

A Series of Mistakes: Nullsleep and the Art of 8-bit Composition

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Abstract

8-bit rendition of NYC, by Alex Bond. Three weeks ago I got to meet one of my musical heroes. I went to an 8-bit game design workshop at NYU focused around programming games for developing nations. It was organized into a series of tutorials, each focusing on a different element of the game design process. The tutorial on music design was hosted by 8bitpeople's Nullsleep, Jeremiah Johnson, one of my two favorite chiptune artists!

Keywords

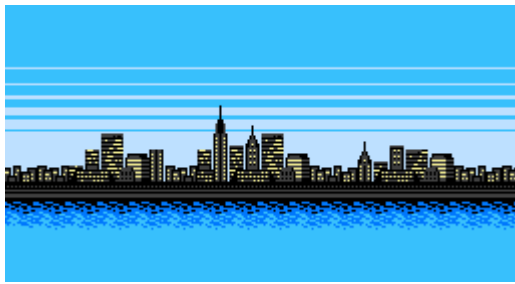
Music (Subfield), Aesthetics, Article, Games/Gaming, Live Music, Memoir

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8-bit rendition of NYC, by Alex Bond.

Three weeks ago I got to meet one of my musical heroes. I went to an [8-bit game design workshop](#) at NYU focused around programming games for developing nations. It was organized into a series of tutorials, each focusing on a different element of the game design process. The tutorial on music design was hosted by [8bitpeople's Nullsleep](#), Jeremiah Johnson, one of my two favorite chiptune artists! As he instructed the room on the finer points of using the [Famitracker](#) software to script authentic 8-bit music, I was struck by some of the nuance in his process. Creativity is a messy and fluid endeavor where mistakes and successes remain ambiguous until they can be contextualized within a final draft.

When Jeremiah programmed the Famitracker, his instrument, I watched as he pushed notes around, made arbitrary decisions and deliberately turned his attention from some tasks which became too arduous. His demo was still awesome, but I was struck by how unstructured his creative process seemed. Famitracker is a music scripting instrument, the notes are organized and prearranged, despite this formal quality there remains a good deal of negotiation between the artist and its interface. I have forever stereotyped music composition as a fairly sterile and surgical art, far away from the authentic feedback between an artist and their instrument. I always had imagined live music as the moment of the authentic, and pigeonholed studio compositions as somehow stale. Watching Jeremiah work helped me to see that all artists hold a unique relationship to their instrument no matter how mechanical, electronic, or mundane that instrument might seem. Even static compositions bring with them history, negotiation and risk. These were liberating ideas, when it came time for me to compose a song on Famitracker, I was able to rip in and rapidly sift ideas from my mind to the canvas.

Eventually, I tried to program in a portamento effect (think: keyboard intro, The Cars, "My Best Friend's Girl"), and needed some help. Jeremiah came over and started to fiddle with the options, but he was having trouble getting it to work as well. It took about five minutes of trial and error before we figured out how to get the effect just right. These mistakes, bad notes, even misspelled words are all part of the creative process and they inscribe themselves into the larger work, even if they only remain in spirit. Understanding these hiccups and nuances let me view composition from a new perspective where I could recognize all of the skirmishes and textures which have been made invisible in the final product. Live music is often constructed as a space of possibility, where these odd textures and negotiations are given the opportunity to appear. How is this presumption challenged if studio compositions can be read as a series of mistakes leading to an arbitrary but coherent whole?

My big song is called [Clever Fishies](#) (Click to hear it!) it will be the soundtrack to a game called *Math Shark*.

Check out Nullsleep's [Her Lazer Light Eyes](#) to hear why I'm so psyched!

AT

