ABSTRACT

Is This My Story? Is This My Song?
Exploring Narrative Dissonance in Worship Music
Through the Lens of Ludomusicology

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This thesis explores connections between ludomusicology, sociology of religious narratives, and church music studies in a larger context of the digital mediatization of music and culture. Analysis of cultural trends around digital and online media demonstrates the importance of mediatization for consideration in church music. Exploration of concepts including Csikszentmihalyi's flow, ludonarrative dissonance and ludomusical dissonance, identity integration in religious narratives, and interactivity in religion shows how digital culture is shaped by and also informs the understanding and practice of religion. A case study analyzing a survey distributed to four congregations or faith-based groups presents evidence that these concepts and vocabulary are productive and clarifying. This thesis points to the potential for interdisciplinary scholarship between church music studies and ludomusicology, among other developing digital media fields.

Is This My Story? Is This My Song?
Exploring Narrative Dissonance in Worship Music Through the Lens of Ludomusicology

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CHAPTER ONE

Why Ludomusicology?

I have heard several worship leaders and teachers compare worship music to a soundtrack for a believer's life. Music that expresses our relationship with God and our calling as believers may be sung in a gathering on Sunday mornings, but worshippers also carry those songs with them into the rest of their lives. These mentors of mine described these songs as mementos bringing hope, reminders of essential truths, or lenses through which to filter life experiences. They sensed that worship music lends a hopeful gravitas, a steadfast joy, and a faithful perseverance to the Christian life. Just as a soundtrack in a film adds meaning and emotional impact to each scene, worship music functions in the lives of worshippers to make sense of the vagaries of daily experiences and challenges.

This metaphor has stuck with me and informed my understanding of musical worship as formational and important to Christian discipleship. However, I believe the concept of worship music as soundtrack has increasing resonance and implications in our world today. This metaphor has untapped potential that can be explored. Music has become a nearly omnipresent reality that pervades the liturgies of our lives; we subconsciously hear it as background noise in malls and restaurants, sing along to it in our cars as we drive from place to place, and listen to it in the privacy of our homes.[1]

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[1] For scholarship on this phenomenon, see: Tia Denora, *Music in Everyday Life* (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

Music of whatever sort comes to play a role in defining who we are, whether we engage with it as consumers, amateur musicians, or professionals. Tribal identities and stereotypes are associated with different genres; simply think of your own assumptions about the attitudes, outlook on life, and even clothing of someone who listens to pop, heavy metal, punk rock, rap, or classical music.[2] Those expectations may not necessarily reflect reality, but we all have them, and we bring that baggage to our perceptions of the identities and stories music represents. Worship music, in a variety of styles and genres, has similar associations with certain identities and ways of being in the world.[3] Sometimes we feel a tension with parts of the story that goes along with our music of choice, whether sacred or secular, while at other times we may wholeheartedly embrace the story offered to us.

These perceptions of musically associated identity, and even the music itself, are increasingly transmitted and transformed through digital media. Online videos of famous performers, audio recordings of live performances, and the accessibility of information about music on the internet have profoundly changed our culture.[4] Our perception of what represents quality in music is increasingly defined by these digital realities, arguably even more so than our "real life" experiences of making music and listening to

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[2] For sources that address music and identity, see: Martin Stokes, *Ethnicity, Identity, and Music: The Musical Construction of Place*, Berg Ethnic Identities Series (Providence, RI: Berg, 1994); Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

[3] For sources on this topic, see: Monique Marie Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation: How Contemporary Worship Music Forms Evangelical Community* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018); Mark James Porter, *Contemporary Worship Music and Everyday Musical Lives*, Ashgate Congregational Music Studies Series (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017).

[4] Nicholas Cook, Monique Marie Ingalls, and David Trippett, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Music in Digital Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

other people make music in person.[5] Church music and worship are also certainly

impacted by these cultural trends of mediatization and digital music. In the field of

church music studies, we find ourselves faced with new questions about the significance

of digitally mediated music, rituals, and community.

       This thesis is based on the acknowledgment that there is a type of soundtrack that

is uniquely situated to provide insights into this new digital world. While soundtracks in

film possess many of the same connections with cultural identities and narratives

mentioned above, soundtracks in video games evidence several other qualities that make

them ideal objects for study. They are firmly situated in the arena of digital multimedia,

and are deeply connected to online realities. The form and function of video game

soundtracks are different than those used in film because video games are interactive and

participatory media while films are meant to be observed passively by an audience. I

propose that the unique qualities of video games—in particular, their reliance upon

digital and online realities and their interactivity—are points of contact with musical

worship today that will open productive areas of inquiry. The field of ludomusicology is

concerned with the study of music in digital games, and has already begun considering

the role and function of music in a world filled with online connectivity and interactive

digital multimedia. Because of this, ludomusicology is a promising area for

interdisciplinary dialogue with church music studies. The music we listen to, associate

our identities with, and use to filter our narratives about the world, each other, and

ourselves is increasingly digitally mediated. In order to lead worship effectively as

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[5] Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation*.

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musicians and scholars, we should heed the call of the digital world to attend to and grapple with these realities.

Overview, Methodology, and Goals

In the chapters that follow, I explore aspects of new media, digital games, music, and religious narratives that show promise for meaningful intersection with church music studies and worship theology and practice. Each chapter gives an introduction to crucial concepts from the relevant discipline, establish a context for understanding important terminology, and point out potential connections with scholarship on church music in the digital age. The second chapter will situate this conversation in larger developments of mediatization and digital culture. In the third chapter, I provide a description of the fields of ludology, or the study of video games, and ludomusicology, which focuses on the use of music in those digital games. This discussion will include Csikszentmihalyi's work on flow, as well as two relatively new terms used in discussing video games that depend on the closely related goal of immersion in games. The fourth chapter draws from the sociological scholarship around religious narratives, whose concepts allow for important connections to be made between identity formation, worship practices, and music. The fifth chapter grounds these theoretical concepts by using a concrete case study. In chapter five, I analyze a survey distributed to several churches and church-related groups in order to demonstrate that the terms and concepts established in this thesis have great relevance and utility in both academic reflection and practical application around worship. I apply a combined bottom-up and top-down approach to analyzing the survey responses, first identifying common themes and trends in respondents' experiences and then examining them through the lenses proposed in the earlier chapters.

My goal in this thesis is twofold. First, I demonstrate that, given the cultural developments relating to mediatization, fields such as ludomusicology are productive conversation partners for interdisciplinary work with church music studies. Second, I show how applying key concepts from ludomusicology helps us to better understand significant concerns facing Christian worshippers in the digital age, particularly the experience of connection, immersion, or investment in worship (and the converse of each). I contend that ludomusicology can afford church music studies valuable vocabulary and conceptual tools to articulate and reflect on worshippers' common experiences of felt connection or disconnection in worship, varying degrees of success in integrating diverse life circumstances into a coherent faith-centered narrative, and challenges and responsibilities faced by worship leaders.

CHAPTER TWO

Mediatization

Mediatization: Music, Religion, and Identity Narratives

We live in a time when digital culture—enabled by mobile technologies, social

media, and the internet – pervades much of our society. These digital realities have the

potential to impact every sphere of our lives, and are increasingly recognized as

significant and necessary objects of academic consideration in a wide range of

disciplines.[1] Digital culture is relevant in studies of church music for several reasons.

First, digital media has transformed the ways music (including church music) is created,

performed, listened to, and shared. Secondly, over the recent decades, religious practices

have also come to be shaped by and transmitted through digital media. Even the ways

people construct and live out their personal identities are impacted by online realities –

social media is a prime example. In what follows, I will address each of these

developments briefly, but first, it is important to consider this set of cultural trends as

parts of a larger whole.

A helpful term in the conversation about music in digital culture is

"mediatization." *A Dictionary of Media and Communication* defines mediatization as

"The increasing importance of the mass media in society and culture: for example, in

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[1] Nicholas Cook, "Digital Technology and Cultural Practice." In *The Cambridge Companion to Music in Digital Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 5-28.

politics and sport."[2] Mediatization, as I will use the term, indicates not only the

translation of ideas, culture, and relationships into digital forms, but also the inevitable

impact that digital media has on the translated thoughts and practices. While the word

can be used to refer to forms of media such as television, in this thesis I will be

particularly focusing on the subsections of media that relate to online media and digital

games.

In their chapter "YouTube: A New Mediator of Christian Community," Daniel

Thornton and Mark Evans describe the impact of mediatization on music:

> The digital age has facilitated new ways of interacting with music. Engagement
> with music will no doubt continue to change, driven by technological advances
> and commercial imperatives. At this moment in history, though, the online media
> streaming and social networking service YouTube is a, if not *the*, dominant
> environment for musical prosumption (the portmanteau of production and
> consumption).[3]

While online digital media may have become the primary context for sharing and

experiencing music, this cultural development is only the latest in a continuing

transformation. In her book *Playing Along: Digital Games, YouTube, and Virtual*

Performance (2012)*,* Kiri Miller situates digital music-making within this broader

history: "Ever since it became possible to reproduce recorded performances in domestic

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[2] Daniel Chandler and Rod Munday, *A Dictionary of Media and Communication*, (Oxford University Press, 2016). http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780191800986 .001.0001/acref-9780191800986.

[3] Daniel Thornton and Mark Evans, "YouTube: A New Mediator of Christian Community" in *Congregational Music-Making and Community in a Mediated Age*, edited by Anna Nekola and Thomas Wagner (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015), 141.

settings, people have been engaging in musical practices that fall between the poles of passive listening (if there is such a thing) and musica practica."[4]

Many of the concerns and questions raised by digitally mediated music, while new in a sense, are really extensions and permutations of dynamics that have occurred before. Each time technology advances in a way that profoundly impacts music's role in our lives, we may worry (understandably so) that this change will include shifts for the worse. Miller describes how the early twentieth century saw the advent of technologies such as player pianos, radios, and phonographs, which "delineated a new distinction between life and recorded performance…[and] also inspired a century of eulogies for amateur musicality."[5] One critic of these changes in the musical landscape complained in 1938 that "contemporary performance 'sounds like its own phonograph record'…and argued that 'the adaptation to machine music necessarily implies a renunciation of one's own human feelings and at the same time a fetishism of the machine.'"[6] I share these perspectives to point out the ever-changing nature of human culture, including musical practices, and the predictable responses to unpredictable developments. In the case of the mediatization of music, I suggest that a helpful response is to seek understanding of new forms in and on their own terms, without making prior judgments as to their benefits or dangers.

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[4] Kiri Miller, *Playing Along: Digital Games, YouTube, and Virtual Performance*, (New York: Oxford University Press USA, 2012) 13. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/bayloru/detail.action?docID=834746.

[5] Ibid., 12.

[6] Ibid.

Religion is also undergoing the process of mediatization. As Teresa Berger writes in her 2018 book @ *Worship*,

> anyone interested in religious practices, those of prayer and worship included, will have to look closely at digital worlds and religious practices in them. It is clear that both very old and entirely new liturgical practices are flourishing online…Clearly, digitally mediated liturgical life is rich, multifaceted, and effervescent. It is also ceaselessly expanding.[7]

Berger calls for digitally mediated liturgical practices to be given due attention, and refers to the history of worship practices to show that worship has always been mediated in some sense:

> As novel as digital communication technologies might be, questions about their relationship to practices of prayer and worship are part of much older conversations. These conversations, broadly conceived, are about the relationship between ever- evolving media technologies and centuries-old practices of worship. Digital technologies stand in a long line of historical media forms that were part of Christian worship from its very beginning.[8]

Berger goes so far as to claim "Christian worship should not be understood as an originally unmediated or pre-mediated world to which (artificial?) media technologies then came to be added. Rather, Christian worship has always only existed in practices of mediation."[9]

Some religious practices do not only include digital mediation, but also are partially or even completely accomplished through digital means. Heidi Campbell tackles questions about online religion in her article "Understanding the Relationship between Religion Online and Offline in a Networked Society." She describes a

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[7] Teresa Berger, @ *Worship: Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 3.

[8] Ibid., 7.

[9] Ibid.

phenomenon she calls "networked religion," which is "informed by the technological structures and characteristics of the internet".[10] Campbell articulates five major traits of networked religion: "networked community, storied identity, shifting authority, convergent practice, and multisite reality."[11] She points out that these traits are also evidenced in offline religious practice, which both informs and is informed by online religion. She also contends that these same trends are observable in shifting religious ideas and practices in offline spheres, particularly in the West.

Campell elsewhere explores religious mediatization specifically in the area of digital games. In her introduction to *Playing with Religion in Digital Games*, she highlights a lacuna in the existing scholarship:

> In the twenty-first century, scholars have noted how people use digital media to recreate religious practices: they visit online shrines, take virtual pilgrimages, and incorporate social media and the internet into their spiritual routines. Despite this, the study of religion and gaming has not received much attention in the study of religion and the internet and remains one of the most understudied elements of such digital environments.[12]

Campbell believes that digital games are an untapped mine of new insights about religion, and claims "…digital games both reflect and shape contemporary religiosity, creating a fertile ground for research into what it means to be human in the fullest sense."[13] She goes on to suggest

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[10] Heidi A. Campbell, "Understanding the Relationship between Religion Online and Offline in a Networked Society," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80, no. 1 (March 1, 2012), 68. https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfr074.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Heidi A. Campbell and Gregory Price Grieve, eds., *Playing with Religion in Digital Games* (Indiana University Press, 2014), 2. http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.baylor.edu/stable/j.ctt16gz5dh.

[13] Ibid.

> …studying digital gaming is not merely an end in itself, but a means of displaying and unlocking the meaning of religion in contemporary society as a whole. Digital games are not simply mirrors that reflect culture. Rather, they frequently eschew or alter, like a funhouse mirror, assumptions about religion. This means they have the potential to inform or interpret religious practice as it is reflected back at us, with a selectivity determined by the source. Digital games do not simply mediate religion, but they also "mediatize" it.[14]

Campbell here articulates a dynamic—that digital games both reflect *and* transform religious experience—that is important to this thesis. Similarly, I argue that studying the intersection of music and digital games (the subject of the next chapter) can provide new insights and frameworks for understanding music in religious settings. Again, the main contribution of the idea of mediatization is that there is a bidirectional influence between digital media and the piece of culture in question, in this case religion.

The third area of mediatization we will deal with relates to identity narratives, particularly in religious contexts. Identity formation is a multifaceted process, and music and religion are highly relevant to this process; my concern in this thesis is how music in worship relates to identity narratives. Heidi Campbell describes the internet's potential to function as

> a spiritual network…[which] includes forming social structures to support spiritual activities, and creating or promoting a common belief or worldview through technological resources. It also entails constructing a specific religious identity and pursuing certain types of religious information online.[15]

Campbell also suggests a particular way of understanding online community:

> The "religious identity network" model characterizes the online community as a group committed to one another through their shared faith and chosen liturgical expression or religious tradition. Identity comes from reinforcing a particular set

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[14] Ibid., 17.

[15] Heidi Campbell, *Exploring Religious Community Online: We Are One in the Network*, Vol. 24, Digital Formations, (New York: P. Lang, 2005), 54.

of beliefs or rituals that are transported online…This also relates to the model of internet as "common mental geography," which uses the network to promote a sense of shared identity.[16]

The internet can certainly be a context for individuals and communities to construct and adopt identity narratives, but this narrative identification does not only happen through online community per se. In his dissertation "(Re)Sounding Passion: Listening to American Evangelical Worship Music," Joshua Busman explores the practices, material culture, and implications of the Passion conference movement within American evangelicalism. He points out the wide-reaching influence of these meetings on worship music in America, through such avenues as CDs, DVDs, and books, as well as online media content: "These recorded performances help to create an aural lexicon of "authentic" worship which is largely reified through references to mediated sonic experience."[17]

Busman engages with the idea of "true worship" in evangelical settings, understood as "an unmediated encounter with God" through music.[18] Paradoxically, these experiences are given normative forms through mediated/mediatized experiences, giving "building blocks for…plausible narratives of the self…through which religious persons come to understand themselves as part of a particular religious life-world."[19] Here we see the convergent practice Campbell mentioned earlier at play – material culture, digital media, and music together create experiences that outline and reinforce

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[16] Ibid., 104.

[17] Joshua Kalin Busman, "(Re)Sounding Passion: Listening to American Evangelical Worship Music," (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 2015), 9.

[18] Ibid., 146.

[19] Ibid., 154.

identity narratives within religious contexts. Tanya Riches also describes this phenomenon as it occurs in churches:

> The congregation's 'aesthetic formation'…is highly mediated, as global and local cultural flows and discourses in music, media and Christian theology shape congregational worship. This is to say that any experience of worship is inextricable from the environment in which it is embedded, and especially for larger 'networked' churches…this is the 'new media' environment.[20]

Riches emphasizes the power of mediatization, as "The new media environment influences both religious experience and spiritual formation."[21] On the other hand, Mia Lövheim makes clear that this new environment does not sever continuity with more familiar settings. In her chapter on "Identity," she posits

> …religious identity online is not that different from religious identity in everyday offline life. Religious identities in contemporary society are performed and mediated; in a different way from previous societies, they call for constant revision and continuous performance in known and unknown social settings, of which some are digital and others are physically located.[22]

According to Lövheim, "religious identity in modern society is still a social thing, deeply anchored in the social situations and religions individuals want and need to stay connected to in order to find meaning in everyday life."[23]

These three areas of music, religion, and identity narratives all interact with new media in the digital age in their own ways. They also interact with each other, forming a complex system of meaning and experiences that form people in powerful ways.

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[20] Tanya Riches, "Panoptic or Pastoral Gaze? The Worship Leader in the New Media Environment," in *Congregational Music-Making and Community in a Mediated Age*, edited by Anna E. Nekola and Thomas Wagner, Ashgate Congregational Music Studies Series (Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2015), 61.

[21] Ibid., 75.

[22] Mia Lövheim, "Identity," in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, ed. Heidi Campbell (New York: Routledge, 2013), 52.

[23] Ibid.

Changes in technology lead inevitably to shifts in culture; these changes nearly always include new opportunities as well as new challenges, which are distinct from but nevertheless related to the opportunities and challenges we have faced before.

Why Does Mediatization Matter?

Many churches do not make significant use of digital media in their worship. Their leaders and members may have minimal awareness of how new media and mediatization affect the ways people experience music, practice religion, and form identities. Many churches are not particularly aware of digital religious practices, or do not perceive them as influencing their church's worship. However, even if a given local congregation does not have streaming services or virtual reality rituals, the cultural trends around mediatization are impacting worship by impacting individual worshippers. The people in most congregations are likely already engaging in some degree of digitally mediatized religion, and so thoughtful reflection is called for. Our customary frameworks and approaches may not be sufficient for this reflection; the growing field of ludomusicology may have new tools for us to apply in this area.

CHAPTER THREE

Ludomusicology

Ludology and Ludomusicology

In their chapter "Games and Design Patterns," Staffan Björk and Jussi Holopainen

describe the field of ludology in this way:

> Interest in developing the field of game research, ludology, has grown steadily
> over the last few years. But because games vary greatly, not only in their content
> and gameplay, but also in their medium and the reasons they are played, there are
> many approaches to the subject. This can be observed by looking at current
> research, which applies the methods and concepts of a wide range of research
> fields, from sociology and pedagogy, to literature and media studies, to computer
> science. Examples of common research topics include player activities, narrative
> structures, and best practices for game development and for meeting artistic
> challenges.[1]

The authors go on to describe the complexities of interactions between differing fields of

research, noting that ludologists' findings

> are typically published within their own communities and the results found in one
> field can easily be overlooked by researchers in other fields. And because their
> frameworks and terminology also differ, even when researchers and practitioners
> meet in multidisciplinary environments, they run the risk of misunderstanding one
> another.[2]

Ludology, then, finds itself at an intersection between a variety of disciplines, with a

unique set of relevant connections due to video games' position as an interactive cultural

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[1] Staffan Björk and Jussi Holopainen, "Games and Design Patterns," in *The Game Design Reader: A Rules of Play Anthology* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2006), 411.

[2] Ibid.

form native to an age of digital mediatization.[3] As this thesis is concerned with music, the more specific field of ludomusicology will be a relevant component of ludology for what follows. As ludology studies games and people's experiences with them, ludomusicology studies music in games and how music factors into those experiences.

There are many questions that could be explored relating to ludology and ludomusicology, but in particular I want to ask what insights may be gleaned by considering church music through the lens of digital games. In order to do this, I will explain specific concepts that will lay necessary groundwork for what follows. I will first give a brief introduction to Csikszentmihalyi's idea of flow. Secondly, I will discuss the significance of flow for game design and the goal of immersion in gameplay. Third, I will draw on Marcell Steuernagel's work to show that flow is a meaningful category for describing experiences in musical worship. Both flow and the closely related concept of immersion are frequently used in game design. This intersection between worship music and flow will lead to a discussion of ludonarrative dissonance and its relation to flow, and from there to the recently proposed concept of ludomusical dissonance. This last concept is the hinge on which this thesis swings, namely that a conflict between music and experienced narratives can lead to disconnection; the others provide language with which to talk about this experience.

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[3] I also believe this quote illustrates a dynamic that impacts church music studies, wherein various conversations around theology, biblical studies, practical theology/applied ministry, ethics, and ethnomusicology can at times struggle to communicate, and instead become "silos" without meaningful interaction or cooperation. There are admirable examples of integration of these fields in studying worship, but they seem to be the exception, rather than the rule, and there is a felt need to bridge those gaps.

An Introduction to Flow

The progenitor of the concept of flow is Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. He describes

flow as

> …a subjective state that people report when they are completely involved in
> something to the point of forgetting time, fatigue, and everything else but the
> activity itself. It is what we feel when we read a well-crafted novel or play a good
> game of squash, or take part in a stimulating conversation. The defining feature of
> flow is intense experiential involvement in moment-to-moment activity. Attention
> is fully invested in the task at hand, and the person functions at his or her fullest
> capacity.[4]

This experience of full involvement in a task includes related experiences of focused

awareness on the action without distraction, a loss of self-consciousness, and an

experience of time passing differently.[5] Csikszentmihalyi also proposes three

preconditions for flow: "a *clear set of goals*…to add direction and purpose to

behavior…*a balance between perceived challenges and perceived skills*…[and] *clear and*

immediate feedback…[which] informs the individual how well he or she is progressing in

the activity, and dictates whether to adjust or maintain the present course of action."[6]

Flow in Game Design

Csikszentmihalyi's work on flow is often cited, but it has particular significance

in conversations around media, game design and ludology. While flow was originally

studied in physical activities like sports, or more tangible mental exercises like chess, it is

also relevant to engagement with media. Joshua Sites compares the experience of flow to

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[4] Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow and the Foundations of Positive Psychology: The Collected Works of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi* (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 2014), 230. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/bayloru/detail.action?docID=1802897.

[5] Ibid., 231.

[6] Ibid., 231-232.

parallel experiences of emotional involvement in film, games, and other media, and

concludes that "Just as media can elicit real emotional responses, media are capable of

enabling people to enter a state of flow."[7] It turns out that not only is flow possible

within digital games, but from a game design perspective, the flow state is highly

desirable. In their book *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (2004), Katie Salen

and Eric Zimmerman pose the question "What might be the relevance of flow for game

design?" They answer, "In many ways, the heightened enjoyment and engagement of the

flow state is exactly what game designers seek to establish for their players."[8] Salen and

Zimmerman go on to cite Csikszentmihalyi's description of eight components of flow.

These are "a challenging activity that requires skills…the merging of action and

awareness…clear goals and feedback…concentration on the task at hand…the paradox of

control…the loss of self-consciousness…[and] the transformation of time."[9] The authors

claim

> In each of the eight components of flow activity Csikszentmihalyi mentions, there
> are clear parallels to games. This doesn't mean that flow applies only to games,
> or that every game produces a flow state for its players. What it does mean is that
> games are one of the best kinds of activities to produce flow.[10]

They return to their initial question, altering it to ask why game designers want to

engender this experience of flow in players. They conclude "Being in flow represents a

rich and meaningful engagement with the activity at hand. Generally, as a game

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[7] Sites, "It's No Game: The Effect of a Generative Music System on Flow in Video Game Players," (M.A. thesis, Indiana University, 2016), 12.

[8] Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 336.

[9] Ibid., 337.

[10] Ibid., 338.

designer, you are creating game systems meant for deep exploration."[11] Gamers describe

certain kinds of video games considered of good quality as "immersive," and this

ubiquitous descriptor is nearly synonymous with flow. Players are drawn into the game

world, feel themselves a part of it, and lose awareness of the passage of time or the

controller in their hands, experiencing the game world with a certain degree of

immediacy. While many people engaging with games may not use the term flow, it

serves as a helpful concept for describing the experience of many, and is generally an

interchangeable term with immersion.

<div align="center">Flow in Worship Music</div>

Just as flow is an important concept for digital game design, it is also relevant for

explaining some dynamics of church music in worship. Researchers are beginning to

address the significance of flow in worship rituals in a mediatized world.[12] Marcell

Steuernagel explores themes that arose in interviews with churchgoers, and finds the

language of flow a helpful category:

> Participants in congregational singing often refer to forgetting the passage of time
> or being entirely present in the experience of church music. One implied notion
> behind this idea of participation is that the experience was uninterrupted, a
> dynamic that does not seem to be connected to liturgical style, at least in the case
> studies included in this dissertation. In order to ground notions such as this, we
> resort to Csikszentmihalyi's concept of "flow," which describes immersion in a
> similar way…"[13]

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[11] Ibid., 339.

[12] Deborah J. Kapp, *Worship Frames: How We Shape and Interpret Our Experience of God*, Vital Worship, Healthy Congregations (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2008).

[13] Marcell Silva Steuernagel, *Church Music through the Lens of Performance: The Embodied Ritual of Sacred Play* (Doctoral dissertation, 2018), 121.

He then goes on to cite Csikszentmihalyi's definition of flow, included earlier in this chapter. Steuernagel proposes a category of "ritual flow," experienced by participants in worship rituals, particularly through engagement with church music. He suggests "When ritual flow is actualized, the process of constructing a special space and time of worship is not cut short by distractions or contrariety."[14] Steuernagel goes on to articulate some possible factors that can disrupt flow in worship:

> Conversely, I argue that one of the ways in which a congregant's flow of worship may be disturbed is through a sudden shift from familiarity into unfamiliarity. Such a shift, or jolt, can result in a "falling out of flow": being expelled from the embodied experience of church music. A sudden divide is created, a dissonance, between expectation and actualization, between novelty and familiarity.[15]

Steuernagel finds the language of flow to be productive not only in describing congregants' experiences of involvement or immersion in worship, but also as a category to explore their occasional feelings of disintegration or distance from what is going on around them – the "sudden divide."

This "falling out of flow" or "dissonance" is the phenomenon on which I want to focus. I propose that this experience is significant to church music studies and practical worship leadership in congregations, and that exploring it further may have unanticipated benefits. As game design and ludology are often concerned with the game player's experience of flow, they have valuable insights to offer on experiences of disruption or dissonance. Two terms from the study of video games seem to promise the opportunity for fresh insights to arise: ludonarrative dissonance and ludomusical dissonance. Each describes an experience, similar to the dynamic Steuernagel describes in the context of

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[14] Ibid., 123.

[15] Ibid.

congregational worship, in which a game player is jolted out of the immersive experience of flow during gameplay.

Ludonarrative Dissonance

As shown above, flow and immersion are closely related experiences that are important to game designers and game players. There are games in a wide variety of genres that tell stories through different ways; as a point of comparison, consider the diversity of narratives and tonal qualities present in film. A "good film" may be one that portrays a compelling story in a believable way, such that the viewer perceives that this kind of thing may have truly happened. A film may also attempt to present a wildly fantastical world to inspire wonder, and the story told will reflect that goal. A romantic comedy tells a different kind of story than an action movie, and some films are appreciated for their artistic value or cultural significance, while others are viewed simply for entertainment.

Similar dynamics are at play in video games, which range from purely play-focused or "shallow" arcade or mobile phone games meant to entertain or distract to complex narratives with either detailed world building or realistic depictions of real-life issues and experiences. These games may be intended to impact the player emotionally, challenge them to think about fraught social or personal issues, or imagine a world quite different from their own. There are video games that have the player doing something as mundane as cultivating a virtual farm, others that pit them against intergalactic attackers, some that set out to tell a compelling story and others that seek to create an atmosphere or portray an artistic vision. In his chapter "Video Game Genres," Mark J. P. Wolf argues

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it is the forms of interactivity, rather than imagery, which we must use when classifying video games. While some video games can be classified in a manner similar to that of films (we might say that *Outlaw* is a Western, *Space Invaders* is science fiction, and *Combat* is a war game), classification by imagery ignores the fundamental differences and similarities which are to be found in the player's experience of the game. *Outlaw* and *Combat*, both early games for the Atari 2600, are very similar in that both simply feature player-characters maneuvering and shooting at each other in a field of obstacles on a single, bounded screen of graphics, with cowboys in one game and tanks in the other.[16]

Defining genre in video games can be a challenging task.[17] Narrative features somewhat differently in different genres of games; however, many gamers expect narrative to be a significant part of their playing experience and evaluate games partly on its quality. Many will play a game because it is enjoyable, but bemoan the poor writing if a game does not measure up to narrative standards. In contrast, some games are enjoyable for their narrative, even if the gameplay is less precise or fluid than would be preferable.

This points to an expectation of players and game designers for games to be considered of good quality: the interaction of gameplay and storytelling. Ideally, both of these key elements will be well-executed and complementary, each drawing the player further into the other and forming an integrated whole. This allows for deeper immersion in the game and a greater experience of flow, as the player is not distracted from playing the game by a badly presented story or diverted from an engrossing plot by clunky mechanics (the "nuts and bolts" of a game – controls, visuals, physics, unique features of the game world, how a particular in-game avatar acts and responds to player input, etc.). The gameplay and mechanics of a game make up the "ludic" elements, and the dialogue

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[16] Mark J. P. Wolf, *The Video Game Explosion: A History from PONG to Playstation and Beyond* (Westport, CT: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2007), 259. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/bayloru/detail.action?docID=329220.

[17] Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *The Game Design Reader: A Rules of Play Anthology* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 412.

and plot make up the narrative elements.[18] The concept of "ludonarrative dissonance"

speaks to a conflict between these elements experienced by the player that hinders or

disrupts the player's engagement in and enjoyment of the game as a whole. Game

developer and critic Clint Hocking coined this term in a 2007 blog post about the game

Bioshock, published by 2K Games. This game is set in an underwater city in 1960, and

explores the philosophy of Ayn Rand's Objectivism. It problematizes the Randian

assumption that rational self-interest is good and portrays the catastrophic consequences

of such an outlook being applied on a large scale. The game as a story challenges the

player to consider this and come to his or her own conclusions about such self-interest;

the narrative demands an answer from the player. As a game, however, the decisions the

player is able to make for or against Objectivism seem inconsequential. In fact, in order

to progress the story at all, the player is railroaded into specific choices that lead to a

profound disconnect between gameplay and narrative. As Hocking puts it,

> To cut straight to the heart of it, *Bioshock* seems to suffer from a powerful
> dissonance between what it is about as a game, and what it is about as a story. By
> throwing the narrative and ludic elements of the work into opposition, the game
> seems to openly mock the player for having believed in the fiction of the game at
> all. The leveraging of the game's narrative structure against its ludic structure all
> but destroys the player's ability to feel connected to either, forcing the player to
> either abandon the game in protest (which I almost did) or simply accept that the
> game cannot be enjoyed as both a game and a story, and to then finish it for the
> mere sake of finishing it.[19]

This is what Hocking means by ludonarrative dissonance – a lack of synergy and

integration between how a game works and feels and the story the game is telling. This

dissonance leads to a disruption of flow or immersion, such that the player feels separated

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[18] "Ludonarrative Dissonance in Bioshock." Click Nothing. Accessed September 19, 2019.
https://www.clicknothing.com/click_nothing/2007/10/ludonarrative-d.html.

[19] Ibid.

from the proceedings in the game world and finds themselves unable to experience the game's narrative as believable, compelling, or relatable.

Ludomusical Dissonance

If ludonarrative dissonance describes an experience of disconnection brought on by the interplay of gameplay and narrative, ludomusical dissonance points to the interplay of music with narratival and ludic elements in games. In a 2013 study, Frank M. Diaz used the category of flow in relationship to musical listening; while more research remains to be done on the topic, listening to or participating in music often seems to fulfill Csikszentmihalyi's criteria for activities that can create flow.[20] One of the major questions that ludomusicological study addresses is how music impacts players' experience of gameplay and immersion.[21] The concept of ludomusical dissonance can be approached in at least two ways: while the term itself explicitly denotes an interaction between gameplay and music, given the way it develops the concept of ludonarrative dissonance, it can also be applied to the role music plays in storytelling. In a way, ludomusical dissonance occupies a space where the three elements of gameplay, narrative, and music overlap. Similarly to the ways a movie's soundtrack is meant to engross the viewer in the action and the story, music in video games is intended to facilitate flow and immersion, as well as emotional involvement. In both cases, the goal is to create an overall experience that is integrated and compelling, and to allow deep involvement in a narrative.

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[20] Frank M. Diaz, "Mindfulness, Attention, and Flow during Music Listening: An Empirical Investigation," *Psychology of Music* 41, no. 1 (January 2013): 42–58. https://doi.org/10.1177/0305735611415144.

[21] Sites, "It's No Game," 25-26.

Michiel Kamp uses the term "ludo-musical dissonance" in his chapter in *Music in the Role-Playing Game: Heroes and Harmonies* (2019), a collected work edited by William Gibbons and Steven Reale. Kamp describes an experience in playing the game *Diablo III*, in which the typical action sequences of the game were interrupted by an apparently unrelated musical cue; a pair of chords with a strikingly different sound from the rest of the background music. Kamp notes "the chords had a portentous quality to them that didn't quite fit the routineness of..my usual gameplay experiences in the game…"[22] In the moment, Kamp was briefly distracted by the music, but it was only upon referring back to recorded footage of the gameplay that he reflected further on the experience and identified what led to his response. One technique used in game soundtracks that differs from film scoring is the use of contextual triggers for musical cues; when a certain event happens in the game, or the player reaches a particular milestone, a change in the background music signals a significant occurrence. This allows the soundtrack to repeat musical sections as long as necessary, as no two game players will play through an interactive game in exactly the same way. In this case, Kamp "realized that the chords must be part of a dynamic element in the soundtrack—a short, non-looping cue sometimes called a 'stinger'—that occurs when the player crosses a certain bridge."[23] Through later analysis, Kamp was able to identify the purpose of this musical moment, but at the time it was simply confusing, even distracting.

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[22] Michiel Kamp, "Ludomusical Dissonance in Diablo III," In *Music in the Role-Playing Game: Heroes & Harmonies* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 131.

[23] Ibid.

Kamp posits that this musical figure (though it may have had an intended purpose of signifying an element of the game's broader structure) and his experience of the moment were an example of "a musical form of 'ludonarrative dissonance'…"[24]. He references Clint Hocking's 2007 blog post, and continues to describe the two "portentous" chords as a "broken sign." This is based on Heidegger's idea of broken signs as those that are unsuccessful in fulfilling their purpose to point beyond themselves. A sign that does not signify demands our attention in a unique way. Kamp observes, "While a working sign announces its referent, a broken sign only announces its 'signness.' The chords in the bridge cue did not actually portent anything, but they *sounded* portentous."[25]

To summarize Kamp's concept and connect it to the discussion at hand, ludomusical dissonance is an interaction between the music of a game and that game's narrative and gameplay elements that causes disruption and works against the intended goal of immersion in storied play. This phenomenon is contextual, in that music's meaning is not simply defined, but requires awareness of genre expectations and other cultural and personal factors. As Kamp puts it, "to recognize the bridge cue as a broken sign requires more than a familiarity with video game music conventions and the ludic and narrative functions that music can have. Rather, it is predicated on an intimate grasp of the workings of music in the particular genre that *Diablo III* belongs to."[26] Kamp ends his chapter with this description of ludomusical dissonance:

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[24] Ibid., 133.

[25] Ibid., 136.

[26] Ibid., 137.

Ludomusical dissonance, then, is a particular kind of ludic experience that arises out of (sub) genre expectations in a historical context of ever-changing scoring practices.…the uneasy friction between narrative and gameplay is an essential part of ludoliteracy, and music's double allegiance to both these poles means it will remain an important signpost of ludonarrative dissonance.[27]

I suggest that similar dynamics may be at play in other contexts where narrative, music, and interactive experience intersect and conflict with one another. For instance, Steuernagel has pointed out the significance of flow in musical worship, and described ways that congregants' experience of worship can be disrupted. Ludonarrative and ludomusical dissonance are well outside our typical lexicon in church music studies, but I propose that they may be helpful concepts that illuminate aspects of our own concerns about worship. However, just as ludomusical dissonance exists at an intersection of three realities – gameplay, music, and narrative – I contend that this discussion requires an additional piece to show its potential uses. My goal is to draw three areas of scholarship together to reveal new possibilities for discourse and reflection. Church music studies offer us insight into musical worship and congregants' experiences of participatory music-making, and ludomusicology provides information on how music can lead to disruption of flow or immersion. The third area I want to explore relates to the function of religious narratives in forming identity, as explored in the field of sociology.

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[27] Ibid., 142.

CHAPTER FOUR

Religious Narratives

Narrative and Religious Identity

Just as the advent of digital mediatization and cultural shifts due to technology

have impacted worship music, social change has also transformed religious practice in

other ways. In the age of information, individuals have access to a huge range of

religious perspectives and practices. Many find themselves in contexts where religion

has become less significant to how people order their lives, understand their own

identities, and find their place in larger narratives. With this degree of choice and the

prevalence of counterarguments against any particular religious tradition, we face new

challenges in an uncharted landscape. Nancy Ammerman describes the influence of this

increased choice in her chapter "Religious Narratives and Religious Institutions":

> As modern people have loosened their ties to the families and places that
> (perhaps) formerly enveloped them in a cocoon of faith (or at least surrounded
> them with a predictable round of religious activity), they can choose how and
> whether to be religious, including choosing how central religion will be in their
> lives. Religious practices and affiliations change over a complicated lifetime, and
> the array of religious groups in a voluntary society shifts in equally complex
> ways. If religious identity ever was a given, it certainly is no longer.[1]

As this was written in 2003, we can expect that in recent years this process of change

may have accelerated even more. It is important to note that many people do still

maintain the religious identities of their families or communities. However, as

Ammerman points out, this is not guaranteed, and is becoming less common:

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[1] Nancy Tatom Ammerman, "Religious Identities and Religious Institutions" in *Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, edited by Michele Dillon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 207.

In the premodern situation, religion was presumably collective and core. In the modern situation, taking up a collective, core religious identity is a matter of (exceptional) choice, not determinism. We neither all share one religious identity nor know quite what to make of the many identities with which we are surrounded.[2]

Ammerman acknowledges that identity is a "modern preoccupation," wherein people are "disembedded from traditional spaces and relationships" and begin "to worry – either existentially or theoretically – about the coherence of our biographical narratives or the bases of our group memberships."[3] As religious identities are becoming more diverse and confusing, it is helpful to have a way of understanding their formation, adoption, and significance in people's lives. Important questions include: How do people receive religious identities? What factors influence their decisions to accept or reject them? What difference do they make in day-to-day experience, as well in times of crisis or celebration that individuals and communities face?

Ammerman contends that people may "seek some sense of congruence within the complexity of their lives," creatively using established patterns and narratives from a variety of sources and loyalties.[4] This congruence in complexity is sought through narrative, which "renders an event understandable by connecting it to a set of relationships and practices – historically and spatially, particular people doing socially patterned things."[5] Narratives "emplot" events into larger stories through the lenses of multiple potential scenarios. Internalized narratives are often unconscious, and narratives

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid., 209

[4] Ibid., 212.

[5] Ibid., 213.

can vary in scale from worldview-encompassing paradigms to small, episodic interpretations.[6]

Narratives are tools by which individuals and communities make sense of the world, integrating sometimes contradictory experiences into a broader story. Religion is one source for these narratives. Religion offers patterns into which people categorize the disparate events of their lives, provides rituals and practices that engrain those patterns and embody them in storied actions, and positions each individual within a larger reality. Considering the relation between religious narrative and personal identity can be a helpful approach in understanding the function of corporate worship, which contains many practices designed to remind worshippers of a central story and form their actions and characters in congruence with that story.

Musical Narratives, Musical Identities

Music-making is one practice used in corporate worship to communicate narrative and construct identity. Miranda Klaver wrote about the interaction of music, narrative, and identity in her chapter "Worship Music as Aesthetic Domain of Meaning and Bonding: The Glocal Context of a Dutch Pentecostal Church" (2015). She clearly positions music making in worship as a primary practice that forms identities in relation to narratives, arguing that "worshippers have access to distinct semiotic domains of meaning that enable them to both situate themselves within narratives and embody them

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[6] Ibid.

at the same time."[7] In making music during worship, worshippers both find their place in

whatever story is being communicated – during a particular service, within a church's

ongoing narrative, and in a broader faith tradition – and physically enact their identity

within that story in an interactive way. Music-making in worship includes physical,

intellectual, and emotional elements, and each of these has a role in the gathered

worshippers experiencing themselves as truly a part of the overarching faith narrative:

> In musicking, these social and relational aspects are not merely evoked and
> imagined as expressions of longing and desire, but experienced as real: we
> experience the world as it is, and through the experience, we learn about the world
> as it should be. This understanding of music as enactment implies that music—as
> embodied performance—encourages the formation of identities.[8]

Klaver also points out an intriguing paradox in worship within a mediated age. She

observes, "worshippers recall the encounter with the sacred as an immediate and

unmediated experience. However, processes of mediation are always at play in the

domain of religion…because the sacred requires some media forms in order to be

experienced and understood by believers."[9] This is echoed by Teresa Berger, who claims

worship has always been mediated through one form or another, in various religious

practices throughout different times and places. Berger points out something implied in

Klaver's argument: worshippers nearly always encounter the divine through some

mediated practice or experience. The issue facing us today is not that media has suddenly

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[7] Miranda Klaver, "Worship Music as Aesthetic Domain of Meaning and Bonding: The Glocal
Context of a Dutch Pentecostal Church" in *The Spirit of Praise: Music and Worship in Global Pentecostal
Charismatic Christianity*, edited by Monique Marie Ingalls and Amos Yong (University Park,
Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015), 98.

[8] Ibid., 101-102.

[9] Ibid., 109.

invaded worship where it was not before. Rather, we are dealing with new forms of media that resurface age-old questions and problems in new ways.[10]

Interaction and Narrative

Digital games represent one such new media form that invites engagement as we reflect on worship. The potential of digital games to shed light on religious practices goes further than simply providing analogues to help us make sense of new media, however. In addition to allowing reflection on how digital mediatization informs worshippers' experience of music, considering digital games provides space to consider the significance of interactivity and the stories we tell each other about life, the world, and God. Rachel Wagner, in her book *Godwired: Religion, Ritual, and Virtual Reality* (2012), suggests that the interactive nature of games invites us to consider faith narratives in religious practice as being deeply interactive:

> We might be tempted to think that "playing" stories is something new, but interactivity has long played a pervasive role in religious storytelling. Every religious tradition has stories of its founders, its practitioners, or its legendary figures, and many of these stories have "interactive" forms, what we might call the "stories we play." The Exodus is remembered in Jewish tradition in the *seder* meal with symbolic associations for the food that is eaten alongside a retelling of the story…Christians regularly retell the story of Jesus, through a re-enactment of the Nativity story or in the dozens of Hollywood films that focus on his life and death…There is a long-standing and deep connection between stories and interactivity in religious life.[11]

Wagner goes on to highlight the connections between rituals and games. She points out that

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[10] Berger, @ *Worship*, 7.

[11] Rachel Wagner, *Godwired: Religion, Ritual, and Virtual Reality*, (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2012), 16.

For something to work as a ritual or as a game, there must be some kind of script to guide one through the experience. A ritual liturgy is a set of rules that shapes the emergent experience of worship but allows for certain choices in performance and interpretation. Similarly, many video games come with a sort of liturgy; in addition to the game's scripted rules, this may consist of a backstory, revealed via associated media, cut scenes, or introductory material, and often shapes the fixed elements of the storyline through which players are led. Religious liturgy also relies upon a "backstory" of sorts, in the form of the received sacred text that inspired the current form of enacted telling. Thus it seems safe to say that games and stories are kin concepts.[12]

The "script" of an interactive game can be understood as an analog of the religious narratives that shape our worldview. Our potential choices in the world are informed by the stories we tell ourselves about reality.

As Wagner points out, games themselves often contain an element of ritual or liturgy. One of these elements is what game players will sometimes refer to as a "gameplay loop," which is a term used to describe the typical rhythm of playing within the structure provided: i.e., the player ventures out from their home base of a medieval village, a space station, or a magical city, engages in exploration, combat, gathering resources, or some social interaction with the game world's inhabitants, then returns back to where they started to reap the rewards of their completed quests. The contents of a gameplay loop are heavily influenced by genre expectations. Similarly, various religious traditions have patterns of practices that are reflected within individual worship services as well as in broader rhythms of life. The structure of a Sunday morning service has its own liturgical rhythm, the repetitive practice of weekly worship and weeknight programs has a kind of "loop" to it, and the monthly, quarterly, or yearly rituals of anything from celebrating Communion to following the church calendar and lectionary bring

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[12] Ibid., 28-29.

worshippers back to familiar ground. All of these practices invite engagement within a

certain set of expectations and rules, with the result that identities are formed through

interaction within the faith narrative.

Whether games are better understood through narrative or interactive play is a

subject of debate. Wagner describes a debate surrounding video games between two

camps,[13] sometimes referred to as "narratologists" and "ludologists."[14] The former group

seeks to understand games as a storytelling medium, and the latter analyzes games as

interactive systems. Wagner acknowledges the tension here, but also connects it to the

intersection of religious rituals and religious narratives:

> One important component in determining if something is more like a game or a
> story is the identification of *where* meaning-making occurs in the "telling" of a
> story. If meaning lies in the reader's *passive* absorption of a fixed text, then
> games are not stories, since games are *active* play. However, if stories can
> *emerge* through interactivity, leaving behind a fixed story as artifact, then a game
> *can* be a story – or perhaps we might say that a game can *become* a story as it is
> played. As Michael Mateas and Andrew Stern observe, "emergent narrative" is
> "concerned with providing a rich framework within which individual players can
> construct their own narratives, or groups of players can engage in the shared
> social construction of narratives"…Liturgy, too, shapes the telling of religious
> stories, creating ritual events that allow certain choices but forbid others.[15]

Understood in this way, religion itself can be thought to include both "gameplay

elements" (systems, rules, and patterned practices that produce the array of possible

choices within certain bounds) and "narrative elements" (the stories that inform the

system, as well as the stories of individuals who exert their agency within the system by

embodying the emergent narratives of their own lives). These two inform each other

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[13] Wagner, *Godwired*, 26-27.

[14] Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *The Game Design Reader*, 33.

[15] Wagner, *Godwired*, 29.

over time. There is an element of interaction in every religious tradition that is essential

to its function of identity formation within narrative frameworks. Wagner notes

> When theorists of games discuss the construction of the game world, they
> sometimes describe a game as a "system" consisting of "a set of things that affect
> one another within an environment to form a larger pattern that is different from
> any of the individual parts" …Stories too, whether or not they are part of a larger
> game, can be viewed as systems that invite our interaction.[16]

Wagner goes on to posit that the interactive nature of religious narratives is what allows

them to be directive and formative in the lives of individuals:

> Perhaps this is the point of such rituals: they provide a system whereby one
> voluntarily restricts one's view for a period of time, as a means of focusing or
> renewal. In such cases, our interactions with these systems or story world
> produce emergent storylines that are our personal experiences, our chosen
> trajectories in life.[17]

Here I want to pause to briefly point out the potential connections between this voluntary

restriction of possibilities for the purpose of focus and the concept of flow discussed

previously. Flow is characterized by and often requires narrowing one's focus on the

task or experience at hand, excluding distractions, and being fully in the moment.

Immersion in a game takes a similar path of drawing the player, who is operating within

the game's rule set, into the narrative of the game world and the identity of the avatar

character. Formation of a religious identity utilizes rituals to limit potential actions to a

certain set of possible choices within a system of rules, producing an emergent storyline

for individuals and communities that emplots their experiences in a larger narrative.

Wagner summarizes her argument in this way:

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[16] Ibid., 49.

[17] Ibid., 50.

Interactions with stories as systems, then, are shaped by rules…All of these experiences are defined by "rules" – by what one can and cannot do – and these rules allow these experiences to produce a system that defines the experience. To approach a religious text from the perspective of rules rather than from that of received authoritative tradition (and fixed literal text) allows interpretation to become more like gameplay than story-reading.[18]

This description of religious texts and traditions as "rules" will likely be misleading to many – it has become popular to dismiss talk of the Bible as a "rulebook," but this is not quite what Wagner means. To simultaneously clarify what Wagner is suggesting and provide some credibility to this approach to religious narratives within the Christian tradition, which highly values Scripture, I will provide an example of similar reasoning from well-known New Testament scholar N.T. Wright.

In a 1991 article, Wright tackles the question of how the Bible, which consists largely of narrative, can be considered authoritative. Wright suggests that "stories in general, and certainly the biblical story, has a shape and a goal that must be observed and to which appropriate response must be made."[19] He offers the following model for how the Bible can be considered authoritative:

> Suppose there exists a Shakespeare play whose fifth act had been lost. The first four acts provide, let us suppose, such a wealth of characterization, such a crescendo of excitement within the plot, that it is generally agreed that the play ought to be staged. Nevertheless, it is felt inappropriate actually to write a fifth act once and for all: it would freeze the play into one form, and commit Shakespeare as it were to being prospectively responsible for work not in fact his own. Better, it might be felt, to give the key parts to highly trained, sensitive and experienced Shakespearian actors, who would immerse themselves in the first four acts, and in the language and culture of Shakespeare and his time, *and who would then be told to work out a fifth act for themselves.*[20]

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[18] Ibid.

[19] N.T. Wright, "How Can the Bible Be Authoritative?" Accessed October 9, 2019. http://ntwrightpage.com/2016/07/12/how-can-the-bible-be-authoritative/.

[20] Ibid.

Wright suggests that the result of this would be a faithful rendition of the first four acts, and then a differently but equally faithful "improvisation" in congruence with those initial acts to produce the fifth:

> This 'authority' of the first four acts [which Wright delineates as (1) Creation; (2) Fall; (3) Israel; (4) Jesus, with the implied fifth act being the time when the Church lives out the call to follow Jesus prior to the Second Coming] would not consist in an implicit command that the actors should repeat the earlier pans of the play over and over again. It would consist in the fact of an as yet unfinished drama, which contained its own impetus, its own forward movement, which demanded to be concluded in the proper manner but which required of the actors a responsible entering in to the story as it stood, in order first to understand how the threads could appropriately be drawn together, and then to put that understanding into effect by speaking and acting with both *innovation* and *consistency*.[21]

This corroborates Wagner's suggestion that religious narratives and identities are formed through interactive systems that prescribe, proscribe, and describe aspects of worshippers' experiences. Actions and events are evaluated by their degree of consistency or coherence with the broader narrative, and this leads to the formation of identities that allow believers to integrate their beliefs and their lives.

Dissonance and Disintegration

Forming individual and communal identities within religious narratives in worship seeks to establish coherence between, on the one hand, the actions, attitudes, and experiences of worshippers and, on the other hand, the essential and central elements of the story a given religious community tells. As we saw from Ammerman previously, people desire a sense of congruence in their lives, and religion often serves that integrating role. In their article "Studying Technology and Ecclesiology in Online Multi-Site Worship," Heidi Campbell and Michael DeLashmutt contend "Christian worship is

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[21] Ibid.

seen as meaningful when it draws effectively from a worshipping community's

theological self-understanding and makes this self-understanding intelligible within the

community's contemporary situation."[22] A contrasting statement would be that Christian

worship is not experienced as meaningful narrative identity integration when it fails to

communicate an intelligible contextual self-understanding. Put another way, if the

narrative in which worshippers are being asked to find their identity does not seem to

speak to their situation, they may find themselves being "dis-integrated," either from the

community among whom they worship or from the very beliefs they hold.

Campbell and DeLashmutt explore some implications of this, particularly as it

relates to semiotic elements of worship:

> A challenge occurs when symbols, actions and words used in Christian worship
> are taken from traditions and texts which are no longer continuous with the world
> in which the modern worshipper is situated. Facilitating worship in a way which
> is meaningful to today's worshipper presents one with two choices. One may find
> and employ complementary signs which suitably represent these aging symbols,
> or one may elect to translate the language and experience of worship into forms
> which are sensible within the common vernacular.[23]

Just as Michiel Kamp's "broken sign," a musical cue that attempted but failed to

communicate something significant, disrupts the flow in gameplay, the use of

incongruous symbols within Christian worship may disrupt the experience of a

worshipper. Similarly, if a religious narrative offered to worshippers cannot make sense

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[22] Heidi A. Campbell and Michael W. DeLashmutt, "Studying Technology and Ecclesiology in Online Multi-Site Worship," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 29, no. 2 (May 4, 2014): 267–85. https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2014.903662.

[23] Ibid., 28.

out of believers' life experiences, identity integration may be derailed.[24] If the system

seems to no longer function properly, the apparent "glitch" may force those operating

within it outside of that storied framework, raising questions about whether it is helpful

or even true.

Musical Mediation and Integration

How do new media forms relate to worship music? What is the worship leader or

minister to make of these complex dynamics in a new world of virtual realities, digital

music, and diverse religious narratives? How do particular individual worshippers

experience the juxtaposition of narrative, media, and music, and what can be learned

from considering musical worship practices through the bifocal lens of ludomusicology

and religious narratives? Before we examine the reported experiences of churchgoers in

the age of digital media, it may be helpful to review the concepts we will be applying to

that examination. So far, we have explored the concept of flow and its dual usefulness in

describing experiences of playing video games and engaging in gathered worship. We

have noted the importance of coherence between narrative and gameplay experience in

video games, with its negative counterpart of ludonarrative dissonance. We have applied

similar insights to the concept of ludomusical dissonance, in which music intended to

point beyond itself, invite deeper engagement in a story or a significant moment, or

provide a space for interaction fails to serve its intended purpose and instead distracts and

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[24] I acknowledge that a certain degree of contradiction or conflict between religious
narratives/theological systems and life experience is tolerable, and can still allow helpful integration to take
place. In some cases, a lack of coherence may even be a call for believers' to change something about
themselves, rather than a shortcoming in the symbolic meaning offered to them. Other instances of
apparent incoherence result from incomplete information and the limitations of human perceptions of their
own lives and of greater spiritual realities. However, it will behoove worship leaders and ministers to
consider the choices they make that may lead to disintegration, and whether they are helpful or harmful.

disrupts. We have examined religious narratives as a system that allows for identity

formation and integration, and the ways music plays a role in that process. We have

reflected on patterns of interactivity in games and narratives, and explored a potential

understanding of religious narratives that invites ongoing interaction and results in

emergent narratives that are simultaneously consistent and innovative. We have pointed

to the challenges that can arise when the symbols used in religious communities,

including music, fail to provide congruence or coherence and instead lead to dissonance

and potential identity/narrative disintegration.

The discussion to this point has been largely theoretical, defining terms and

highlighting potential connections between ludomusicology, religious narratives, and

church music. The foundation is now in place to consider how this theory works in

practice, and to show that ludomusicology is a competent and beneficial conversation

partner with church music studies. In order to establish that these theoretical concepts

provide a viable framework in which to understand worshippers' experiences, we now

turn to the experiences of actual worshippers.

CHAPTER FIVE

Case Study

Survey Method

As a part of this research, a survey was distributed to gauge people's experiences of immersion or disconnection during worship (see the Appendix for the full survey text). Survey recipients responded to a series of qualitative questions about worship, writing out their answers. The survey was available online, either in desktop or mobile format. The survey was distributed to members of two Baptist Churches associated with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, Calvary Baptist in Waco, Texas, and Second Baptist Church Downtown in Little Rock, Arkansas. Both churches are predominantly middle-class and white. The survey was also distributed to two online groups. The first of these was a group of ministry leaders in a parachurch youth ministry organization in Pennsylvania with connections to multiple denominations, but predominantly to the United Methodist Church. The second was a Facebook group titled "Multicultural Worship Leaders Network," which is intended to provide connections and conversation among worship leaders involved in multicultural worship efforts. The 23 individuals who completed the entire survey[1] represented a wide range of age groups, divided by decades from 18-29 to 80+. Twenty-one identified as white, one identified as black or African American, and one identified as Asian or Asian American. Eight out of 23 of respondents had fulfilled some kind of pastoral staff or paid position in the church at

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[1] These 23 completed surveys were out of 46 total attempts; some of these 46 were from individuals who came back and completed the survey later.

some point, while the rest were involved in volunteer roles. In this chapter, I will summarize the responses to each of the questions to the survey, highlight some particularly significant statements that reflect common themes, and then offer some insights gained from the survey as a whole.

The survey's format was designed to invite reflection on experiences of flow and religious narratives relating to worship music. To accomplish this, I presented questions in contrasting pairs or groups. The first pair of questions asked about experiences of flow or disconnection without using these theoretical terms. The second pair asked respondents to reflect on narrative consonance or dissonance between religious narratives encountered in worship and life experiences. A third set of five questions related to the interaction of worship leaders and congregants; a pair of questions asked worshippers what actions or attributes of a worship leader were conducive or disruptive to their experience of worship, and the next three questions asked worship leaders about their experiences while leading. Finally, the last pair of questions invited respondents to describe emotional dissonance with songs being sung, or a perceived lack of fit between musical and other liturgical elements within a particular worship service. Positive questions were asked first in each pair, to encourage greater ease in answering and to provide a foil for negative experiences.

Immersion and Disconnection

The first question of the survey proper as respondents to describe an experience related to investment or immersion in worship: "Recount a time when you felt totally invested in worship in the moment. What was that like? What do you remember about the service that may have contributed your experience of immersion?" Common factors that

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were reported as helpful to immersion were musical elements and musical quality (14),

meaningful lyrics (8), competent leadership (3), and cohesive service elements (3). Most

respondents focused on musical elements of a service, but some cited preaching and

prayers as important to their experience of immersion. Some respondents cited

environmental factors in the worship setting, such as the apparent engagement of other

worshippers, dim lighting that allowed fewer distractions. One recounted this singular

experience:

> I was at an (outdoor) youth-focused Christian festival and a guest band was leading worship. During the band's worship set, it started to rain heavily. As rain like this was fairly common at this particular festival, most attendees were prepared with rain jackets, umbrellas, etc. As the crowd began to pull these items out for protection from the rain, I had this distinct little moment of deciding that I wanted to get completely soaked by the rain while worshiping. I'll never forget how something about worshipping while literally being drenched with water changed the entire experience for the better and I've never felt more in touch with the Holy Spirit while singing worship songs - perhaps this was due to being literally soaked by one element of God's creation. Perhaps it was the connection between water/the symbolism of baptism/etc. Perhaps it had to do with the fact that this worship experience wasn't and couldn't have possibly been man-made/contrived in any way (with the exception of the music being made on stage, of course). This was easily the most immersive (in the truest and most literal sense of the word) worship experience I've ever had.[2]

Other respondents pointed to the connection of worship to particular circumstances in

their lives; these may have been directly addressed in worship, or else they were not

explicitly mentioned but nevertheless informed the worshipper's reception of the service.

One individual wrote "I have been the most invested during pivotal times in my own life

experiences, i.e.: times of particular faith struggles, life events such as marriage, birth of

a child, loss of someone dear - when the worship experience spoke to my own current

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[2] 18-29 year old white Director of Worship, anonymous survey response, 2019.

situation or anticipated situation."[3] Multiple people cited familiarity of some kind as

being essential to feeling invested in worship, contrasting this with being distracted by

novel elements (e.g., the lyrics or music of new songs) that detracted from their focus.

Several also related experiencing a profound awareness of other worshippers, either in

the room with them or as an anticipation of heavenly worship. One such response

included the following:

> A couple of years ago during the Maundy Thursday service at Calvary, the fifth
> verse of "What Wondrous Love is This" really 'hit me' (as they say) and I felt
> enraptured with the love of God. "To God and to the Lamb, who is the great I
> AM, while millions join the theme, I will sing, I will sing!"[4]

This individual felt God's love powerfully where music and a religious narrative came

together in song lyrics that included them in a much broader community.

Many respondents described specific musical or stylistic elements, or

presentational choices associated with a particular musical style, that were apparently

contradictory to the experiences of other respondents. One individual recounted how

> One year as a choir member we prepared and presented The Messiah for our
> church at Christmas. The lyrics and music were so meaningful and worshipful I
> felt a closeness to God and our audience as if we all were one in worship. It was a
> significant emotional experience of focusing on the eternal God and involving
> everyone in that experience.[5]

While another wrote

> Musically, I think modern worship choruses with a full worship band draw me in
> the most. I've attended some churches that dim the lights, while the worship
> choruses were sung, that minimized distraction and maximized my focus on
> the moment. Powerful preaching and the reading of the Bible can do the same.[6]

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[3] 70-79 year old white volunteer teacher/music leader, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[4] 30-39 year old white volunteer teacher/committee member, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[5] 60-69 year old white records secretary, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[6] 40-49 year old white Sunday school teacher, anonymous survey response, 2019.

Even a practice like dimming the lights in a worship space is not universally interpreted in the same way. While some recount worshipping in a darkened space as allowing them to focus on their individual connection with God and forget others around them, another respondent described their experience in this way:

> The easiest way to immerse myself is when I already know the music and don't need to look or follow along. Darkened lighting has helped make for a more intimate gathering. When others in the gathering are committed to letting go and being immersed, it helps others to feel more free to become immersed as well. Social comfort matters incredibly, in my opinion.[7]

In this case, the environmental factors of darkened lighting and musical familiarity allowed this worshipper to experience worship as "a more intimate gathering," implying deeper connection with other people, not just with God. The presence of other people was highly significant in this person's experience, as the response shows a keen awareness of the behavior and attitudes of others and cites social comfort as key to immersion.

The survey responses demonstrate that, while there were consistent themes such as the value of musical quality and competent leadership, what was helpful in encouraging a state of immersion for one individual was quite different from what was beneficial to another. These differences often became apparent across stylistic boundaries, where choices about music and the worship space led to contrasting experiences. While exploring this aspect more fully is outside the scope of this chapter, it seems that the diverse cultural expressions around worship, which are often unique to each local context, heavily impact what contributes to immersion. I suspect that individual personality also plays a major role in this; for instance, some survey responses

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[7] 40-49 year old volunteer teacher/music leader, anonymous survey response, 2019.

cited being instructed to greet and talk with other worshippers as conducive to greater investment in worship, while others described a more introverted, though not necessarily individualistic, experience.

The thread of intermixed common themes and contrasting (sub)cultural expectations continued into the next question, which asked participants to describe a situation that was the direct converse of the first: "Recount a time when you felt distracted during worship. What was that like? Was that distraction related to your own thoughts, things happening in the room, or both?" There were a few common responses here as well, including the worshippers' own thoughts or personal concerns (14), environmental factors (8), and poor quality in music or use of sound systems (4). Corresponding to earlier statements about musical quality, one respondent shared "I've found myself distracted in worship when the quality of the music/production elements is significantly lacking...more specifically, when it is clearly evident that a music ensemble or soloist or tech person has not adequately rehearsed/prepared."[8] Multiple people cited ineffective use of sound systems as a source of distraction: "I remember a time, maybe more than once, when the worship service sound system malfunctioned and it was almost impossible to hear the words of choral worship, prayer, scriptures, and the sermon. I was very distracted."[9] Another person wrote "Ive [sic] often been distracted by poor sound mixing or an inability to follow along due to not knowing the words."[10] Unfamiliar lyrics were another common response, as well as underprepared or poor quality music, or song

[8] 18-29 year old white Director of Worship, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[9] 70-79 year old white deacon, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[10] 30-39 year old black or African American volunteer worship leader, anonymous survey response, 2019.

choices perceived as strange. Environmental factors contributing to distraction included unclear or confusing expectations or leadership, people moving around or entering or leaving the service, cell phones, children, or physical discomfort such as a cold worship space. One respondent described a time when the guidance of a worship leader was received as unhelpful: "When I was asked to engage my 'cognitive functions' I felt that it was limiting and restrictive. Worship cerebrally. I didn't understand nor wanted to participate."[11] Another described a service in which "the guitar players seemed like they were competing with each other to be noticed and heard."[12] Numerous respondents also pointed to personal factors, such as other intrusive thoughts and concerns, social disconnection, or emotional hurt or distance from what was happening in the service.

Emotional distance and social disconnection contributed to this individual's experience of distraction:

> I attended a contemporary worship service at a time when I was battling depression. The exuberance and total body immersion of the congregation left me feeling even worse. The entire service seemed artificial because I was hurting so much and wondered how anyone could express extreme emotion--were they real or was I really so far away from God.[13]

Emotional dissonance led this respondent to an experience of questioning the validity of the religious narratives and expressions being practiced during worship. If this individual could not feel what others around them were apparently feeling, what did that mean about them and their relationship with God? On the other hand, was it even believable that these enthusiastic worshippers were actually authentic in what they were expressing?

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[11] 30-39 year old Asian or Asian American Worship Director, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[12] 50-59 year old white multicultural ministry team leader, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[13] 70-79 year old white pianist/organist/music librarian/youth choir director, anonymous survey response, 2019.

The dual elements of musical worship and preaching appeared here again:

If the minister's message is not meaningful to me, I will find my mind wandering to personal issues or concerns. I'm usually not distracted by noise like a baby crying or etc. Also I find that the musical part of worship keeps my attention more than the pastor's exhortation. The only exception would be when the music minister is introducing a new hymn for us to learn or if the music is disjointed or not a smooth transition from one chord to the next. Worship needs to be smooth and worshipful.[14]

This respondent downplayed environmental distractions, but also pointed out the importance of a smooth progression in a worship service. They even associated these things together in the phrase "smooth and worshipful."

Worship Music and Religious Narrative

The next two questions asked about the intersection of music in worship with worshippers' personal spiritual lives. In asking these questions, I was interested in learning how worship music played a role in constructing narratives that were helpful to making sense of life experience, and conversely how music might be unhelpful in that regard. The first question asked respondents to "Describe an experience in gathered worship when the music expressed something significant in your faith journey." Answers to this question fell into several overlapping categories. First, some survey respondents answered by mentioning a particular song that is consistently meaningful to them (9). Second, some described specific kinds or styles of music that are helpful to them in worship (8). Third, some related how music related to memorable experiences of their lives, typically periods of suffering or loss (10). These categories bleed into each other, with many responses containing more than one of the categories. The third

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[14] 60-69 year old white records secretary, anonymous survey response, 2019.

category of significant memories in particular tended to overlap with one of the other two.

Multiple responses named titles of songs that were meaningful: "the song trust in you (you did not create me to worry) is always an impactful reminder that i dont have to worry and helps keep me centered in the midst of the chaos that life throws at you."[15] One respondent offered the following reminiscence: "I was saved during worship at a church camp. They were playing 'How He Loves Us'. The light was dim and we were all able to focus on our own moment. The music was loud and it was difficult to find a distraction. In that moment, I truly realized how much He loved me."[16] Others connected particular songs to other occurrences in their lives: "I remember a time when the song 'How Great Thou Art' reminded me that God was with me in my family struggles. This song connected me to my past and to my present."[17] This same song appeared in another testimony: "How Great Though [sic] Art takes me to my parents, grandparents and other loved ones that it is [sic] been sung at their funerals. I believe that a lot of music and the words take me into His realm and glory which brings me to a deeper faith and love."[18] Worship music associated with personal loss was also significant to another respondent:

> the most impactful moment was the weekend after we buried my mother, we sang "Blessed Be the Name" – with the words "You give and take away" over and over - it pierced my soul and gave me a lot of peace all at once. It was an exact cry of

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[15] 30-39 year old black or African American volunteer worship leader, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[16] 18-29 year old white volunteer teacher and childcare worker, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[17] 60-69 year old white deacon, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[18] 70-79 year old white deacon, anonymous survey response, 2019.

my heart in the moment and that song has been deeply connected to that ever since.[19]

Another went into detail about a meaningful song, relating it to a challenging time in their life:

> I first heard the song "Extravagant" by Bethel in a gathered worship setting around the time when my grandma became very ill, near the end of her life. There's a lyric in this song that goes, "You don't belittle our pain and our suffering; You comfort us in our greatest unraveling" I remember that this lyric spoke to me in such an insane and moving way because I had just recently used the word "unraveling" to describe to a friend what was happening in my family. The timeliness of this song's entrance in my life (and this lyric specifically) has always stuck with me as a powerful Holy Spirit move.[20]

Particular songs also sometimes led to greater awareness of the struggles of others:

> just recently hearing 'when memory fades' was very powerful to me, both the lyrics and choir's delivery. not just in terms of past, but in terms of hoping for the present and future of God's presence and work in my life, friends who are caregivers, and lives of those with dementias. It also tied me into the choir, congregation as to their also going through this.[21]

Several respondents reaffirmed that meaningful connection with music often corresponded to emotional times in life. One wrote "Usually that happens when I am experiencing something difficult. The music or something else in the worhip [sic] time speak directly to my emotion it thoughts surrounding my current experience."[22] Another included the other end of the emotional spectrum: "I especially relate to worship music in times of grief or special rejoicings - emotional related. Majestic 'soaring' worship music can transport me quicker than anything else into a very meaningful worship

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[19] 40-49 year old white volunteer teacher/music leader, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[20] 18-29 year old white Director of Worship, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[21] 50-59 year old white deacon, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[22] 50-59 year old white pastor's wife and volunteer teacher/music leader, anonymous survey response, 2019.

experience."[23] Another said they feel music is expressing something significant "When songs that are used remind me of the experiences of the presence of God I had in my childhood."[24] One respondent related a particular song and a unique practice in their church to a significant moment in their faith journey: "Singing 'Let's go Down to the River to Pray' while walking to the front of the sanctuary always feels like a holy moment to me that re-immerses me in memories of my own baptism."[25]

Another significant subset of responses focused on lyrical or musical elements. One respondent remembered times "When the Organist and pianist were playing with the choir and congregation singing some of the greatest hymns ever written. Such meaningful music which did not have a hip hop beat to it."[26] A second response expressed "Old hymns that I grew up singing are meaningful and about 1/2 of the more modern/praise songs speak to me."[27] Another voiced gratitude for special instrumentalists and talented leaders who "bring us to the Mercy seat."[28] Finally, one respondent offered a reflection on both lyrical and musical factors:

> Lyrics which appeal to my humanity, my frailty, my sinfulness, God's forgiveness and mercy always add to the significance of the music to me personally. It speaks to me. When the music is quiet and comforting and melodic, this also speaks to my heart. However, upbeat and louder music can also touch me personally if the

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[23] 70-79 year old white volunteer teacher/music leader, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[24] 50-59 year old white multicultural ministry team leader, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[25] 30-39 year old white volunteer teacher/committee member, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[26] 80+ year old white deacon/committee member, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[27] 50-59 year old white pastor's/youth minister's wife and volunteer teacher/music leader, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[28] 60-69 year old white volunteer teacher and choir member, anonymous survey response, 2019.

message is clear and encouraging. When the melody and lyrics are in synch is the best experience there is in worship.[29]

The fourth survey question, again the converse of one preceding it, focused on the potential lack of synergy between worship music and personal experience: "Describe an experience in gathered worship when there was a disconnect between the music and what was happening in your life. What do you think caused the disconnect?" Some common responses included issues with lyrics or musical style (11), personal struggles (8), and a perceived lack of awareness or interest of ministry leaders toward the challenges facing congregants (4) One response criticized lyrics perceived as "Christian cliché" or as "unoriginal/simplistic." This person felt disillusioned by the knowledge "that lyrics of this nature are written to be generic/relevant to wide varieties of Christians [so] they immediately mean less to me when I hear them."[30] An intriguing parallel to this complaint about generic content appeared in the response of an individual who experienced worship in an Anglican church on a British army base in Benghazi:

> The services were very high church in all aspects and the music and the message brought by the priest or "padre" just never seemed to relate to me at all. I think this occurred because the service was one prescribed outside the church, probably back in England, that fit a pre-determined plan for the church with little disregard for the needs of the local church.[31]

Other responses related again to lyrical or musical elements, often with some version of "this kind of song/hymn/lyric doesn't connect with me/speak to me." One related frustration about the language used by old hymns to refer to people or to God; another

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[29] 60-69 year old white records secretary, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[30] 18-29 year old white Director of Worship, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[31] 70-79 year old white deacon, anonymous survey response, 2019.

noted disconnection if the music was "too jazzy"[32]; another found percussion instruments unhelpful, but expressed that sometimes they appreciated hymns and at other times valued praise choruses; another pointed out the disconnect caused by lyrics that were incongruent with the theology of the church or the worshipper, use of ancient language, or melodies outside of their normal vocal range. One respondent felt that at times song choice in their congregation could seem too contrived in attempts at topical relevance.[33]

Survey respondents were much more likely to cite personal factors, such as life circumstances and emotional issues, rather than environmental factors when the music did not correspond to their experience. While they associated positive experiences of immersion with the music, leadership, or environment, they more frequently tied negative experiences of disconnection to their own mental and emotional state or actions. One simply wrote "singing about joy in the midst of my parents [sic] divorce is a struggle."[34] Another response highlights the confusion and inner conflict often associated with these issues:

> sometimes when there has been a disconnect is due to the blues, either self-pity or genuine grief/anger, and having the false belief that others do not share this. sometimes i wish we had some more blues, but then i don't. i want to connect with others with sorrow and anger, with God who also expressed sorrow and anger, but then i also don't. it is confusing sometimes because i want to escape things of the world causing this and focus on God who is good, worthy of praise and lifting of our souls which is a focus of worship for me, to reframe my thinking and think of him first. so at times connecting to the more 'negative' emotions would not be a worship experience at all. I am glad for having continual praise music in my

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[32] 70-79 year old white deacon, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[33] 50-59 year old white pastor's/youth minister's wife and volunteer teacher/music leader, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[34] 30-39 year old black or African American volunteer worship leader, anonymous survey response, 2019.

church each sunday that brings me into god's presence beyond this world and its ways.[35]

Another person described a disconnect between music and life on the congregational level:

are We went to a church that was having significant issues, so much so that people were leaving the church in groves [sic]. Every Sunday, the choir would sing "We One in the Spirit" (or some other hymn about unity) like they were hoping that the church would become unified. It felt like a strange disconnect when they could identify the problem but offer so little recourse for the issue.[36]

It seems clear from these responses that worshippers value a kind of integrity in worship music, such that if there is a disconnect between what is sung and their life experience or the situation of the church, it is in some sense disruptive. Also, many people seemed to struggle to clearly articulate why or how these experiences of disconnection came about, and some expressed uncertainty about how to rectify them, while others pointed to stylistic factors.

Worship Leaders and Congregants

The next set of questions in the survey centered on the interactions between worship leaders and worshippers in the congregation. The first two questions relate to immersion or disconnection brought on by a worship leader's actions. The next three ask about worship leaders' experiences, both their perceptions of a congregation's connection or lack thereof, or their own disconnection while leading. These questions allow respondents to speak to similar issues of investment or distraction as they relate to the

[35] 50-59 year old white deacon, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[36] 30-39 year old white volunteer teacher/committee member, anonymous survey response, 2019.

role of worship leaders. They are intended to allow reflection on and application of worshippers' perspectives to the work of scholars and worship leaders.

First, respondents answered the question "As a person in the pews or seats, has something a worship leader has said or done helped you feel more involved in worship? Describe that experience." Common responses included various leadership characteristics (10) and knowing the story behind a song's origin (5) or a song's significance to a leader (2). One response that appeared numerous times was an appreciation for a leader describing the origin or story of a song, or sharing a personal testimony connected with it. An individual noted how "Often a personal testimony or word about the origin of the song pulls me into a fuller meaning of the song."[37] Similarly, "An explanation of the origin of a hymn before singing has made me feel more involved in the worship experience,"[38] and "I also enjoy knowing the story behind songs we are going to sing. It makes the songs more meaningful to me."[39] Another respondent acknowledged the challenges of doing this in gathered worship, while still voicing a closely aligned perspective: "It certainly doesn't always work in a worship setting but knowing the story behind a specific song helps the words become more important."[40]

Another variety of responses centered on elements of effective leadership. These included confidence (2), directing focus away from the leader and toward God (2), a

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[37] 70-79 year old white volunteer teacher, accompanist, and choir member, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[38] 60-69 year old white deacon, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[39] 50-59 year old white pastor's/youth minister's wife and volunteer teacher/music leader, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[40] 70-79 year old white volunteer teacher/music leader, anonymous survey response, 2019.

perceived deep engagement with the music (3), and a perceived attitude of surrender (3).

One respondent also stated

> Personal testimony is very important no matter who shares it. The Minister of Music, however, is an integral part of the worship experience. A word from them is meaningful. I can't recall the songs but, leading into our singing, the leader personalizes the lyrics of the song. Quite an enriching of the moment. We were attuned."[41]

Other responses described other practices of worship leaders that individuals found helpful to immersion in worship, in particular expressive behavior, welcoming a variety of responses from worshippers, and a humble attitude. One person observed "When the worship leader is really feeling the music and isn't as engaged in directing, I can really tell there is a difference."[42] Another pointed to a specific action as helpful: "Yes when they have encouraged freedom of expression/response in worship allowing for worshippers to respond exhuberantly [sic] or with personal quiet reflection all at the same time."[43] Validating the various experiences and personalities of worshippers as legitimate expressions of worship is key for this person. Another respondent particularly valued prayer and a certain attitude of openness:

> I think any prayer offered by a leader that returns the focus to Jesus (and not her/himself) helps me feel immediately more involved. I also appreciate when a worship leader is willing to be open to the movement of the Holy Spirit and extend a song (for example, by repeating a song's chorus, or particular lyric) or musical moment (to facilitate prayer, spontaneous worship, etc.)[44]

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[41] 60-69 year old white volunteer teacher and choir member, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[42] 18-29 year old white volunteer teacher and childcare worker, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[43] 50-59 year old white multicultural ministry team leader, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[44] 18-29 year old white Director of Worship, anonymous survey response, 2019.

An additional perspective names this attitude and the challenge of specifying what it entails: "When the worship leader is committed to immersion in worship, it creates an atmosphere that opens the congregation up for immersive worship. It's not a checklist I can describe - it's an attitude of surrender."[45]

In contrast, but perhaps not contradiction, with some other answers, one respondent said that worship leaders have been helpful by "saying and doing little, having clear direction and being 'small'- led to worship God through the leaders instead of focusing on the leaders has been appreciated."[46] What behaviors point beyond the leader toward God may differ depending on the context, but an attitude of humility, authenticity, and competent leadership seems to be a common thread. Another respondent wrote "I like when church members are prompted to/expected to take a few minutes and greet the people around them."[47]

The reverse of the previous question asked respondents "As a person in the pews or seats, have you ever felt distracted or disconnected by something a worship leader has said or done? Describe that experience." These responses fall into three camps. First, an apparent lack of personal engagement or expression was commonly cited: "If they seem uncomfortable or uninterested"[48]; "I am distracted by a music leader who seems joyless

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[45] 40-49 year old white volunteer teacher/music leader, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[46] 50-59 year old white deacon, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[47] 50-59 year old white pastor's/youth minister's wife and volunteer teacher/music leader, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[48] 50-59 year old white pastor's wife and volunteer teacher/music leader, anonymous survey response, 2019.

or has no expression on his/her face"[49]; "I'm often distracted when worship leaders are too self-aware of their own performance and not surrendered to the experience of worshipping God"[50]; "A church I attended at one time had a music leader who seemed very pompous and stiff, too serious and not approachable. The Christian life is very important but should be joyful."[51]

A second repeated concern was excessive effort on the leader's part to produce certain kinds of participation from congregants. One respondent felt distracted by worship leaders "particularly when leaders try to hype things up"[52]; another described leaders "forcing an energy that isn't there…for example, trying relentlessly to get the congregation to clap along with a song when it's clear that the congregation is not wanting to."[53] Others described "too much talking by leaders and not enough just being in God's presence listening"[54] and "Lectures by ministers on how everyone should sing. Or feedback on how well congregants performed [a] song. Extremely distracting."[55]

A third concern that appeared in two responses related to perceived political or partisan statements or bias. One respondent recounted how "In a former church, the pastor was very political, and of course, I belonged to the party he did not like. Each

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[49] 70-79 year old white volunteer teacher, accompanist, and choir member, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[50] 40-49 year old white volunteer teacher/music leader, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[51] 60-69 year old white records secretary, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[52] 50-59 year old white multicultural ministry team leader, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[53] 18-29 year old white Director of Worship, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[54] 50-59 year old white deacon, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[55] 30-39 year old white children's minister/college minister, anonymous survey response, 2019.

political reference he made pushed me farther and farther away from worship."[56] Another described anxiety at statements made from the platform that could be perceived as partisan and potentially create a rift in the church, even if the pastor was speaking from his convictions.

The next three questions were specifically directed to worship leaders. First, they were asked, "If you have led worship, describe a time when the congregation was invested, connected, in the moment. What behavior did you observe?" Eight of the 11 responses to this question cited outward expressions such as closed eyes, raised hands, and tears, as well as a relaxed posture and movement. One leader noted that when they observe these behaviors, they get "a general vibe that the people I'm leading forget I'm even in the room :-) It's tough to exactly quantify/describe this…but it could be evidenced by things like arms extended in worship, closed eyes, prayer, movement around the worship space, etc."[57]

Another response included reactions to personal sharing: "I've been able to share my testimony on occasion and I've felt like I was 'heard'. Smiles, nods, expressions of kindness have all helped me to continue through nervous moments and sharing difficult experiences without fear of admonishment or judgement."[58] Yet another respondent described enthusiastic singing as a key marker: "People singing loud and off key usually.

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[56] 70-79 year old white pianist/organist/music librarian/youth choir director, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[57] 18-29 year old white Director of Worship, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[58] 50-59 year old white audovisual team member, anonymous survey response, 2019.

But if the worship music is louder its actually really great because everybody is making their own joyful noise. Its beautiful to watch."[59]

Following this question, I asked worship leaders about contrasting experiences: "On the other hand, describe a time when the congregation did not seem fully involved. What behavior did you observe? What did you do in response?" Interestingly, the actions worship leaders described as *indicators* of distraction in congregants are the same behaviors that congregants hoping to engage in worship reported as *causes* of distraction: talking to others, using smartphones, staring into space, and moving around the room or coming in and out. Several respondents who had led worship connected congregational distraction with unfamiliar songs; one articulated this and offered an additional perspective in their context: "They all seem to be kind of going through the motions if they don't know the song really well. Honestly, I also think if it's really bright, that affects people's willingness to let go a little bit."[60]

One leader wrote they responded to a distracted congregation by "Trying hard" (seeming to imply exerting more effort to elicit a worshipful response from the congregation) but followed that up by saying "I would recommend against it."[61] Another reported that they responded by glaring at the offending congregants, who were using their phones during worship.[62] Several others took responsibility for the distraction

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[59] 18-29 year old white volunteer teacher and childcare worker, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[60] 18-29 year old white volunteer teacher and childcare worker, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[61] 30-39 year old Asian or Asian American Worship Director, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[62] 70-79 year old white deacon, anonymous survey response, 2019.

themselves and tried to correct it, by some combination of prayer and familiar song choice in the moment. One recounted this experience:

> there was an instance when I was leading at a women's retreat and everyone looked very disconnected - so I changed the song selection and vamped into a well-known hymn that would help them connect to God and still stay with the message. They were able to connect out of knowing the words and having an understanding of what was going on, and then I went back to my plan and they were more committed to worship. Often, when I cannot change the plan, I just focus on my own immersion and lead by example.[63]

A second said that they "Encouraged focus on God and switched to a more well known song."[64]

Following this question, I asked leaders "If you have led worship, describe a time when you felt disconnected from worshipping as you were leading. What do you think caused the disconnection? How did you respond?" The predominant answer was that the worship leader was struggling with technical, musical, or music team-related concerns (5). These included a lack of preparation, nerves, preoccupation with musical elements, or something going poorly in the service. The other common answer was distraction caused by distracted congregants, conflict with others, or their own emotions or experience of social disconnection (3). One respondent spoke to this experience while also describing their reaction to recognizing their own disconnection:

> Again, emotions and social disconnection is often the culprit in my case. I often shake these things off and try to refocus my own efforts on simply worshipping from my own heart and space. Often this is enough to remove distractions and allow me to re-engage. Concentration on the message of the song is often a good draw back into the right frame of mind. Sometimes giving the congregation a

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[63] 40-49 year old white volunteer teacher/music leader, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[64] 50-59 year old white multicultural ministry team leader, anonymous survey response, 2019.

verbal reminder to concentrate on those words will help them draw back into the message of the music as well.[65]

One respondent noted they felt uncomfortable allowing themselves to "connect" in worship while leading in the first place, because "I was doing a job! [Losing] myself might be too self serving."[66] Another discussed the element of responsibility as a leader and how this impacts them:

> When you're the one leading worship Sunday after Sunday, there are occasional Sundays where the creation of meaningful worship music starts to feel like simply WORK and not a connection with the Lord. I've most definitely had Sundays like this, where I forget why I'm on stage in the first place and start thinking about all kinds of other things (Sunday afternoon plans, work I have to finish, physical hunger/thirst, weird pains in my foot, etc.) In moments like this where I find myself distracted, I try to focus on one or two particularly meaningful lines of the song I'm in the middle of singing and/or find space in the midst of the song to pray a short re-centering prayer – "Lord, remind my why I'm here"[67]

The results of this survey indicate that, overall, worship leaders seem to experience immersion and distraction in worship in much the same ways congregants do. The main difference seems to be a heightened sense of responsibility for the gathering as a whole, in which leaders feel it is their job to lead week to week and to make worship "go well" on a given Sunday.

Emotional and Liturgical Dissonance in Music

The final two survey questions centered on dissonance within musical worship, not in the sense of musical notes that sound distasteful together, but in the sense of the sound and message of music being disconnected in some way. This question closely

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[65] 40-49 year old white volunteer teacher/music leader, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[66] 30-39 year old Asian or Asian American Worship Director, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[67] 18-29 year old white Director of Worship, anonymous survey response, 2019.

parallels a previous query about the disconnection between music and life circumstances; though some similar responses appeared, these final questions also elicited more specific responses. First, respondents were asked to "Describe a time when the songs used in worship were expressing feelings or beliefs that you did not have at the time. (For example: was the music expressing pain when you were happy, rejoicing when you were hurting, voicing doubt when you felt sure of God, or certainty when you were doubting?)" The parenthetical prompt was intended to encourage answers that addressed particular experiences of dissonance and to invite reflection on them. Most respondents acknowledged this disconnection happens, but their reactions to it varied. Some found themselves caught in or distracted by their own thoughts about the music or lyrics and interpreted this as an inability to engage:

> Definitely more of the latter examples: rejoicing when I was hurting and certainty while I was doubting…I've definitely found myself getting caught up in the lyrics of songs, wrestling with my own thoughts/questions rather than investing fully in the moment of worship.[68]

Others would ignore that song and mentally move on to the next part of the service: "I know that not every piece of music will suit me, speak to me, or even be liked by me so I just anticipate one that will."[69]

Some recognize their own lack of connection with a song, but turn to thinking of others for whom it may be appropriate, observing others in the room and perhaps praying for them or people who are not present. One respondent wrote "This happens often at my

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[68] 18-29 year old white Director of Worship, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[69] 70-79 year old white volunteer teacher/music leader, anonymous survey response, 2019.

church. I do not take offense to this, many in our congregation find the words apt for themselves. I take comfort in that."[70] Another expressed

> that doesn't bother me so much because I know I am not the only person in the room that needs to hear the songs that are playing. If anything, it gives me a chance to look at other members and watch them worship, then I can worship along [with] them while they are in pain and I am joyful, or vise-versa [sic].[71]

In this vein, one respondent said that these moments are "helpful to my connection with others."[72] Another wrote, "I try not to think that it doesn't relate to me and try to focus on how it may be lifting up other people. I know there is a purpose and it's not always about me,"[73] while another individual said "it happens frequently. I have often allowed this to bring to mind people in my life I know need those words and allow the worship to be a prayer for them."[74]

Others expressed an appreciation for joyful songs during times they were experiencing suffering: "Songs of joy when I am hurting have given me hope - hope that one day I can feel joyful again."[75] One respondent wrote

> This happens frequently. If I am not feeling well, only dark and troubled songs would reflect my mood. However, sometimes singing is believing, so I appreciate a variety of styles and moods. If I am down, quite often the songs lift my spirit. If I am sad, sometimes it's comforting to acknowledge that sadness through song. Music both mirrors my moods and moves me to a deeper/happier spiritual place.[76]

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[70] 18-29 year old white volunteer teacher, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[71] 18-29 year old white volunteer teacher and childcare worker, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[72] 50-59 year old white deacon, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[73] 50-59 year old white audovisual team member, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[74] 40-49 year old white volunteer teacher/music leader, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[75] 60-69 year old white deacon, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[76] 70-79 year old white pianist/organist/music librarian/youth choir director, anonymous survey response, 2019.

Some respondents reported that "sad" music when they were in pain was unhelpful and would push them deeper into sadness:

> I probably was not very excited to sing at the time and only made the motions of singing with no feeling. Wishing it would get over soon. Thinking how could this be so hurtful and how could I be a part of all this. It would bring back memories that I didn't want to think about. Also, how could I be happy when this is so sad. If I were in pain and the music was sad I would slump deeper into the pain[77]

In this particular instance, apparently neither joyful nor lamenting music was experienced as alleviating the worshipper's suffering.

> One respondent focused on beliefs expressed in songs rather than feelings: The most common element I notice is reformed theology in non reformed churches. Recently sang a song that was celebrating that God would save my life... knowing people die. Or worshipping a God who based on lyrics controls every aspect of human life. Or songs written by homophobic or racist authors.[78]

Overall, the one clear pattern is that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to the fit between the emotional tenor of congregational music and individual emotions during worship. Joyful people are generally content to sing joyful music, but some find singing songs expressing lament helpful in prayer and empathy for others. Those who are suffering may be repulsed or encouraged by celebration, and they may find relief and catharsis in music that voices their pain, or it may contribute to deeper anguish. No responses described an increase of empathy from those in pain toward joyful people through singing celebratory music.

The final survey question asked about a disconnect within musical elements of a liturgy or service: "Describe a time when the musical sound or style used in worship seemed to not fit, either with the words of that song or with the service as a whole." The

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[77] 70-79 year old white deacon, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[78] 30-39 year old white children's minister/college minister, anonymous survey response, 2019.

most common response related to common stylistic patterns or norms. One respondent said this lack of fit occurs "When we have a rock guitarist loudly using an array of effects pedals in a service where the people from different cultures do not like rock music."[79] Another cited a pattern in the structure of some services:

> One thing I struggle with is when churches feel the need to start and end EVERY service with a "happy/high energy song." While I understand the desire to use songs like this to facilitate congregants' engagement...I would argue that it doesn't always take a fast/loud song to do so. I've been a part of many services where, following a reflective/meditative kind of sermon, the band awkwardly breaks into a loud, fast, high energy song, simply because it follows the weekly "formula" for the service.[80]

One respondent described similar dynamic in a different stylistic setting from the prior two, recounting a loud organ postlude beginning after a contemplative service.[81]

Some responses related to the construction of services: "I have been to many services where the songs are chosen seemingly at random. The lack of planning leaves one wondering what the point of the service was."[82] A similar answer said "That happens frequently in many churches where team planning isn't used. The service becomes a leapfrog of themes and styles that really lead nowhere. Each piece is a separate entity, and the end result is a disconnected hour that really does not lead me to worship."[83] Several other individuals expressed satisfaction with the church staff's planning of

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[79] 50-59 year old white multicultural ministry team leader, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[80] 18-29 year old white Director of Worship, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[81] 30-39 year old white children's minister/college minister, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[82] 18-29 year old white volunteer teacher, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[83] 70-79 year old white pianist/organist/music librarian/youth choir director, anonymous survey response, 2019.

services, saying they did not experience this kind of dissonance. One qualified this

statement with some stylistic reflections, but remained positive:

> I've been very blessed to be a part of churches where the ministers are gifted at pairing well the worship experience with the service. Stylistically, there have been moments that I've irked at the style choice with the message of the text. I often crave a more dynamic experience that I receive - wanting the pace to move quicker or for a song to swell more dramatically. But not to the point of distraction.[84]

Two unique responses stood as outliers. One person expressed a lack of concern about

musical "fit": "I don't really notice this because I do not care as much if it fits. To me it

only matters that people have a chance to show their love to God, and to feel His. That

looks different during worship than during a sermon."[85] The implied meaning seems to

be that a sermon should fit together and make sense logically and thematically, but the

rest of a service need not do so, as long as worship is taking place. The second unique

response described a particular practice this individual finds distracting: "Sometimes

when a familiar old hymn that holds special meaning for me is set to a different

arrangement or different harmonies, it is disruptive to my being able to respond

positively."[86] The lyrics alone may not be what a worshipper has associated with

significant memories or experiences from their pasts; the familiar sound of the song or

hymn may be essential to that musical ritual.

One other response struck me as significant. When asked about times when

music seemed not to fit in the rest of the service, this individual answered:

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[84] 40-49 year old white volunteer teacher/music leader, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[85] 18-29 year old white volunteer teacher and childcare worker, anonymous survey response, 2019.

[86] 70-79 year old white volunteer teacher, accompanist, and choir member, anonymous survey response, 2019.

> When there is a disjunct in the flow of the service. When it feels like a JERK in the flow (i.e. worship moment then immediate announcement). I DONT seee [sic] worship words not fit. I feel like the worship leader should vet songs but after that's done... each worship song should stand relevant to the whole/each pocket of the congregation given that the congregation is multi generation multi ethnic[87]

I highlight this wording of "flow" to point out an interesting dynamic in conversations about worship. Most people will latch on to whatever terminology they are familiar with or supplied with to express ideas about and experiences of worship, which for many people are difficult to pin down. I used words such as immersion, investment, involvement, connection, disconnection, and distraction in my questions, and many respondents wrote those same terms in their answers. The survey and its language provided a context for respondents and myself to interact with these terms. The respondents and I have reflected on and deepened the meaning of those terms through considering the personal experiences of a variety of people. As I wrote this chapter, I found myself subconsciously about to write the word "apt" in one of my descriptions, only to realize I was doing so because one of my survey responses made use of that word. When we come across a word that is helpful to expressing a concept and immediately have opportunity to use it to describe that idea, we often default to it. However, some terms are helpful enough that they stick even without this recency bias.

I am not claiming that this respondent had Csikszentmihalyi's work on flow in mind when they used the term. However, I have encountered the word "flow" in conversations about worship for years, and only later heard of Csikszentmihalyi's description of the phenomenon and learned more of its implications. Also, numerous other responses seemed to be describing something like flow, dissonance between

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[87] 30-39 year old Asian or Asian American Worship Director, anonymous survey response, 2019.

musical elements and religious narratives, a disconnect between theology and lived experience, or other dynamics that are the subject of this thesis.

Worship is a difficult topic to discuss, particularly for laypeople. The topic is surrounded with baggage and expectations about how people *should* experience worship, and some experiences do not have adequately precise and clear terminology to allow ease of communication. Developing ways of speaking about experiences of disconnection, dissonance, immersion, and flow in worship has both academic and pastoral implications. It is unlikely that the exact same words and ideas will be used in academic and congregational settings, but they can and should inform one another. There will always be an element of mystery in congregants' spiritual life, and it is not my goal to eliminate that. However, if leaders, researchers, and teachers can speak more clearly, we can empower people to name their struggles, normalize feelings that would otherwise produce unnecessary shame and fear, and shine light into dark corners where insufficient leadership strategies and poor use of ministerial power may hide.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion

The goals of this thesis have centered around finding ways to convey more clearly how musical worship "works" in a digital age, and giving church leaders and congregants an enriched vocabulary for communicating these dynamics. I have presented an interdisciplinary perspective on church music, ludomusicology, and sociology of religious narratives that can provide a framework for reflection and practice. Church leaders and scholars alike must grapple with the cultural shifts of mediatization, and consider the impact of digitally mediated music and interactions on the experiences and responses of worshippers and worship leaders. The concept of flow is significant in this intersection with mediatization, as worshippers may experience music in church as cohesive and integrating or disconnected and confusing. Ludonarrative dissonance provides vocabulary to discuss a lack of fit between experience and story, which many worshippers encounter between their lives and their understandings of faith. Ludomusical dissonance sheds light on the significance of music in making sense of experience within narrative. This is further developed in discussions of religious narratives and identity integration, which can be helped or hindered by music and other interactive practices. A case study of surveyed worshippers and worship leaders revealed concrete factors—both musical and extra-musical, personal and environmental—that can contribute to positive experiences of cohesiveness and integration in worship, as well as contrasting negative occurrences that are unhelpful.

The survey also revealed a diversity of responses to emotional dissonance in worship (e.g., singing joyful songs while experiencing depression, or lament while life was going well). Some perceived this disconnect as a problem, others as a source of encouragement, and still others as an invitation to empathy and prayer. Rather than allow this complex set of responses to paralyze leaders for fear of doing harm to one congregant while helping another, I suggest that we should express and encourage the full spectrum of human emotions in worship, while not relegating the processing of emotions only to Sunday mornings. Congregants may sometimes need silence (which can also be included in gathered worship to good effect) rather than song, while others may take time, support from friends and loved ones, pastoral care, and counseling before they are able to engage certain feelings again, whether "positive" or "negative." It may also be important for leaders to remember that worshippers were more likely to attribute experiences of immersion in worship to effective leadership, musical quality, and positive connection with others, but also tended to associate experiences of disconnection with their own personal preferences, feelings, or failings.[1]

More questions remain to be explored, such as whether experiences of emotional or narrative dissonance in worship are necessarily always negative. Might it be helpful or necessary for worship to create dissonance in order to be challenging or prophetic, and could musical choices that initially seem to cause disconnection actually invite a deeper engagement in other ways? Though many questions remain, we can propose this key

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[1] Mark Porter has explored this tendency in his book *Contemporary Worship Music and Everyday Musical Lives*. He writes "The musical leaders offer strategies for handling musical dissatisfaction in line with their conceptualizations of what music is and what it can do and these largely centre on emphasizing spirituality in a way that often seems to deflect talk away from specifically musical questions." Mark James Porter, *Contemporary Worship Music and Everyday Musical Lives*, 29.

conclusion from this initial examination: those who lead worship must consider what may be conducive to coherence between musical worship, faith narratives, and life experience, and also be aware of what may disrupt coherence and lead to disintegration, either momentarily in gathered worship or more broadly in believers' lives. This is but one example of how ludomusicology can be a productive conversation partner with church music studies, and the current landscape of digital culture and mediated music means we should continue to seek new insights and connections in this area.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX

Survey Questions

1. Recount a time when you felt totally invested in worship in the moment. What was that like? What do you remember about the service that may have contributed your experience of immersion?

2. Recount a time when you felt distracted during worship. What was that like? Was that distraction related to your own thoughts, things happening in the room, or both?

3. Describe an experience in gathered worship when the music expressed something significant in your faith journey.

4. Describe an experience in gathered worship when there was a disconnect between the music and what was happening in your life. What do you think caused the disconnect?

5. What role does audiovisual technology play in your church's worship? For example, digital projection of song lyrics, videos, etc.

6. What role does digital media play in your everyday life? For example, social media, YouTube, etc.

7. As a person in the pews or seats, has something a worship leader has said or done helped you feel more involved in worship? Describe that experience.

8. As a person in the pews or seats, have you ever felt distracted or disconnected by something a worship leader has said or done? Describe that experience.

9. If you have led worship, describe a time when the congregation was invested, connected, in the moment. What behavior did you observe?

10. On the other hand, describe a time when the congregation did not seem fully involved. What behavior did you observe? What did you do in response?

11. If you have led worship, describe a time when you felt disconnected from worshipping as you were leading. What do you think caused the disconnection? How did you respond?

12. Describe a time when the songs used in worship were expressing feelings or beliefs that you did not have at the time. (For example: was the music expressing pain when you were happy, rejoicing when you were hurting, voicing doubt when you felt sure of God, or certainty when you were doubting?)

13. Describe a time when the musical sound or style used in worship seemed to not fit, either with the words of that song or with the service as a whole.

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