



Vocalist, pianist, recording artist, and avid gamer **Jennifer Miller Hammel** wants video game music to get the respect it deserves, an idea that still garners debate from certain parts of the classical music world. She makes a strong case for its rightful place in that ecosystem with her video game and classical music streaming channel **Arcade**, a part of the non-commercial **Classical California** KDFC/KUFC radio station.



Miller Hammel shaped Arcade into a consistently reliable argument on why **video game music** should be seen as a legitimate artistic endeavor that shares in the same complexity and consideration as other classical works. It doesn't necessarily see it as a new thing that has to fight its way into this heavily storied arena. Instead, it views video game music as a natural expansion of the field. This is why Miller Hammel's decision to include newer classical pieces that inspire video game music is so clever and so necessary. It further cements the interconnectedness of it.



If there's ever any doubt as to the power of music in video games, consider playing an early mission from *Medal of Honor: Frontline* for the **Playstation 2** called "Eye of the Storm." It's a covert style level set in the submarine docking pens of Lorient in France. You have a small arsenal of weapons at your disposal, but if you play your cards right the mission can be completed from the shadows with a sniper rifle in hand.

You're sabotaging U-boats in an attempt to cripple the Nazi's underwater operations. The mission could've gone scoreless, to highlight the stealthy nature of it. But it isn't. Composer **Michael Giacchino** (*The Batman*, *The Incredibles*) crafts one of the best pieces in the game for this level. It's called "Border Town" and it's a methodically paced piece that combines subtle moments driven by soft wind and string sections followed by sonically denser interventions that build to a rousing finale where the player is left feeling like he's the sole reason the Allies won World War II.

It's one of the most impressive, chest-swelling moments in video games, and it's the score that seals it. There are many more examples of this kind of effect, ranging from intensely emotional pieces found in classic RPGs like *Final Fantasy VII* (by **Nobuo Uematsu**) to dimly ominous tracks crafted for games like *Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (**Hajime Wakai**, **Manaka Kataoka**, and **Yasuaki Iwata**). All of these works have gotten generous amounts of airtime on Arcade, and once you start coming back to the station it's very hard to stay away from it.

RICARDO SERRANO: We all have our origin stories when it comes to video game music. The one that really got me in it was *NBA Jam*. As a kid playing that game in arcades, it reminded me of the NBC and NBA on TNT intro themes while also capturing that funky, soul-infused sounds basketball evokes. Which record or individual piece did that for you?

JENNIFFER MILLER HAMMEL: I always had an appreciation for game music. Of course, I loved the classics going all the way back to **Koji Kondo's** music for Mario and Zelda. But I feel like the one that really made me understand how epic game music could be was **Jack Wall's** music for *Myst 3: Exile*. I'd been a *Myst* fan since 1993, since the original game came out. When *Myst 3* came out, I picked up the big collectors edition of the game that came with the soundtrack. Actually, when the game came out I was supposed to go study abroad in Italy for a month. I bought it and then literally left the next day. But I took the music with me to listen to, so I could kind of get a sense of it and where the game was going to go.

It absolutely transfixed my imagination. I knew at that point that video game music could be as cinematic as anything that you will see in a major blockbuster film, or a big television show. It really started me thinking about how big these scores can go? And so, I started going down that rabbit hole.

I'm a big adventure game person. I went on to play games like *The Longest Journey* and *Siberia* and found these games also had incredible scores. I really started paying more attention to what was going on musically. It also helped that I never saw genre when it came to music, because I was raised in a very musically diverse household. For me, good music was just good music. It wasn't classical music, it wasn't game music, it wasn't movie music, it was just good music. This was another way for me to add a lot more music to my rotation.



SERRANO: There's this idea, that more traditional types adhere to, that frames video game scores as the escapist form of classical music. It's meant to diminish that work by creating a different category that separates video games from the likes of Brahms or Debussy. You clearly don't see the need to go down that route. How do you counterargue that point?



MILLER HAMMEL: First of all, I would love to sit down and do a blind taste test with them. Give them, say, Dvořák's "Rondo for cello." Which is a beautiful, beautiful piece. And then after that, play the main themes from Austin Wintory's scores for *Journey* and *Flow* to see if they can tell the difference.

I mean, one is going to sound more modern, but does one scream game music over the other? I think the reaction comes from the fact that they know going into it that it's video game music, and so therefore they think it's something that's supposed to sit in the background and not be paid attention to.

To be fair, and after having talked to so many composers who work in this industry, there is a sort of balancing act where you do have to create some music for a game that is not necessarily going to be what you hope or want it to be. For example, I think the music for the *Final Fantasy: Crisis Core* DLC is great, but it is

too front and center while you're trying to play and focus on the game. With some games, the music does sort of hang in the background a little bit. But I would still challenge these folks to go in blind and try to tell the difference. I think that having that foreknowledge that you're listening to a game piece kind of sets your brain in a certain way.

I would tell them to go and listen to game music as if they were listening to a **Beethoven** piano sonata, or a **Schubert** symphony. I tell people this all the time, if Mozart, Handel, Vivaldi, and Beethoven were working today, this is what they would be writing. Because they wrote music. They wrote where the work was. In their times, it was writing courtly music and grand operas, things along those lines. You'd write for weddings and coronations. Today, the money for music is in entertainment, especially in gaming.



SERRANO: You recently brought your very successful radio show, *Arcade*, to a live audience. What surprised you about the experience? Anything particularly unexpected?

MILLER HAMMEL: I had the lovely opportunity to partner with our friends at the San Francisco Conservatory, and they have this incredible program there: The Technical and Applied Composition program, or the TAC program. It trains the commercial music composers of tomorrow. Students in this program get to work in film scoring, television scoring, and game scoring. They go through the whole development cycle, working with student game developers to do audio design and music design.

That was one of the things that really impressed me about the whole process behind Arcade Live!, that we were able to utilize the students at the school to make these brand new arrangements for these incredible pieces of classical music. They arranged “Ride of the Valkyries” for two pianos, and it was one of the most impressive things I’ve ever heard.

Then we got to pair older pieces with game music to establish a kind of correspondence between them, to look at influences and connections. There’s this piece called *Ill Tarantella*, a piece that finds its roots centuries ago in a type of dance that’s inspired by spiders, that was paired with “Spider Dance” from *Undertale* (composed by **Shirobon**). To hear those two pieces next to each other, and to hear how closely linked they are even though they were written 200 years apart, it reinforced the belief that this music is just more closely linked than people think. And then to see the audience reaction, because we had a very small studio audience of about 40 people, and about half of the folks there had never been to a concert where game music was played, was very surprising and reaffirming for me.

SERRANO: If you could offer a short playlist of songs, pieces, or full scores to get people into video game music (all the way to getting tickets for a concert), what would you include in it?

MILLER HAMMEL: Well, first of all, I would say go check out Arcade. That's a great place to start. I will pitch myself here because you really do get hours upon hours of music to enjoy and lose yourself in. The way I put it together, It's about 80% game music, 20% classical music that's been used in video games or have influenced them.

But I would say, if you really just want to get started and not necessarily have to go through all of Arcade, check out the music of [Jessica Curry](#). She's a great British composer who's done a lot of work in the indie game world. She does a lot of work with orchestra and choir. It's some of the best music you will ever hear. It's actually what inspired me to create Arcade. She composed the music of *Amnesia: A Machine for Pigs*, *Dear Esther*, and *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*.

Austin Wintory is another great composer. The music he wrote for *Journey* is some of the best examples of what can be done with games in this field. **Inon Zur**, who composed the scores for *Fallout* and *Starfield*, is another sure bet. He did amazing work with the score for *Siberia: The World Before*, basically turning it into a piano concerto. There's just some really, really wonderful composers out there. And then, of course, you have **Wilbert Roget II**. He's a big name. Recently, he worked on *Helldivers 2* and *Star Wars: Outlaws*. And of course, Jack Wall.

SERRANO: A bonus question. How does 8-bit and 16-bit music fit into the video game music arena from a classical music standpoint?



MILLER HAMELL: That's a good question. Makes me think about *Mega Man* a lot. So, lately there's been a lot of orchestras that have been doing orchestral covers of 8-bit music and 16-bit music from the good old NES days, and it's really interesting to see how that music translates overall. Just think about the *Castlevania* series, all the possibilities there.

You're probably not going to hear the more synthesized stuff on Arcade just because of the way it's programmed. Arcade is meant to appeal to more orchestral listeners. But when you hear the scores of *Castlevania*, *Mega Man 2*, *Mario*, and *Zelda* being translated to orchestra, then it opens it up for us. It's an incredible thing to listen to those old iconic sounds being interpreted by a full orchestra. I always keep an eye out for that.



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