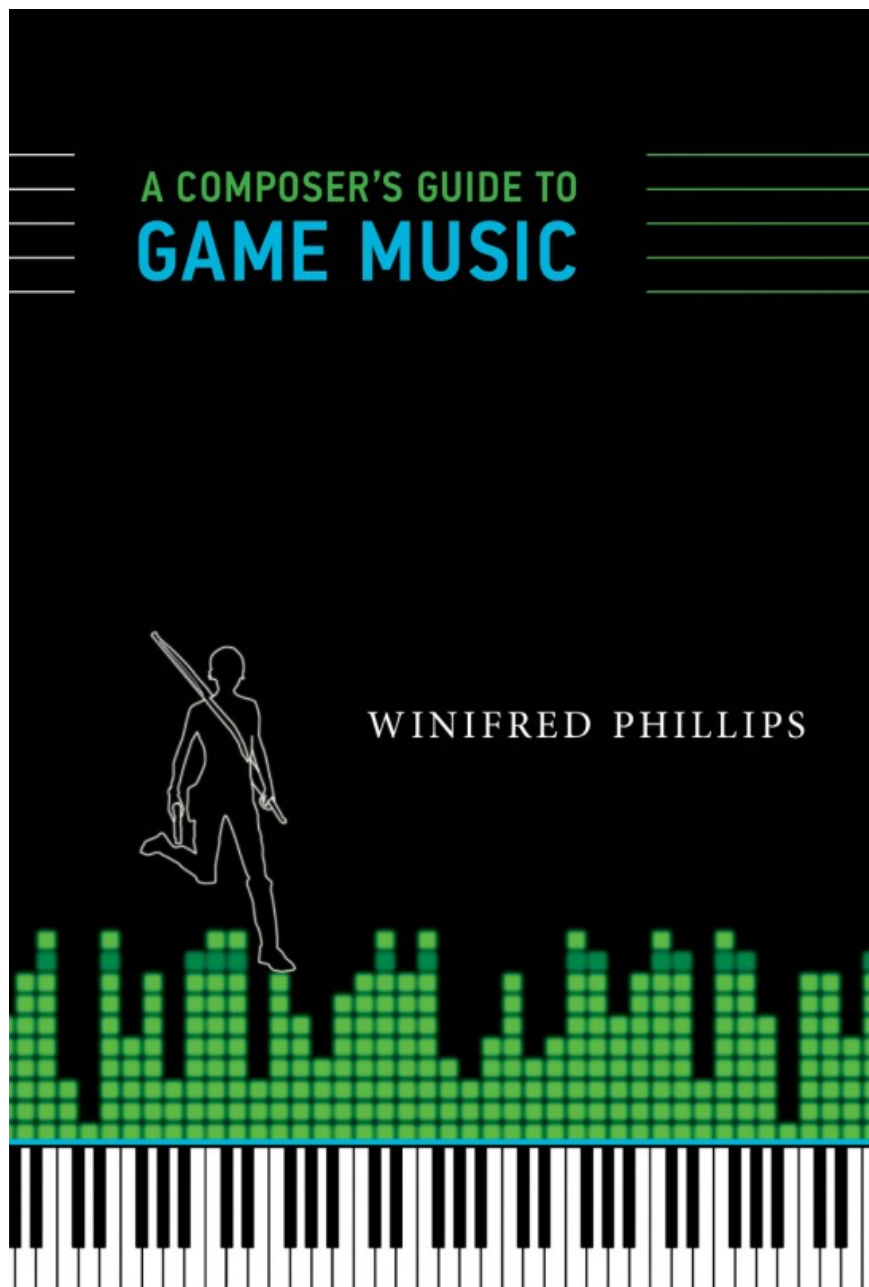# Book Review

A Composer's Guide To Game Music
by Phillips Winifred

By Claire Fitch

The games industry is currently enjoying a creative explosion of possibilities, not least from the perspective of writing music for this technology-fuelled aspect of the entertainment world. In this regard, the publication of Winifred Phillips A Composer's Guide To Game Music (MIT Press 2014) proves timely. Aligning perfectly with the newfound interest of composers keen to capitalize on the myriad of opportunities working through this medium presents, this book has particular relevance for composers interested in transferring their classical composition training over to writing music for games. Having written music for some of the most successful Triple A games in recent years Phillips presents an interesting and insightful overview of industry practice, research and music composition. Her enthusiasm for playing games, as well as writing music for them is obvious from the outset, with her gaming memories being used to discuss the musical experiences in many classic titles. It is fair to say that the advice she shares on potential workflow processes has relevance for the more established game composer looking to 'level-up' their career, as well as those looking to gain a foothold in the game music composition industry.

While many earlier books covering this genre have relied on anecdotal and historical examples, this is perhaps the first to include original musical examples from an established game composer. The book includes many musical examples to highlight the broad scope of potential compositional styles and techniques within the games industry, including titles such as Assassin's Creed III: Liberation, SimAnimals, The Da Vinci Code, Big Little Planet and The Maw. Affording the reader such an insight into the creative and technical process of the craft of game music composition facilitates the potential for reverse-engineering the composition process, which is an interesting development.

The book's main thesis hinges around the responsibilities of a freelance composer working within the games industry. Similar to the approach taken by Aaron Marks in Game Development Essentials: Game Audio Development (2009) and by G.W Childs in Creating Music and Sound for Games (2007), Philips also begins by sharing her experiences of finding work, negotiating the necessary contracts and dealing with the day-to-day business of writing music for games. Where Marks goes on to emphasize the creation, recording, capturing, editing and mastering process of sound content associated with

game audio and Childs discusses the minute details of the software used in the production of sound, Phillips's focus is on developing a creative skillset based on musicianship. The technical aspects of composition are carefully examined, with specific examples from Assassin's Creed III: Liberation used to illustrate Leitmotif and Idée Fixe; SimAnimals, Spore Hero and Shrek the Third are used in relation to looping techniques and Speed Racer examples are used to highlight horizontal re-sequencing. Examples from The Maw are also drawn upon in providing explanations of vertical layering. Phillips further highlights the importance of keeping up with the latest advances in music and game engine technology, a practice she shares through extra content available via her blog. (https://winifredphillips.wordpress.com/)

Although compositional techniques are the focus of A Composer's Guide To Game Music, there is also a significant amount of research into the various genres involved in music and games, with an in-depth investigation linking different personality types of players to specific music types and game types. Phillips discusses the influential power that music can have on the branding and appeal of a particular game title and her analysis into what makes music work well within the game world is particularly interesting.

As noted earlier, Phillips gives many excellent, in-depth descriptions of the creative and technical nature of composing music for video games, and in this regard, the chapters on Linear Music in Games and Interactive Music in Games warrant specific comment. Linear Music in Games introduces the current strategies used by game composers, highlighting the practice of loop composition. Using musical examples from Spore Hero Phillips describes linear looping, outlining the techniques of perpetual development, compositional dynamics, successive variation, repeating figures and slow textures. The development of thematic content without depending on the use of traditional song structure is presented as a necessary and critical skill in the development of successful game music composition. Other examples from The Da Vinci Code and God of War are also called upon to describe the craft of the linear loop. Interactive Music in Games is explored through Phillips's discussion of the types of non-linear music currently used in game composition. Stingers, transitions, horizontal re-sequencing and vertical layering are all discussed in detail using examples from The Maw and Little Big Planet. Phillips proposes

options for constructing a game score using collections of component parts, illustrating a clear understanding of the practices involved. In particular, her depth of knowledge demonstrates a clear passion for both games and game music. She is enthusiastic about the subject and encourages both a hands-on approach as well as a strong theoretical basis to examine the relevant academic studies within the area.

Throughout this adventurous journey into the world of game music, Phillips observes that the game sound world is in constant flux, primarily driven by the relentless advances of technology. Interestingly, despite her acknowledgement that a freelance game audio content provider should possess a consistent and current knowledge of all developments in music, sound effects, audio middleware and game engines, one of the book's shortcomings is that the audio capabilities and potentialities of game engines and middleware engines could perhaps have been explored in more depth. This 2014 text was written at the crossover point of software upgrades from both audio middleware and game engines, which unfortunately renders the discussion about FMOD Designer immediately out of date. For those seeking a more up to date introduction to game engines and audio middleware, it may be found in Steve Horowitz and Scott Looney The Essential Guide to Game Audio: The Theory and Practice of Sound for Games (2014) and Michael Sweet's Writing Interactive Music for Video Games (2015).

That small criticism aside, some of the most useful information presented within A Composer's Guide To Game Music concerns the introduction of traditional compositional strategies and how they might be applied to composition for games. Idée Fixe, Leitmotif, the art of looping, horizontal re-sequencing, vertical layering are all specific skills required for game music composition, and this is the first book within the field of game audio to cover these topics in-depth. This makes it essential reading for composers interested in transferring their classical composition training over to writing music specifically for use within the games industry. The scope of this book is wide and well informed, covering a large part of what are now the basic requirements for writing music for games. Phillips provides an insightful, informative overview of game music composition that draws extensively from wider research into the relevant academic studies as well as from the

author's extensive career in writing music for games. Phillips shares insights in to the game composition world from an informative and interesting perspective.

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Bio

Claire Fitch is a composer with over ten years experience in writing music for games. Claire also lectures in game music composition and sound design for games at Griffith College, Dublin and Pulse College, Dublin. She is currently a PhD candidate at Queen's University Belfast, researching sonic art and composition.

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