

# **Koji Kondo research report**

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# Introduction

In this research report, I'll be discussing the Japanese music composer Koji Kondo, best known for his work on the soundtracks for the *Super Mario* and *Legend of Zelda* franchises. I'll be taking a deep dive into two well-known Nintendo games from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century that featured his work, albeit in different tones and style, with the first being a light-hearted chiptune and the second being more down-to-earth and realistic.

My reason for choosing this particular creative practitioner is largely relevant to the video game I'm developing for Major Projects this semester. I aim to figure out what makes Kondo's work unique, and use that knowledge to create a soundtrack for my game inspired by his work.

# Report

## Context

Koji Kondo (b. 1961) is a Japanese video game music composer who currently works as a supervisor and consultant for Nintendo's sound team.

Having studied at the Osaka University of Arts, in 1984 he was hired by Nintendo after they approached his university offering spaces for music composition and sound programming ([Kohler, 2007](#)). Although his first work was for the 1984 game *Punch Out*, it wasn't until a year later that he would compose the soundtrack for *Super Mario Bros*, which would prove to be one of his most well-known works.

Kondo lists Henry Mancini as a particularly major source of inspiration, and his work shows Latin, jazz and classical music as major influences.

**Key Works:** *Super Mario Bros.* (1985)

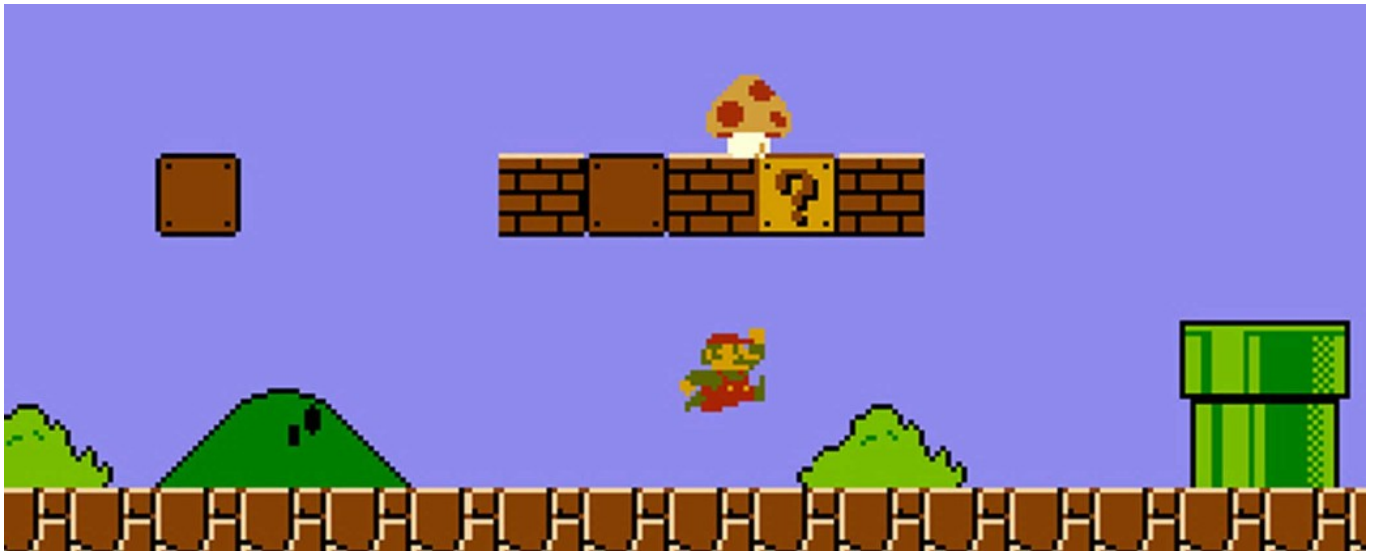


Figure 1: Super Mario Bros

Compared to the Zelda franchise, the soundtrack of *Super Mario Bros* (and the Mario franchise in general) is more light-hearted and doesn't take itself too seriously. Even the death of enemies is shown in a comical way. One could say this makes the game appropriate for all ages.

Nintendo director Shigeru Miyamoto's personal philosophy required that the music be seamless with elements of the game (Schartmann, 2015). Many sound effects in *Super Mario Bros* slide up and down in pitch in response to action on screen. For example, when Mario jumps, the boing sound rises in pitch as he elevates. In this sense, the music is integral element of *Super Mario Bros*, rather than something added simply to break the silence.

## Key Works: *Ocarina of Time* and *Majora's Mask* (1998/2000)



Figure 2: Hyrule Field as it appears in *Ocarina of Time* 3D

One of Kondo's most notable soundtracks would have to be 1998's *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*. This title was released for the Nintendo 64 console, and tells the story of a young boy who is called upon to save the land of Hyrule from the great king of evil, Ganondorf.

The game is well-known for being the first Zelda title to use a 3D perspective, and Kondo's soundtrack reflects the mystical and vast landscapes the player encounters.

One of the notable tracks in *Ocarina of Time* is Hyrule Field. Unlike all previous Zelda games, this overworld theme doesn't use the classic Zelda theme and instead opts for something fresh that evokes feelings of exploration, mystery and unease, similar to how the young Link might feel after leaving Kokiri Forest for the first time.

While *Ocarina of Time* follows the classic Hero's Journey trope, and the protagonist Link is regarded as the great Hero of Time, its sequel *Majora's Mask* is more unnerving, set in a dream world where no one knows Link, with the impending disaster of the moon colliding with the land of Termina in just three days. If I were to describe *Majora's Mask's* soundtrack in a word, it would be dread. This is further supported by the fact that Princess Zelda, the Triforce and the goddesses don't exist in this world, adding to Link's isolation.

A good example of the music representing progression in *Majora's Mask* is with the Clock Town Theme. The primary game mechanic that distinguishes *Majora's Mask* from *Ocarina of Time* is the use of rewinding the same three-day period right before Termina's demise. On the first day, the Clock Town

theme evokes feelings of community and peace, with the residents being largely oblivious to their dark fate. On the second day, the tone becomes more isolated, reflecting the sense of anxiety in the town's residents. On the final day, the music hastens with loud deep pulses giving a clear indication that something is wrong. When the moon is about to collide, Clock Town's theme is replaced with one of despair and hopelessness, which persists outside the walls of the town to all of Termina.

Both games heavily feature "reverse leitmotifs", where locations would be associated with a specific theme, rather than characters.

## Skills and Strategies

A key game mechanic in the Zelda titles *Ocarina of Time*, *The Wind Waker* and *Spirit Tracks* is the use of a musical instrument, namely the ocarina, baton and pan flute respectively. Often the player will be required to perform a simple series of notes to progress in the game, some of which appear in the soundtrack as full pieces. This further reinforces the concept of integration between the music and game as mentioned earlier.

## Challenges

After being hired by Nintendo, Kondo now found himself limited in terms of the instruments he could use a notable challenge for Kondo was the limitations early Nintendo systems had for producing sound. The Nintendo Entertainment System (NES), on which *Super Mario Bros* was released, could only play five sounds at any one time ([Gibbons, 2020](#)). Kondo took advantage of this limitation, resulting in the soundtrack for the *Super Mario Bros* soundtrack being simple yet memorable, and setting the foundation for numerous remixes in subsequent Mario titles.

## Future Trends

Kondo's work on the Zelda series would result numerous in fan-made recreations, often of the orchestral genre, which expand on the atmospheric nature of the soundtrack, creating more immersion into the fictional worlds of Hyrule and Termina. A good example and personal recommendation of this is Theophany's *Times End*, based on the *Majora's Mask* soundtrack ([Theophany, 2012](#)).



## Cultural Impact

One of Kondo's tracks in *Ocarina of Time* caused some internal controversy. The music that plays when Link enters the Fire Temple contained a sample of Islamic chanting, presumably added for atmospheric effect and to reflect the Goron's despair from being imprisoned by the dragon Volvagia. When translated, the voices are allegedly saying "I bear witness that there is no god but Allah" ([Hagopian, 2012](#)).

Having got this chant from an album of sample sounds, it's likely Kondo was unaware of its Islamic translation. Due to Nintendo's policy on not including religious references, the chant was removed in later versions of the game, replaced with demonic moaning.

## Creative Industry

The video game music industry at the time Kondo began working at Nintendo was still primitive, with the first game to feature background music being *Rally-X*, released in 1980 ([GamesRadar\\_US, 2010](#)).

Rivals to the NES at the time of *Super Mario Bros'* release were the Atari 7800 and Sega's SG-1000 and Master System, comprising most of the third-generation of video game consoles. Like the former, these also featured basic sound chips, limiting the music that could be produced. One of the best-selling games that would be released on the Master System was *Sonic the Hedgehog* in 1991. The soundtrack for this game would be partly converted from the 16-bit edition, composed by Masato Nakamura, with the remainder of the songs being the original work of Yuzo Koshiro ([Greening, 2011](#)).

## Conclusion

To conclude, I have explained in detail Koji Kondo's most well-known work, dissected what makes it so unique, and shown the impact it had on the video game music industry going forward.

With regards to the soundtrack planned for my Major Projects video game, I would be aiming for something rather atmospheric and abstract, with a certain emotional component as well. Certain tracks like *Majora's Mask's* Snowfall Temple come to mind, with dissonant chords creating unexplainable mental images.

## Recommendations

### **The Legendary Hero (Koji Kondo)**

This track sets *The Wind Waker* into motion alongside drawings showing the events of *Ocarina of Time*. The music starts off mellow as it introduces Hyrule and the Triforce, sours as Ganondorf appears to claim the artefact, then returns heroically as Link arrives to defeat the king of evil.

### **Time's End (Theophany)**

This is a fan-made orchestral album based on the *Majora's Mask* soundtrack. The music is very atmospheric and if you close your eyes, it feels like you're in the fictional world of Termina.

### **Wet Dry World (Koji Kondo)**

This track accompanies the titular *Super Mario 64* level of the same name. Compared to other levels in the game, which have a dream-like atmosphere, Wet Dry World resembles a testing stage, almost incomplete. The track is comprised of two parts. The first is mechanical, like it's pushing for something to keep happening without stopping. The second begins when the player reaches the flooded town, and sounds like a hopeless lament.

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