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Adorno in the Digital Age:
Consumerism, Ideology, and Participation in *The Beatles: Rock Band*

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Abstract

This essay presents an analysis of the ideologies in the online trailer to the virtual musical performance video game *The Beatles: Rock Band*. This analysis presents a contribution to the scholarly conversation by using Theodor W. Adorno’s theories, a novel and underutilized heuristic for analyzing video games. The trailer to *The Beatles: Rock Band* (Harmonix, 2009) promotes the ideology of consumerism through its mythologized depiction of the Beatles. The interactivity of video games may combat Adorno’s condemnation of the culture industry, allowing resistance to its hegemony via the performed de(con)struction of the text.

Introduction

In September 2009, public discourse was infiltrated by talk regarding the release of the video game *The Beatles: Rock Band (TB: RB)*. The game, part of a larger genre of “virtual performance” music games (Miller, 2012, p. 16) was touted as “a cultural watershed” in *The New York Times* (Scheisel, 2009, p. AR1). Regarding the game’s “intergenerational cultural resonance,” its release was even compared to the Beatles’ iconic appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show* 45 years earlier (Scheisel, 2009, p. AR1). The release of the game created a healthy amount of fanfare and “media shock” that the game existed at all (Martens, 2010; Minkley, 2009). Adding to the hype surrounding the game was the authorized release of the entire Beatles’ catalog in remastered CD format and MP3 format through Apple’s iTunes digital marketplace (EMI, 2009). These concurrent releases were notable because, until 2009, the Beatles had doggedly avoided putting their work on iTunes and they had not remastered their catalog since their original CD releases 30 years previously. Further fueling the frenzy, the game was received by a critic with the tantalizing claim that “it may be the most important video game yet made” (Scheisel, 2009, p. AR1).

The advertising for *TB: RB* also added to the hype. Excluded from the hype, however, was a discussion of how the trailer for the game was presenting and securing the legacy of the Beatles in the collective consciousness for the purposes of commerce. In this essay, I argue that advertising for *TB: RB* generated a mythologized legacy of the Beatles in the public memory as a way to promote the ideology of consumerism. However, as a result of promoting an interactive musical video game, the trailer encouraged the player to actively participate in virtually performing the music, thus mitigating some of the ideological consequences of its commodity fetishism. To make this argument, the influential writings of Theodor W. Adorno (1928/2002; 1938/2002; 1941/2002) will be useful here because they explored the intersection between the
production, circulation, and consumption of the ideological content communicated by mass media. Contemporary critical communication scholarship, in part, is interested in how mass communication distributes ideologies (Anderson & Middleton, 2015). Hence, the ideological elements that TB: RB subtly communicates to its audience should be examined. This study presents a contribution to the scholarly conversation by using Adorno’s theories, a novel and underutilized heuristic for analyzing video games.

When a claim of such magnitude—that The Beatles: Rock Band is perhaps the most important video game ever made—is uttered in the newspaper of record in the United States, the subject of that claim is due for scholarly examination. Curiously, however, the game has largely evaded critical analysis. Although nearly a decade has passed since the release of the game, TB: RB and similar virtual musical performance videos games continue to receive some scholarly attention (e.g., Gonzalez, 2009; George, 2010; Hodson, 2012; Sakkal & Martin, 2019—though not enough. During the first decade of the twenty-first century, there were not many video games sold in the United States that were more popular than Rock Band; video game franchises like Guitar Hero and Rock Band sold over 46 million game units and made over three billion dollars during the five-year period between 2005–2010 (Miller, 2012). Additionally, TB: RB is worth interrogating because it does not “even attempt an accurate retelling of history” (Hodson, 2012, p. 82), even though the game considers itself a documentary “based on real life people and events” (Hodson, 2012, p. 83).

These people and events are salient because the Beatles remain perpetually perched on top of the top-selling artists metrics, even until the present time (McIntyre, 2017). In fact, they are the top-selling artists worldwide from 1964 to 2016 with more than 250 million album sales (Statista, n. d.). Because of their rarified celebrity status and history, the artists have largely been ubiquitous in the collective memory, appearing in frequent advertisements, which are a testament to “the notion that history never fully disappears” (Love, 2017, p. 35). The inevitable power of public memory permeates video games: public memory of real-life events is constructed in some video games through a selection of favorable details and suppression of others that might distract from the desired tenor of the narrative (Hess, 2007).

Besides its relative lack of a presence in the academic literature, there are several reasons why The Beatles: Rock Band presents an interesting topic for scholars in communication studies. First, the game was often framed in the press as a vehicle for nostalgia and cross-generational appeal (Sapieha, 2009; Scheisel, 2009). However, the game functioned as more than mere shared entertainment that linked (grand)parents with their (grand)children; its gameplay was adorned by avatars and locales that amplified the nostalgic elements of the Beatles’ history, while diminishing other elements that might tarnish that same nostalgia. Thus, the legacy of the Beatles was constructed anew in the game. Next, although the advertising for the game ostensibly celebrated the Beatles’ musical innovations, the band’s accomplishments were inevitably drowned out by the discourse of commercialism. A critical reading of the advertisements for the game will provide insights into how consumerism permeates discourse about video games such as this. Finally, the gameplay of musical performance video games like TB: RB occurs at the intersection of popular music and interactive media, a space salient to the study of communication. Thus, although the video game clearly illustrates the ideology of commodification prevalent in contemporary entertainment, it also articulates a possible antidote to the passive power of consumerism through the active participation that comes from the gameplay in virtual performance video games. As evidenced, the cultural messages communicated by The Beatles: Rock Band are sometimes contradictory and often perplexing.
Throughout this analysis, I explore how the advertising for The Beatles: Rock Band exploits the mythologized legacy of the Beatles for the purpose of promoting consumerism. To do so, I analyze the online trailer of TB: RB. I chose this particular text because advertising often constructs public memory through its use of nostalgia (Kasabian, 2017). Although the game itself is a locus of reasonably diverse messages, the official trailer is representative of not only of the ideological assumptions of the game, but the diachronic visual portrayal of the band within the game’s catalog of songs. The words of German composer and cultural critic Theodor W. Adorno prove particularly useful in analyzing the ideological dimensions of the game’s trailer. Using the critical framework of Adorno’s (1938/2002) commodity fetishism as a lens for analysis, I argue that the trailer does indeed encourage viewers to be “acquiescent purchaser[s]” (p. 291). However, I propose the possibility that the gameplay of TB: RB—as depicted in the trailer—actually challenges Adorno’s (1938/2002) critique of the mass media in this particular case; the interactive affordances of these video game technologies provide the public with the tools to counteract the passive consumption of which Adorno cautioned. In other words, although The Beatles: Rock Band is not exempt from Adorno’s caution of fetishization, the interactive gameplay design may combat the passive listening inherent in popular music through the performative agency that video game technology offers the player.

The Beatles and Public Memory

The construction of public memory is a popular field of analysis in both historical and communication studies. Much like personal narratives, which are notoriously unreliable (Hardwig & Hentoff, 2000; Sternberg & Yacobi, 2015), cultural narratives are ambiguous and therefore in need of continual reinforcement. Defined in an influential book on the subject, public memory is “the vague and often conflicting assumptions about the past that Americans carry with them and draw on, usually unconsciously, in their daily actions and reactions” (Filene, 2000, p. 5). Public memory may be composed of conflicting narratives that often become taken for granted. The discourses that construct public memory, then, “privilege, situate and/or produce certain kinds of subjectivity in the present” (Heineman, 2014, p. 3).

Public memory can be shaped through the powerful process of nostalgia. Advertising can function in a powerful capacity to create a collective perception of something in public memory (Meyers, 2009). Advertising may use nostalgia to create an assumed “realm of memory” composed of commercial goods from which the collective memory is then constructed. Explaining this concept, Meyers (2009, p. 740) wrote:

Ads relate commodities to an assumed shared past, and promise consumers that the purchase of the advertised products will enable them to relive a better and happier era…The nostalgic appeal of advertising campaigns promises consumers an emotional connection to the past that downplays a more analytical and skeptical historical view.

It is through this saturation of nostalgia that consumers participate in tandem with the advertiser’s creation process (Meyers, 2009).

When exploring video games as mechanisms for creating public memory (e.g., Hess, 2007), a critic may conduct “a careful analysis of how past events are used to explain, argue for, or shape a particular present” (Heineman, 2014, p. 3). Further, the act of reinforcing a particular present is undergirded by ideology: “to consider popular nostalgia is also to consider consumer
culture: Consumers re-purchase items from the past (or that look like they are from the past) so as to have a material connection to a time and place that has passed” (Heineman, 2014, p. 14). Similarly, the Beatles are framed nostalgically in the gameplay of *TB: RB* (Hodson, 2012) and in the associated advertisements. For example, in the official commercial for the game, the band is depicted in a live action shot crossing Abbey Road, offering a mimetic version of the iconic album cover. However, the members of the band have been digitally manipulated to appear as if they are smiling and laughing with a new generation of video gamers who dance across the street with them. The presence of the gamers in the iconic locale invites viewers of the ad to participate in the nostalgic creation process. Despite the clear intergenerational pathos of the ad, there is still a nostalgia that underlies it; the band is shown as they were in 1970, not as they are now, or in any subsequent decades. The ad crystallizes the Beatles into the public memory, not as people, but as mythical characters.

The public memory of the Beatles is generally maintained in contemporary writings about the band, which frequently focus on how the band transformed the genre of rock ’n’ roll (Reising, 2017). *Rolling Stone* magazine called them “the greatest rock and roll band of all time” (Sawyers, 2006, p. 97), while the *New York Times* declared in 1967 that the Beatles had transcended even that distinction: “Hailed as progenitors of a Pop avant garde, they have been idolized as the most creative members of their generation” (as cited in Goldstein, 1967/2006, p. 97). The band’s hagiographic status is reinforced in nearly every documentary about the 1960s. For many viewers, that status began (at least among American audiences) in their 1964 appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. This event “had a dramatic effect on the development of rock music,” taking most American viewers by surprise (Covach, 2006, p. 37), and culminating, eventually, with the creation of the “popular music crowd” (Marshall, 2000, p. 166). The Beatles’ celebrity status continued and was constantly reinforced, despite Lennon’s infamous verbal gaffe that the Beatles were more popular than Jesus (Burns, 2000). Notwithstanding the controversies from the Beatles’ public lives (i.e., affairs and drug use; Burns, 2000), their music and iconic images have been solidified as a mythic narrative, perpetuated by their heavy press coverage from the early years, when they were “sustained by the media as pleasant boys with a well-developed and well-mannered sense of humour” (Marshall, 2000, p. 168). Indeed, even Lennon’s controversial comment “quickly passed from public memory” (Denisoff, 1986, p. 384), thus preserving the legendary mythos of the band. The legacy of the Beatles has been in the making for nearly half a century; even before the group broke up, “the Beatles [already] embodied a series of cultural memories that overwhelmed their own present as a group” (Marshall, 2000, p. 173).

The importance of the mythical status of the Beatles in public memory cannot be overstated for the purposes of commodification. This ambivalent potential is evoked even in the band’s famous moniker “The Fab Four”: “the Beatles trod the line between something authentically wonderful and significant (fabulous) and something manufactured and created by an industry (fabrication)” (Marshall, 2000, p. 169). Scheisel’s (2009) glowing *New York Times* review for the game draws primarily from the reservoir of the band’s mythical public memory for its rhetorical power: “By reinterpreting an essential symbol of one generation in the medium and technology of another, [the game] provides a transformative entertainment experience” (p. AR1). The intergenerational promise implied by this statement presupposes that the memory of the group today will be contingent upon its current homological connection with its former cultural salience of the 1960s. By doing this work for promoting the video game, Scheisel

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(2009) constructs a legacy of the Beatles that transcends time and place. However, this legacy remains linked with the discourse of consumerism. To better understand how entertainment, technology, and consumerism relate, we need to examine Adorno’s (1928/2002; 1938/2002; 1941/2002) critiques of mass culture, advanced during the first half of the 20th century.

**Adorno and Commodity Fetishism**

Adorno’s (1938/2002) critical concept of commodity fetishism is valuable for reading popular music. In capitalist societies, fetishism “attaches itself to the products of labour [sic], so soon as they are produced as commodities” (Marx, 1912, p. 83). The products of labor—material and ideological—may be manifest through the products of monolithic capitalist entities, all of which Adorno (1991) called the culture industry. In 1938, Adorno argued that the state of popular music produced by the culture industry was such that each listener had become converted into an “acquiescent purchaser” (1938/2002, p. 291). To Adorno, pop music was the clearest evidence of the sinister aims of the culture industry, being first intensely desired by the masses and then consumed for the purposes of spending money. Adorno (1938/2002) was especially critical of pop music used for advertising: “For all contemporary musical life is dominated by the commodity form...[Music] serves in America today as an advertisement for commodities which one must acquire in order to be able to hear music” (p. 295).

Another clear mechanism for promoting the fetishization of popular music is the high fidelity music-reproduction device designed to distribute the music to be consumed. In 1928, Adorno railed against the gramophone as being a bourgeois apparatus because it eliminated the need to become musically trained to produce music (1928/2002, p. 272). Recording technologies actually enhanced the narcissism of the listener, because they caused the listener to become “flattered” by the prestige one acquires from owning such a device (p. 274). To Adorno (1928/2002), then, music playback technology was not a marvel, it was merely a tool for the culture industry to retain its hegemony over the listener. The only way to break free from this condition for the casual listener would need to come from mechanical failure-induced austerity:

> There is only one point at which the gramophone interferes with both the work and the interpretation. This occurs when the mechanical spring wears out. At this point the sound droops in chromatic weakness and the music bleakly plays itself out. Only when gramophonic reproduction breaks down are its objects transformed. Or else one removes the records and lets the spring run out in the dark. (Adorno, 1928/2002, p. 275)

Commodity fetishism, in other words, was facilitated by the proper functioning of the machine. Only once the listeners’ attention was drawn to the material conditions of the mechanical reproduction could they be liberated from its hegemonic power as a consumerism apparatus.

To be sure, Adorno (1928/2002) was highly pessimistic in his assessment of the state of popular music and playback technologies. Adorno’s goal was to write provocatively to help the public become emancipated from hegemonic ideologies (Tester, 1994, p. 54). As Fuchs (2016) explained, “Adorno profoundly opposed the commodity form and was convinced that wherever it is introduced, it damages human life in society” (p. 79). The key to liberation from commodity fetishism was aesthetics. An accomplished musician, Adorno wrote that dissonance and disharmony in music was necessary for consumers to cognitively and emotionally break their restraints. Because popular music necessarily lacked these dissonances, composed instead of
saccharine content manufactured only to ensure its purchase by the non-discerning consumer, dissonance in pop music was important: “Expression cannot be conceived except as expression of suffering” (Adorno, 1984, p. 161). In other words, the expression of pain in music, and the listener’s internalization of that pain, was crucial to its emancipating function.

However, because popular music removes these disharmonies, the hegemonic aims of the culture industry continue unhindered. Moreover, the lack of any dissonance in pop music makes it more easily fetishized (and therefore commodified) for the hedonistic consumer. Inherent in this notion of the acquiescent purchaser is another key component of Adorno’s (1941/2002, pp. 458–459) concept of music as commodity—the listener rendered passive by the music:

The frame of mind to which popular music originally appealed, on which it feeds, and which it perpetually reinforces, is simultaneously one of distraction and inattention . . . distraction is not only a presupposition but also a product of popular music.

The official trailer of TB: RB belies this commodity fetishism through a glowing and nostalgic representation of the Beatles’ personas, performances, and places. But, as I will argue, through its depiction of the gameplay, the trailer also hints at possible tools to resist the very ideologies it communicates.

The Beatles Rock Band Official Trailer

Upon searching for “The Beatles Rock Band Official Trailer” on YouTube, the viewer will discover a brief video promoting the game that lasts two minutes and 38 seconds—the trailer for the video game that premiered at the 2009 E3 video game expo (Harmonix, 2009). After the first screen appears proclaiming the rating of the game (“Rated T for Teen; Mild Lyrics; Tobacco References”), we see an overhead view of a darkened and dreary city. The title proclaims “Liverpool 1963,” where we hear bells ringing and the distant melodies of the Beatles playing “I Saw Her Standing There.” In the next shot, we are in a hall adorned with the words “Welcome to the Cavern,” on an arch above a doorway. These words are evocative: the player is given access to the hallowed nightclub where the Beatles played regularly in their early career. The words are shown as if the viewer encounters them firsthand, indicating that the viewer is actually there, experiencing the concert.

Over the next two minutes, we are treated to extreme close-ups of the band’s avatar faces, coupling our experience as actual ticket-holders to viewers with perspectives that only cameras may provide. We are whisked to important cultural events like the Beatles playing “I Want to Hold Your Hand” on The Ed Sullivan Show and “I Feel Fine” at Shea Stadium in New York City. This portrayal encourages a mythos not only of the band, but also of the scene. In fact, the geographic setting proves to be an essential component to the myth throughout the trailer; in addition to the places already mentioned, later in the trailer the band is presented recording the song “Back in the U.S.S.R.” inside of the Abbey Road studio. At this point in the trailer, the

2 “The Beatles Rock Band Trailer—E3 2009,” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NFgEmu9ARVA. I selected this video for analysis because of its reach, both then and now. It was unveiled at the E3 Developers Conference in 2009 to promote the game. Paul McCartney, Ringo Starr, Yoko Ono, and Olivia Harrison all appeared at the conference as well (MacLeod, 2009).
viewer has seen the band in a variety of settings, including up close in concert and in Hollywood-style films. Now the viewer sees the band within an intimate setting, as if the viewer had been personally invited to witness it. The visual and geographic situating of the band’s music reifies their mythos in the annals of music history. The portrayal of the band as avatars concludes with the cover of the game, a real picture of the band, presenting a postmodern juxtaposition of virtual images and real images. This technique’s apparent purpose is to blur the line between the real and the imagined in the mind of the viewer. Used as a rhetorical tool, this technique’s purpose is vicarious, suggesting to consumers that they are not only buying a virtual representation of the Beatles, but a new fusion of real and imagined, in which they not only hear and view the concerts, they actually become a Beatle.

Other images follow, suggesting that the viewers are watching a concert, a movie, or watching the band in the intimate setting of the recording studio. The consumer is treated to the pastoral landscape of a field complemented by streaming sunrays while witnessing “Here Comes the Sun.” The band’s mythos increases as we are treated to their various hairstyles, clothing styles, and accessories over time. As consumers of the game, we see the band diachronically, evolving to match the cultural trends of the day over a period of a few songs. In this way, the trailer removes the natural constraints of time, placing the whole career of the band on display for the viewer to experience.

Finally, the trailer (Harmonix, 2009) depicts the group at the historic rooftop concert, playing “Get Back.” For Beatles fans, this glorious moment marks the conclusion of their career. There are no interfering police as in the actual video footage. The viewer may revel in the experience unhindered by external distraction: In the trailer, the consumer does not witness any drug use of the band, marginal players from the Beatles’ history like Stu Sutcliffe or Pete Best, or even Yoko Ono’s interfering presence; the imagery of the game exists only in the mythic space created by the ideology of the Beatles as a cultural force (Gonzalez, 2009). The trailer appears to follow this assumption, ensuring that the band’s iconic status is preserved and not diminished after the death of two of its members. Like other post-breakup Beatles media, the trailer of the game suggests that the band “may still be wizards and that the dream is still not over” (Burns, 2000, p. 181).

Fetishism in the Trailer

Because it is clearly promoting a product, the dominant ideology of TB: RB trailer (Harmonix, 2009) is that of capitalism. With each subsequent image and song, the fetishism of the video game becomes normalized through the commodification of the Beatles’ mythos. The ideologies are manifest by the visual history of the Beatles in the trailer; the final screen, for example, indicates that the game was to be released on “09–09–09.” This choice of date is noteworthy when viewed through an economic lens. Capitalism and consumption are inextricably tied with mnemonic markers; Christmas (12/25) is one such example where the very date conjures up images of buying and consumption. The Beatles’ release date makes the marker of release easier to retain in the minds of potential purchasers.

The hegemonic ideologies of Harmonix (2009) are continually renewed throughout the trailer by offering multiple pleasures to the potential consumer. First, Harmonix (2009) appeals to the viewers’ fetishistic urge to view and consume the Beatles’ music. The trailer intensifies that urge by offering the viewer the opportunity to actually be one of the Beatles. Because the trailer contains only music and no dialogue, the viewer is symbolically brought to be one with
the music, unfettered by outside commentary. Scheisel (2009) wrote that, in the gameplay, players may “inhabit the various Beatles” (p. AR1). Certainly, there are many visual shots of the band as avatars; however, for the majority of the trailer, the gameplay controls are superimposed on top of these images. This is a reminder that the viewer can experience creating music, exactly as the Beatles are doing in the trailer. Furthermore, there are only four Beatles on stage constantly; no one else is allowed to play with them, implying that the viewers have the rare opportunity to actually assume the role of one of the band.

Next, the consumer can take part in creating music (without the talent) and partake of a social relationship with the Beatles (without ever meeting them). In this way, the game fulfills a consumer desire for nostalgia by allowing players the elusive and vicarious satisfaction of participating in an idyllic history of performing in a fabricated world—absent of any drug use or Yoko Onos—all while the listening in on quiet conversations between the Beatles. The trailer presents the functional band as if the bandmates were still creating music; because of this nostalgic depiction, the consumer can avoid the real life events that led to the breakup of the band.

In sum, the trailer’s use of selective nostalgia enhances the myth of the Beatles. It reinforces the iconic visualizations of the group from their humble beginnings to their troubled dissolution, but without focusing on any of the potentially negative “real life” factors that precluded it. This selective depiction points toward the power of imagery in constructing memory. Even while the trailer reifies the Beatles’ iconic mythos for the purposes of promotion, however, it depicts a type of interactivity that potentially challenges Adorno’s (1941/2002) critique of passivity.

**Passivity and (Inter)Activity**

Like other popular media, video games are a medium for commodity fetishism. With *Rock Band*, this fetishism is even more pronounced because it occurs at the intersection of two powerful commodities: popular music and video games. According to Adorno (1941/2002), popular music creates passive listeners because they accept what is handed down to them from above. Despite the clear commodity fetishism promoted by the game’s trailer, however, Harmonix (2009) communicates additional messages worth exploring here. Roughly, video games are a platform that allows for a more nuanced engagement with Adorno’s (1941/2002) arguments.

Summarizing Adorno, Fuchs (2016) wrote, “If all forms of music and culture can be commodified, then they also must have the potential to resist commodification independent of musical style” (p. 89). All technologies offer opportunities for glitches, modifications, and other means of emancipation. Historically, some musical devices allowed the listener to interact with the playback of the music; player pianos, for example, allowed the consumers to control the elements of the playback, including its levels of tempo and sustain (Miller, 2012). This alteration of the music made the material conditions of the playback available for the listeners. Perhaps this mechanism for musical change is one reason that Adorno, in his later writings, conceded that reproduction technologies could bring something novel to the listening experience. Just five months before his death, Adorno published an article that acknowledged one of these benefits: “The ability to repeat long-playing records, as well as parts of them, fosters a familiarity [with the music,] which is hardly afforded by the ritual of performance” (Adorno,
Adorno often wrote about the need for emancipation from the status quo (Fuchs, 2016); perhaps some technologies could actually lead to a type of emancipation for the listener. Despite the clear ideologies of consumerism therein, the TB: RB trailer illustrates how the game is a multi-tiered mediated experience, offering players a level of interactive performance that can enhance their understanding of the music. The passivity that popular music imposes is widespread, but the participatory culture of modern gaming technologies disrupts that notion. With music video games, interactivity is an essential component to the gameplay (Deen, 2011; Austin, 2016), and the portrayal of the gameplay in the trailer emphasizes this interactivity (Harmonix, 2009). Depicting the game controls next to videos of Beatles avatars offers the player the promise of revivifying the Beatles, letting “players put the performance back into recorded music, reanimating it with their physical engagement and adrenaline” (Miller, 2012, p. 15). The virtual performance of the music allows players to actively listen to the music and appreciate the talent and creativity of the songwriters, rather than falling into passive habits of recognition and regressive hearing.

The ad for TB: RB, while highly commoditized, visually demonstrates ways in which the player may combat the fetishization of the legacy and music of the Beatles: the player is able to virtually perform the songs in the gameplay, therefore the player’s attention is shifted from the passive listening of the song to an active attempt to recreate the elements of the song. Kiri Miller’s (2012) empirical research on the gameplay yielded the following conclusion: “While many people have described Guitar Hero gameplay as ‘just playing along’ with prerecorded material, I suggest that it is more accurate to think of it as playing between—that is, playing in the gap between virtual and actual performance” (p. 16). This can lead to a more sophisticated engagement between the player and the music.

Still, fetishism is not entirely resisted in the trailer or the gameplay. While the gameplay offers the chance for interactivity, the objectives of the game (i.e., to play the song exactly like the recording) certainly do not encourage musical creativity. One of Miller’s (2012) respondents explained:

> I can appreciate the music on a far deeper level while I’m playing it in Rock Band, but I am absolutely shutting down the creative centers of my brain to do it. It’s kind of like after you’ve composed a song for a group and now you’re just rehearsing it to death until it becomes automatic. (p. 114)

Elaborating, Miller continued: “Musical works that formerly represented creative genius, technical mastery, and sincere commitment become ‘easy, hollow, and accessible’” (2012, p. 99). It is important here to distinguish which benefits are afforded to the player and which are not. The gameplay depicted in the trailer does not appear to offer the player any opportunities to critically assess and then create new music. Nor does the gameplay depicted there offer any clear antidote to the implications of “hollow,” accessible fetishization. However, the performance function of the gameplay does compel players to focus on approximations of each of the musical components of the song, thus shifting their attention to the complexity of the music itself and away from the habitually passive, regressive listening usually reserved for entertainment created by the culture industry. According to medical researcher Daniel R. George (2010), the interface of the game even engages cognitive functions like memory, attention, and analytical listening: “trying to replicate a song note by note, mimicking fast-fingering hammer-ons and pull-offs, altering the pitch of notes with a whammy bar, and attempting to sing
complicated three-part harmonies can deepen knowledge of the underlying structure of a song” (pp. 470–471). Like the game, the trailer emphasizes the difficulty of the gameplay as well; the description under the YouTube video even reads, “Take note of the multiple harmony lines for the vocals!” The fetishism in the trailer is communicated through its appropriation of the Beatles’ legacy. But the depicted gameplay suggests that the player’s interactivity, performance, and focus on the music are some of the rewards for that fetishization.

Conclusion

The trailer of *The Beatles: Rock Band* is a space of struggle. The ideology of consumerism abounds and is repeatedly reinforced with each image and song, offering pleasures if the viewer is willing to abide by the rules of the fetishistic milieu. The platform exploits the legacy of the band for the purposes of promoting Beatles merchandise. Harmonix (2009) uses nostalgic imagery and mythic locales to distribute consumerist ideologies to a public of “acquiescent purchaser[s]” (Adorno, 1938/2002, p. 291). However, the interactive nature of the game being advertised provides the purchasing public with the tools to challenge the passivity of which Adorno (1941/2002) cautioned.

Accordingly, the interactive affordances of the medium may warrant a rethinking of Adorno’s commodity fetishism in the case of video games. He wrote that dissonance in music was one of the few antidotes to the oppressive power of the culture industry (Adorno, 1938/2002). Though players should create a good song with the Beatles by conforming to the rules of the game, they have the capacity to deconstruct the songs and see each component of the musical structures. To be sure, the trailer promotes the oppressive ideology of consumerism with corresponding oppressive tools (in the form of game controls like simulated guitars, microphones, and drums). However, paradoxically, the trailer also promises an active form of musical reproduction by using those same tools. The stark tone of Adorno’s provocations about popular music needs to be reconsidered when applied to interactive vessels for pop music, like virtual music performance video games.

According to critical media theorist Christian Fuchs (2016), “Adorno felt that culture becomes debased when it is connected to commerce and advertisements. Out of his analysis of music and culture speaks the desire for a world of culture beyond the commodity form and beyond advertisement” (p. 80). As evidenced in the present analysis, *The Beatles: Rock Band* is not exempt to advertisement. It retains commodity form as well—even the simulated instruments and objective of the game are a substitution for actual training in music performance, theory, and technique. However, the trailer demonstrates a video game interface that promotes interactivity with music in ways that counteract passive listening.

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