

***Taiko no Tatsujin*: Musical literacy in the Media Mix**

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the *Taiko no Tatsujin* (Bandai Namco, 2001/2018) franchise and the musical literacy it conveys. While previous accounts of game musical literacy have focused on the competence necessary to interpret references across media (van Elferen, 2016), this paper expands on the concept, including forms of musical participation such as live performances and oral traditions.

The musical compositions included in *Taiko no Tatsujin* pertain to the Japanese phenomenon of media convergence known as media mix (Steinberg, 2012), as they have been previously popularized by anime and *geemu ongaku* (or game music) (Yamakami & Barbosa, 2015). However, the musical participation extends its references to the practice of Japanese *taiko* drumming, a largely oral, non-notated musical form, which cannot be reduced to a musical repertoire.

The conclusions show that game musical literacy is constructed not only on media literacy, but also on various different forms of participation in musical performances, or musicking (Small, 1998), which concur in constructing game musical literacy. The musical culture associated with digital games is therefore expressed through a large variety of musical practices.

Keywords

Music, *Taiko no Tatsujin*, media mix, musicking

INTRODUCTION

Few games have captured the collective imagination about the Japanese arcade scene like the *Taiko no Tatsujin* franchise. With more than 50 entries, the series has been deployed on platforms such as PS4, Nintendo Switch, PS Vita, Nintendo Wii, Android mobiles, and more. Arguably, the most recognizable version of *Taiko no Tatsujin* remains however its arcade iteration, which features two large drum-shaped input devices. Proportionately large mallets are available for the player, inviting the immediate possibility of hard-hitting the drums. The color, shape, and general look of the input devices mimic that of a traditional Japanese *taiko*. The musical compositions included in the game, however, seem to be less based in the actual *taiko* tradition. In fact, they might be more familiar to fans of digital games, j-pop, or anime. The first game in the series, simply called *Taiko no Tatsujin* (Namco, 2001), features theme songs from popular anime such as *Doraemon* and *Ampanman*; tracks from other Namco game franchises; and original compositions in diverse genres, from ska to heavy metal. In that regard, *Taiko no Tatsujin* can be considered as an example of the “media mix”, understood as “the practice of marketing interconnected works

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for different media (manga, anime, movies, etc.) and tie-in products” (Picard & Pelletier-Gagnon, 2015) within the context of the Japanese media entertainment industry. *Taiko no Tatsujin*, however, does not just take part in the media mix by featuring popular characters from anime, but also by including a musical repertoire associated and popularized within the media mix. In that regard, *Taiko no Tatsujin* heavily relies on the “musical media literacy” of its player, intended as “the fluency in hearing and interpreting film, television or advertising music through the fact of our frequent exposure to them and, subsequently, our ability to interpret their communications” (van Elferen, 2016).

The anime songs included in the digital game provide a cultural context situated within the media mix, initiating a specific cultural discourse with potential players. However, this musical context and repertoire is not the one that would be generally associated with taiko drumming. In fact, this broad class of Japanese percussion instruments is definitely not primarily used in musical compositions pertaining to the above-mentioned genres and contexts. In that regard, *Taiko no Tatsujin* shows a crucial difference with comparable digital game franchises such as *Guitar Hero* (Harmonix, 2005) or *Rock Band* (Harmonix, 2007). The similarities between these games are primarily found in the game mechanics, which, at least on a basic level, require the players to “hit” a pattern of notes in time with popular songs. However, both *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band* feature musical compositions that are archetypical of the musical practices represented; as such, these digital games consistently aim to be legitimately positioned within a musical discourse, largely situated within the “rock” musical genre. *Taiko no Tatsujin*, instead, takes a more ironic, surreal approach, juxtaposing the relatively traditional practices of taiko drumming with musical compositions largely situated within the modern cultural sphere of the media mix.

Therefore, on one hand *Taiko no Tatsujin* taps into the musical media literacy of its players, which happens to be mostly situated in the media mix; on the other hand, a different kind of literacy is involved, situated outside of media literacy and within the cultural practices of taiko performances.

How is it possible to describe the overall musical literacy conveyed by *Taiko no Tatsujin*? To answer this question, this paper will expand the context of musical literacy in digital games, going beyond media analysis to include other forms of musical participation not based on media forms. In doing so, I argue that the musicological contextualization of digital games cannot be solely situated within a given mediascape, but rather needs to take into account a diverse range of cultural practices. The musicological theoretical tools deployed in this paper will reflect this scope, referring to the concept of musicking, introduced by New Zealand musicologist Christopher Small (1998). Small considers “music” not as a noun, but as a verb: “to music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing” (1998, p. 9).

Small specifies that this list of music is not finite, and does not exclude other possible musickings:

“The verb to music is [...] descriptive, not prescriptive. It covers all participations in a musical performance, whether it takes place actively or passively, whether we like the way it happens or whether we do not, whether we consider it interesting or boring, constructive or destructive, sympathetic or antipathetic” (1998, p. 9).

In this regard, this paper identifies the musicking enabled by *Taiko no Tatsujin*, and the complex web of musical meanings referenced by it.

GEEMU ONGAKU IN THE MEDIA MIX

In this section, I will introduce the concepts of media mix and *geemu ongaku* (or videogame music) and position *Taiko no Tatsujin* within this specific cultural context.

The term media mix has been intended originally, within the Japanese mediascape, as a marketing strategy that targets different advertising media in an organic, comprehensive fashion. This understanding of media mix has been formalized in 1963 by the ad journal *Senden Kaigi* (Advertising Meeting) (Steinberg, 2012, p. 139). However, as mentioned, “media mix” now identifies a phenomenon of convergence between different media, in which given intellectual properties are spread across a number of different outlets such as manga, anime, toys, and more. While the compatible idea of media convergence has already been described by Jenkins (2006), mostly in relation to the North American mediascape, Steinberg argues that the media mix phenomenon has instead a specific history, situated in Japan, and is primarily centered on anime.

“The emergence of Japanese television animation, or *anime*, in the 1960s as a system of interconnected media and commodity forms was [...] a major turning point and inspiration for [...] the media mix” (2012, p. viii).

While synergy across media is an international phenomenon, Ito draws differences between the Japanese media mix and the US mediascape:

“Unlike with US origin media, which tends to be dominated by home based media such as the home entertainment center and the PC Internet, Japanese media mixes tend to have a stronger presence in portable media formats such as Game Boys, mobile phones, trading cards and character merchandise that make the imagination manifest in diverse contexts and locations outside of the home” (Ito, 2010, p. 86).

Digital games are arguably involved in the media mix as well. Lamarre inserts digital games in the media mix by considering them within the larger group of digital media. Specifically, Lamarre mentions the franchise *.hack*, “a multimedia series whose media instances [feature] manga, anime, Playstation 2 (PS2) console game” (2018, p. 289). The franchise creators used media mix marketing strategies, “releasing the *.hack* manga in a Kadokawa magazine and broadcasting the anime series just before launching the first game” (Lamarre, 2018, p. 293).

Similarly, Picard and Pelletier-Gagnon aim to analyze Japanese digital games (or *geemu*, in Japanese) in the media mix: “understanding the different articulations of the *geemu* media mix allows to better identify the development, marketing and consumption practices of video games in Japan” (Picard & Pelletier-Gagnon, 2015).

The role of digital game music has also specifically been analyzed in relation to the media mix. In their analysis of *geemu ongaku*, Yamakami and Barbosa identify in the 1980s the “golden age” of Japanese videogame music (2015). The authors primarily understand as *geemu ongaku* musical compositions originally composed for digital games. While they consider it difficult to formally define *geemu ongaku* as a consistent genre according to its musical characteristics, they argue that at least commercially it can be considered as such, noting that by the end of the 1990s over 350 CDs of “game music” were available on the Japanese market. Fritsch also documented the popularity of these releases (2016).

Specific magazines have also been instrumental in the development of *geemu ongaku* culture. *Beep*, founded in 1984 by Softbank, included not only “sonosheets”¹ of game music, but also “criticism and analysis of music or sound design, basic courses in acoustics, interviews with composers, [and] introductory guides to direct recording of video games in arcade centers” (Yamakami & Barbosa, 2015).

Geemu ongaku culture, however, does not exist solely in media forms such as music CDs, digital games, or magazines: the *geemu ongaku* repertoire is also performed during live concerts, which features diverse ensembles ranging from small bands to large symphonic orchestras. Live *geemu ongaku* concerts also facilitated the emergence of “sound teams”: musical groups like Zuntata, Kukeiha Club, or SST Band.

“Teams, formerly hidden behind a game title or company name, came under the spotlight as true “musicians” and artists. The sound part of their games was recognized as a musical “work”, and since that time, any new release, for many admirers, meant the creation of a new piece by their favorite musician” (Yamakami & Barbosa, 2015).

Taiko no Tatsujin participates in remediating *geemu ongaku*, since it features musical compositions from prominent digital game franchises. Starting from its 8th arcade version, *Taiko no Tatsujin 8* (Bandai Namco, 2006), *geemu ongaku* was featured as a musical genre with its own dedicated playlist, alongside J-pop hits, anime songs, and other genres. A total of 12 *geemu ongaku* songs were included; tracks ranged from classic, easily recognizable tunes like the *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo, 1985) and *The Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo, 1986) respective main themes, to songs from the Bandai Namco franchises *Tekken* (Namco, 1994) and *Soulcalibur* (Project Soul, 1998). Also notable is the inclusion of the main theme of *Darius* (Taito, 1987), a classic shoot’em up arcade game.

However, *Taiko no Tatsujin* does not just remediate previously available *geemu ongaku* tracks, but also contributes to the genre repertoire. In fact, the game regularly features several original compositions that should arguably be considered as part of *geemu ongaku*. These original tracks are grouped in the game song list under the moniker of “Namco Originals”, and are specifically composed for *Taiko no Tatsujin*. Similarly to what has been described by Yamakami and Barbosa with regards to other *geemu ongaku* tracks, the Namco Originals are introduced in a given digital game and subsequently remediated in different ways. For example, the audio CD *Taiko no Tatsujin OST – Katanuki* (2018) is a compilation entirely consisting of recent Namco Originals tracks. This latter audio CD is one of the many available records dedicated to *Taiko no Tatsujin*; however, these soundtracks usually features a mix of different genres, juxtaposing for instance anime songs and J-pop. The *Katanuki* compilation can therefore be considered as a testament to the popularity of Namco Originals within *geemu ongaku* culture, proving *Taiko no Tatsujin* contribution to the genre’s repertoire.

Taiko no Tatsujin is therefore embedded in the media mix and in *geemu ongaku* culture. As illustrated, a variety of different forms of musical participation, or musickings, are practiced within this specific musical culture. Even a brief overview reveals that the different musickings performed by *geemu ongaku* participants range from playing given digital games, to purchasing *geemu ongaku* CDs, to buying dedicated magazines, and more.

GAME MUSICAL LITERACY IN THE GEEMU MEDIA MIX

The musical culture described by Yamakami and Barbosa documents the peculiarity of the musical literacy shared by geemu ongaku listeners. While I have previously introduced the different ways in which *Taiko no Tatsujin* engages with geemu ongaku, it will now be necessary to further debate the concept of musical literacy in order to understand how it applies to *geemu ongaku* and to *Taiko no Tatsujin*.

As previously mentioned, van Elferen (2016) has discussed musical literacy across media, defining it as the fluency in listening and interpreting “film, television or advertising music”. The concept expands on previously formalized theoretical tools related to media and game studies, applying them specifically to music in digital games.

Media literacy has been defined by Roepke as “habituated practices of media engagement shaped by cultural practices and discourses” (Roepke, 2011 as cited in van Elferen, 2016). Audiences have “developed a certain expectation curve with regards to [these media] form, style, and possible socio-cultural meanings” (van Elferen, 2016) through engagement with any kind of medium, including digital games.

While media literacy is not medium-specific, Zagal has applied the concept focusing on digital games. The “ludoliteracy” of digital game players is the sum of diverse skills, ranging from the competence of operating a game console, to the ability in interpreting established game design tropes and situations. (Zagal, 2010)

Game musical literacy is therefore formalized as a combination of media and ludic literacy:

“Combining the audiovisual literacies of film and television music with ludoliteracy, game soundtrack design appeals to a specific game musical literacy. Through intertextual references to audiovisual idioms from other media, game soundtracks deploy player literacy for their immersive effect: it is because gamers recognise certain composing styles that they are able to interpret gaming events and feel involved in gameplay, game worlds, and game plots. Boss fights, for instance, are often accompanied by the high-tempo, brass-heavy, dissonant orchestral scores with syncopated percussion that players recognise from exciting scenes in heroic action movies” (van Elferen, 2016)

This conceptualization of game musical literacy is therefore focused on interpretation of musical sections, cues or fragments during gameplay. Moreover, it also stresses the role of these musical parts, which contribute to the overall semiotic process happening during their subsequent deployment in any given gameplay situation. In other words, players also make sense of in-game situations thanks to cross-media referencing.

This point is also reiterated within the relevant literature: “Game music [...] establishes, utilizes and reinforces musical signifiers (interacting with a wider pan-media currency of musical semiotics)” (Summer, 2016, p. 141). The focus on game musical literacy as described by van Elferen, however, appears to be too limited for a productive application of the concept to *geemu ongaku* in the media mix. In fact, the various different musickings described in the previous section of this paper have showed the diverse forms of musical participation available and practiced across geemu ongaku culture. Some of these musickings have actually little to do with actual gameplay or with games-as-played, so to speak. Rather, they seem to have formed a robust musical culture of their own, which finds in the medium of digital games a

unifying territory. *Geemu ongaku*, in fact, consistently maintains its “game music” identity even when it is extrapolated from the digital game medium and transported in a different medium or setting.

Participation in *geemu ongaku* is not even necessarily primarily connected with actual game-playing. Exposure to the *geemu ongaku* repertoire is arguably connected with listening to music CDs or participation in live happenings just as much as it is connected with playing digital games. *Geemu ongaku*, therefore, nonchalantly traverses not only different media (digital games, music CDs, magazines, etc.) but also exists in live concerts. This aspect is crucial, as it proves that *geemu ongaku* culture actually extends beyond the conventional confines of the media mix. Live happenings, in fact, are in general hardly identifiable as “media”; specifically, live concerts are not usually included in discussions regarding the media mix. In this case, musical participation in digital games is therefore not solely confined within a media environment.

The aspects debated within this section are arguably legitimately related with the “game musical literacy” of participants in *geemu ongaku* culture. The listener is in fact capable of discerning *geemu ongaku* regardless of any formal characteristic of a given *geemu ongaku* composition. This is unlike other possible and apparently similar examples. Chip music or chiptune, for instance, is a musical genre identifiable with digital games, and particularly focused on the 8-bit sound aesthetic. It is not easy to pin down the formal characteristics of the genre, as it “continues to spread into innumerable musical and media genres, niches, and intertextuality”, but it can be said that it is at least “semi-consistent in its microsound or ‘bit-crushed’ timbres” (Reid, 2018). In that sense, chiptune strives to establish a discourse of authenticity based on the timbral qualities of the hardware used to produce such compositions. *Geemu ongaku*, on the other hand, does not have coherent or at least recurrent structural characteristics. Only a literate music community can therefore maintain the confines of *geemu ongaku*, being able to apply the genre’s tropes thanks to a deep web of interconnected semiotic meanings, which are made explicit during a variety of different musickings. In that regard, *geemu ongaku* participants do not just apply the audiovisual literacy that they acquired by watching film and television to “interpret gaming events and feel involved in the gameplay” (van Elferen, 2016), but rather are involved in a much wider musicking phenomenon.

As mentioned, different iterations of *Taiko no Tatsujin* have featured a variety of *geemu ongaku* compositions, ranging from original recordings to new arrangements of popular tracks. *Taiko no Tatsujin* therefore remediates *geemu ongaku* in original fashion, effectively adding a new context for tracks that already belong to the genre. The game musical media literacy tapped into by *Taiko no Tatsujin* can also be considered a form of meta-literacy. In *Taiko no Tatsujin*, in fact, players experience specific musicking participation, tapping along certain musical tracks on the taiko drums. However, this musicking also references other popular digital game musickings familiar with the players. Possibly, the players have in fact previously experienced such musicking when playing other digital games that exposed them to the same musical composition remediated by *Taiko no Tatsujin*. This complex referencing system situates the game in a specific semiotic domain, discernible by *geemu ongaku* participants thanks to their game musical literacy; however, it does not necessarily have any functional, gameplay-related implications. It provides valuable cultural context, but it does not indicate any gameplay scenario (such as a boss fight, as previously mentioned by van Elferen). In that regard, I maintain that digital game musical literacy is not necessarily functional-oriented and it cannot be solely reduced to game operation.

ON TAIKO DRUMMING

In the previous section, I have expanded the concept of game musical literacy, commenting on occurrences in which literacy is tapped into outside gameplay activities. Previously, I have also situated *Taiko no Tatsujin* within the media mix and geemu ongaku. That, however, is still not enough; the musical literacy tapped into by *Taiko no Tatsujin*, in fact, expands far beyond the confines of the media mix and geemu ongaku. I now intend to expand further on the overall musical literacy at stake with *Taiko no Tatsujin* by looking at the most evident musical reference set by the game: taiko drumming. The analysis of this aspect will shift focus from musical contents and compositions to a variety of relevant forms of musical participation. The subject matter of musical analysis of digital games, in fact, is not only constituted by the musical compositions contained in a given game example; rather, it can also include in the discussion the different musickings practiced by game players.

Taiko no Tatsujin is primarily based on taiko drumming; that is obviously the most self-explanatory musical connection established. In order to understand what kind of musical literacy is being tapped in this case, it will however be necessary to introduce taiko drumming. What is a taiko drum, and what are the musical and cultural practices connected to it? A fully detailed answer to this question would expand well beyond the limits of this paper; nonetheless, a general introduction to the meanings of taiko practice is necessary to appreciate the musical literature and participation in *Taiko no Tatsujin*.

In general, a taiko is a wooden, barrel-shaped drum. It can be used as the centerpiece for various kinds of musical performances, involving one or more taikos of different sizes, alongside different musical instruments such as flutes, *shamisens*, and vocal and dance performances. Taiko events have in recent years become increasingly popular, taking stage on international venues. Formed in 1981, *Kodo* is arguably the most prominent and well-known taiko ensemble to ever operate. In the same year of its formation, *Kodo* made its international debut, performing in Berlin and touring Italy, West Germany and Japan (Kodo, 2015). This milestone can be considered as the start of the contemporary international popularity of taiko performances, commonly referred to as the “taiko boom”. Taiko exhibitions, in fact, have been staged at the Nagano Winter Olympics in 1998 and at the FIFA World Cup co-hosted by Korea and Japan in 2002 (Bender, 2012, p. 3). *Taiko no Tatsujin* seems to be regarded as a proof of the popularity of taiko performances:

“Building on this popular appeal, [taiko] has even been converted into a video game. In “*Taiko no Tatsujin*”, an arcade game created by the Japanese company Namco, players use wooden mallets to tap [...] on an electronic drum shaped like a taiko. The company has released software and hardware home console versions of “*Taiko Master*”, along the line of the “*Guitar Hero*” and “*Rock Band*” series of video games. Clearly popular domestically, taiko drumming has arguably become Japan’s most globally successful performing art” (Bender, 2012, p. 4).

The previous quote is interesting for at least a couple of reasons. To start with, we could notice how being the subject of a digital game is read by the author as a testament to the popularity of a certain phenomenon. Gone are the days in which a digital game could be superficially dismissed as an automatic trivialization or belittling of certain cultural aspects. But apart from considerations related to the cultural status awarded to the medium of digital games in this context, more questions arise.

In his overall analysis, Bender does not focus on the compositions being played – the musical scores that taiko players would eventually perform. Rather, taiko practice is considered from the ground up in his analysis of it as a performing art: a perspective that necessarily includes various aspects of anthropological value. Specifically, taiko practice is understood as a form of “new folk performing art”, a definition that intends to “centre attention on performance culture that is presumed to be a communal possession, expressive of that community, transmitted orally within it, managed by it, and owned by no one of the community members more than another” (Bender, 2012, p. 11). The horizontal perspective traced by this definition seems to be typical of informal musical setups, differing from musical forms that are structured in a more vertical or hierarchical fashion. The latter structures are best exemplified by the clear-cut roles established within Western classical music practice, as mentioned and critically addressed by Small (1998).

More generally, the new folk performing art is however an expression form ascribable to oral traditions. The latter is a crucial notion: Small’s criticism of the field of musicology is in fact based on the discipline’s focus on notated music, and its neglect of any other musical form.

“Musicology is, almost by definition, concerned with Western classical music, while other musics, including even Westerns popular musics, are dealt under the rubric of ethnomusicology” (Small, 1998, p. 3). This creates a methodological conundrum: musicology claims to study music, but continuously refers to “music” as only a segment of musical expression. The problematic consequences are that “the word music becomes equated with works of music in the Western tradition” (Small, 1998, p. 3).

Ethnomusicology, “a [...] word which is widely used to refer to the study of the different musical systems of the world” (Blacking, 1973, p. 3), is faced with the daunting task of studying a plethora of musical systems, which are obviously intertwined with countless practices, histories, and in general cultural implications of any possible human ethnic group.

Bender’s research is therefore situated within this theoretical frame, adopting a wide ethnomusicological lens in order to pin down musical characteristics of taiko culture. Once again, the complexity of taiko performance cultures are a large subject, but I intend to extrapolate from Bender’s work those meanings that will be useful for a proper musical analysis of *Taiko no Tatsujin*.

In fact, musicking with *Taiko no Tatsujin* also involves engaging with musical practices that go beyond the limits of musicology described by Small. The next section will discuss the musical literacy at stake in *Taiko no Tatsujin*.

TAIKO NO TATSUJIN AND MUSICAL LITERACY

The actual taiko instrument is only one of the many facets of taiko culture, which, as discussed, is a vast topic with deep ramification in Japanese culture. Similarly, the musical literacy to be discussed involves comparably vast implications.

The taiko featured in *Taiko no Tatsujin* is most probably a reference to the *chū-daiko* (also called *miya-daiko*): “the most extensively used variety of taiko in the contemporary taiko ensembles” (Bender, 2012, p. 32). The *chū-daiko* is in fact often mounted on a slanted stand (*josuki-daiko*) (Vetter, 2015) that tilts the drum, favoring a comfortable position for the performer. This setup is similar to the standard arcade iteration of *Taiko no Tatsujin*.



Figure 1: A *Taiko no Tatsujin 2011* (Bandai Namco, 2011) arcade cabinet. Picture by Minseong Kim, CC BY-SA 4.0.

The *chū-daiko* is used in religious rituals and in the folk performing art genre. In *Taiko no Tatsujin*, as mentioned, there is no direct reference to religion, and the emphasis is arguably put in representing the largely secular contemporary matsuri. Also, the *chū-daiko* is not a type of taiko used in classical stage performing art, thus excluding that specific musical culture from the referencing system conveyed.

The game does not directly or literally refer to the taiko techniques associated with *chū-daiko* either. However, through the design of its input devices, *Taiko no Tatsujin* encourages gestures that are comparable to the typical techniques associated with playing a large taiko, which is considered an intense physical performance, requiring strength and stamina. The timbre of the taiko, exemplified by its characteristic deep thud, is also prominently featured, alongside the highly pitched rim shot. As the game mechanics guide the player towards hitting either the center or the rim of the drum, the resulting acoustic output will be double. While the plastic taiko itself provides organic, direct acoustic feedback once stricken, it also triggers digital sounds reproduced by the cabinet speakers; the resulting acoustic feedback is a combination of recorded and “live” sounds.

Primarily, though, *Taiko no Tatsujin* does not just reference the taiko drum as an instrument, but also represents in a cartoonish fashion certain elements that are typical of its festive context. In fact, while I have previously situated *Taiko no Tatsujin* in the media mix, I now intend to position it within the larger frame of the contemporary, shifting meanings surrounding Japanese festivals, or *matsuri*. According to Bender, “the common English translation of the Japanese matsuri as “festival” lacks the nuance of the Japanese term” (2012, p. 106). The key difference lies in the religious nature of the term. Even if sometimes used to indicate a religious

festivity, the common use of the term “festival” can of course indicate a secular happening, generally a large open event. In Japanese, instead, the original meaning of “matsuri” was a strictly religious one. In recent times, however, the term has started to be used to also indicate largely secularized events, incorporating the meanings of the English term. This shift is particularly common within urban matsuri, such as those taking places in the large metropolitan areas of cities such as Tokyo or Osaka. Contemporary taiko groups seem to increasingly “base membership on residence, regardless [...] of shrine affiliation” (Bender, 2012, p. 108). The communal aspect is therefore still strong, but shrine affiliation is no longer a fundamental discriminating factor. To corroborate these points, I can anecdotally mention to have had the opportunity to participate in one of such festivals, the Akasaka Jodoji Bon Odori in July 2016, held in the ward of Minato, Tokyo. *Bon Odori*, which translates to Bon dance, is a style of dancing performed during the summer *Obon* period. Appropriately, a large taiko drum took center stage on that occasion. Alternating performers would share the instrument, playing along a repertoire of pre-recorded musical tracks, sometimes accompanied by crotal bells. The event caters for and explicitly invites people external to the neighbor community to participate. Members of the organization would offer free light drinks to tourists, and invite them to join the *bon odori* dance.

Through visual elements, *Taiko no Tatsujin* sets up a playful matsuri of its own, complete with food stands, goldfish scooping, and of course the classic tower (or *yagura*), bandstand, a centerpiece of the matsuri. The tower is prominently featured on the cover and promotional material of the *Drum Session!* (Bandai Namco, 2017) iteration of the franchise.



Figure 2: Promotional image for *Taiko no Tatsujin: Drum Session!* (Bandai Namco, 2017). A *yagura* bandstand is displayed in the center of the picture.

This range of references, while not directly or solely musical, is nonetheless imbued with musicking value; as such, in this context they can be considered as part of the musical media literacy conveyed by the game. Arguably, players without such musical literacy will be unable to competently place the collective imaginary projected by *Taiko no Tatsujin* in an appropriate semiotic domain, thus missing on a variety of referenced musicking meanings.

Moreover, in this case, the game musical literacy does not refer to exposure to other media, or even competence in the repertoire of a given musical genre. Rather, the literate player will be able to gather the larger musicking and cultural context associated with the taiko drum thanks to the presence of a plastic replica of the instrument, and the in-game visual elements. In fact, as discussed, the musical compositions included in *Taiko no Tatsujin* have largely very little to do with taiko practice or matsuri, since they are instead situated in the cultural scenario of the media mix.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has debated *Taiko no Tatsujin* and the musical literacy it conveys. The concept has originally been applied to digital games by van Elferen, who emphasized that digital game players are able to gather “intertextual references to audiovisual idioms from other media [...] to interpret gaming events and feel involved in gameplay, game worlds, and game plots” (van Elferen, 2016). However, *Taiko no Tatsujin* taps into a wider musical literacy, extending its referencing frame beyond the confines of media, to include musical meanings practiced in taiko drum culture. Moreover, *Taiko no Tatsujin* effectively works on two largely separated cultural tracks: the media mix on one side, and taiko practice on the other.

The first track is found by analyzing the musical content (here intended as the musical compositions included) of the digital game. The featured tracks are primarily from popular anime franchises, vocaloid singers, pop and rock genres, and *geemu ongaku*. As such, it can be said to participate in musical media literacy in the conventional sense, as it taps on previous musical experiences from other media. However, as mentioned, *Taiko no Tatsujin* also participates in *geemu ongaku*, here understood as a loosely defined musical genre unified by digital games culture, in which game musical literacy is used in different ways. The participants’ literacy is tapped into also and primarily when in-game operations (including cognitive operations, such as interpreting) might not at all be involved. As such, direct gameplay implications are not prominent. Nonetheless, participation to this musical culture involves a high degree of competence in game musical literacy.

The second track is found by analyzing the taiko musicking practices referenced by *Taiko no Tatsujin*. While the musical content of the game is largely based in the media mix, its primary musical inspiration is instead the taiko drum, and the complex web of meanings that taiko drum practice conveys. Taiko musicking is a case of contemporary oral tradition, rapidly evolving in the wake of new phenomena surrounding its practice. The musicking afforded by *Taiko no Tatsujin* can be situated in the cultural discourse that I have so far introduced. Devoid of religious implications, the game joyfully celebrates in exuberant fashion matsuri and taiko, juxtaposing them with meanings derived from a mishmash of media mix music. In doing so, the game actually creates a mixture of musicking practices, generating an ironic, caricaturistic effect.

The game, in fact, constitutes a case of music-focused digital game that prominently features musical practices based on oral traditions. In that regard, it creates its authenticity or credibility not necessarily by featuring clearly recognizable musical compositions ascribable to a specific genre (like the comparable *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band* franchises), but rather by tapping into the larger musicking frame associated with taiko culture. These aspects, however, are not peripheral to taiko practice: rather, they could be considered its core.

This paper argues that musical literacy in digital games should therefore not be limited to the analysis of musical contents across media, but should rather involve the

many different musicking practices that might be intertwined with participation to digital games culture. Musicking, understood as any form of participation to musical performances (Small, 1998), provides a comprehensive theoretical frame in which it is critical for digital games to be situated.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Probably best known by Western audience as “flexi discs”, it is a phonograph record made of a thin, flexible vinyl sheet, compatible with regular turntables.