

Music in Digital Games

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Introductions

Digital games are often lumped together with the cinematic medium for several reasons. Whenever a new medium is introduced, it's usually compared to an older, more familiar medium to ease the transition. For example, e-mail, while vastly different from traditional mail, was described as such to make things simpler to understand. In that regard digital games have been compared to the medium of film. A second reason is that many publishers believe that trying to associate one's game with a cinematic experience is good for business, or a valuable bullet point to put on the back of the packaging. In doing so, publishers and media evangelists alike have simplified the digital gaming medium to nothing more than a film + 1 to be had in your own home. To be fair, film and digital games often (but not always) exchange notes, and many of the stylings of the cinematic genre have bled into games.

One of the largest differences in digital games compared to film is in the use of sound, and music in particular. In film, the difference between diegetic and non-diegetic sound is painfully obvious. The gunshot from the action hero's firearm is diegetic, but the striking orchestral score backing him up is non-diegetic. Bordwell & Thompson define diegesis as: "the world of the film's story. The diegesis includes events that are presumed to have occurred and actions and spaces not shown onscreen." (Bordwell & Thompson, 2001, p. 430). It's simple to define what would be diegetic or not in many cases. However, in digital games, this definition is not sufficient. Should diegesis refer to a story in digital games, or should it just refer to the game's scenario? What would be considered diegetic in *Tetris*? Sound? Gameplay? If one could consider a world where random block patterns fell from the sky to create rows that disappeared, would it be a stretch to consider that music was constantly playing in this world?

Digital games present music for three different reasons: to create atmosphere or to elicit a particular emotional response, to act as an audible cue or hint, or as a major gameplay element. By

exploring these three elements, one can begin to understand how both diegetic and non-diegetic music works in digital games, and how that is critically different from film.

Music is Used to Manipulate Emotions

An age old use of music is as a narrative supplement. Nothing helped a fireside tribal hunt story better than some good drum accompaniment, and nothing can compare to the rousing scores of today's films that are designed to leave a memory of the film's audible themes. Films such as *Mission: Impossible* and *Pirates of the Caribbean* have very distinct themes that encapsulate the energy and adventure that both these film series present. In the same way, you could ask the gaming community about themes that are important to them. Some would tell you of the *Halo* theme that called the proud Spartans to battle, or the whimsical *Zelda* theme that was sending off a boy in a green tunic into a wild adventure. Some would reference the fun *Super Mario* theme, and others would recall the haunting melody of *Silent Hill*. No matter what song they chose, the music has a direct connection with their memories in the game. Music in games is not simply something just to keep players' ears occupied while their thumbs do the walking. Music is meant to modify emotions to suit the emotions in the game. An example of this manipulation of emotions can be found in the game *Flower*.

In *Flower*, the player controls the wind to push a flower petal through fields of grass. The object of the game is to breeze past (pardon the pun) more flowers, thereby adding to the player's gust of petals. The experience is very calm and peaceful, with no threat of death or dismemberment that is so common in many digital games today. As such, it was necessary to create a musical soundscape that would match the mood and tone of the game. The non-diegetic music is slow and flowing, and is successful at setting the proper tone for the game.

Oftentimes general soundtracks are strictly non-diegetic. Games often take a cinematic approach in this respect and create non-diegetic themes to score an event. The line between diegetic

and non-diegetic music becomes blurred in the next few sections.

Music is Used to Provide Audible Cues

While film can use music to give hints about how a certain character feels, or what kind of an environment a character finds themselves in, it is far more subtle than the audible clues given by digital games. Audible cues can be found in almost every game, and they come in a variety of different flavours. Some cues are used to inform the player about their character's status, some are used to indicate the pacing of the game, some are used to warn of hazards or enemies, and some are used to identify a location.

Illustrating the status of a player is traditionally done with a heads-up display in game, but it's often aided by more obvious visual or aural cues. In 2002, Nintendo published the cult-favoured *Eternal Darkness*, which had an overarching theme of insanity. The player's character had a “sanity meter”, and as it fell, the camera would gradually skew and things would happen to make the player feel insane. What aided this was that after it fell past a certain point, the music changed to fit the level of sanity the character was presently at.

This situation is one where the diegetic and non-diegetic seem to collide. While the player's sanity meter is full, the musical background is strictly non-diegetic. As the player descends into madness, the musical score is erratic, creepy and would perfectly fit an unstable mind. It's debatable whether the insane musical score would be non-diegetic.

An excellent example of pacing can be found in the *WarioWare* series, and especially in *WarioWare: Touched!* (Nintendo, 2005). In the *WarioWare* series, players complete series of microgames in ever diminishing time frames in an attempt to complete as many microgames as possible. The first round of microgames is at a normal pace, but with every new set, the total time

available to complete each microgame is diminished, but the musical accompaniment that goes with every theme increases in speed to fit the smaller time frame. In this way, sound is creating a sense of urgency, and establishing the pacing of the game. Many of these microgames have a mix of diegetic and non-diegetic music, but they all depend on the gameplay to instruct them on their play time.

An example of music warning of incoming enemies would be in *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (Bethesda Softworks, 2007). In *Oblivion*, the player could be running about outside, but an enemy could spot them and begin to make chase. The player would otherwise be completely unaware that they were being chased would it not be for the battle theme that played as soon as the player is spotted by an enemy. This is especially important because in *Oblivion*, some enemies will spot the character and initiate attack from a far distance, so it's important to know when one is being targeted. This is an example of simple non-diegetic music.

Finally, music can be a guide or a landmark for physical space. For example, in *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo, 1998), many of the areas in the world have their own distinct theme music. This would help give the player their bearings, as well as give them a sense of what to expect in a new location. For example, the player's visit to the bustling Castle Town Market is met with a lively jig while his exploration of the empty and ominous Temple of Time was supported by a echo-laden choir hymn. The first step into the Temple of Time is confusing because the initial reaction one has is that the music is diegetic, but upon searching the building, no chanting monks are to be found, proving the music to be non-diegetic. This kind of uncertainty is found elsewhere in *Ocarina of Time*: a section in the game requires the player to follow music through a maze of tunnels in the Lost Woods. In the rest of the Lost Woods area, one believes the music to be non-diegetic, but once they follow the music they discover that a friend of the main character is playing it on their ocarina.

So, as explained, even musical cues have a possibility of being diegetic when placed in digital games. Film would never have such confusion or controversy over what is to be considered part of the

film's world. Musical cues are only the tip of the iceberg when one begins to consider the wealth of games that use music as a gameplay elements.

Music is Used as a Gameplay Element

In many games, music is incorporated somehow into the actual gameplay. In film, music can be the basis for many films such as musicals or music videos, but rarely does one see the level of connection music can have with the digital game medium. Music can be used to create game scenarios, music can be the gameplay itself, or music can be created from gameplay.

Music can be used to create game scenarios in a variety of different games. Chiefly is the *Guitar Hero* franchise, where one plays along on a guitar-shaped controller to their favourite musical tracks. The game involves a player pressing buttons in time with corresponding notes falling down a virtual fretboard on screen. The notes are arranged to give the illusion that the player is actually performing the track that is playing in the background. In this way, music, with the help of developers, has created a scenario for a video game.

A similar situation is *AudioSurf*, (SOMETHING, SOMEYEAR) an on-rails driving game where the levels are created based on sound data extracted from MP3 files supplied by the player. The game would dynamically fill the track with blocks to correspond with the music.

In both *Guitar Hero* and *AudioSurf*, gameplay is being created by music, both directly and indirectly. In these cases, the music would be diegetic, but due to the more ambiguous nature of the game world of *AudioSurf*, it causes some confusion. Although both of these games feature music heavily, timing and reflexes are the core resources for gameplay rather than aural proficiency.

In *Mario Paint* (Nintendo, DATEYDATE), players are given the chance to create their own music in the “composer” mode. Players are able to drag esoteric instruments (Ducks, Nintendo

GameBoys, Planes) onto a virtual music sheet. The location of the instrument on the scale would determine what pitch it would be played at, and the location of the instrument in the piece would determine when it would be played. This tradition was held over until current day, with *Guitar Hero: World Tour's* “Studio” mode where players could use the Guitar Hero interface to create songs and share them online. This kind of music, while diegetic, is the apex of distinction between digital games and film. In no way could a situation like this exist in a film.

Finally, music can be created from gameplay. In *Bit.Trip Beat*, the player controls a paddle to reflect incoming blocks, in the vein of a single-player *Pong*. However, each block creates a musical blip, and if the player manages to reflect most of the blocks, the musical blips add to the background music that was previously assumed to be nondiegetic. Due to the ambiguous nature of the game world, it's unknown what the diegesis entails. Again, it's observed that the difference between film and digital games are becoming increasingly stark.

Conclusions

From the cases studied, it's obvious to see the radical differences between the media of film and digital games. What is considered diegesis in film applies far less often in digital games, since some games contain multiple kinds of music with unknown sources. In digital games, music does serve the emotional and stylistic causes, just like film, but it also serves as a set of audible cues to indicate the status of the player, their location, the pacing of the game, and proximity to hazards. Music is also used in gameplay directly by providing gameplay scenarios, being the gameplay itself, and being born from gameplay. As scholars work to understand this new medium it is important to identify it as a new medium rather than a simple film + 1.

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