12-10-2014

Mirroring Reality: Music in Video Games

Allison Burr
Chapman University, burr108@mail.chapman.edu

Mirroring Reality: Music in Video Games

Allison Burr
Bachelor of Arts Music, Class of 2015
Hall-Musco Conservatory of Music, College of Performing Arts, Chapman University

Abstract

This paper explores the effectiveness of music in video games in terms of mood setting and immersion. The effectiveness of the emotion evoked is studied through both personal and scholarly research. Four video games are explored from different game genres. In *Bioshock* and *Fallout 3,* the music immerses the player into the environment of the video game, whether it is an underwater dystopia or the post apocalyptic Washington DC area. *Dead Space*, a survival horror game set on an abandoned mining vessel in space, pushes the boundaries in terms of musical dissonance and terror by using innovative sound design. The final game is *Journey*, a game unlike any other that destroys most video game conventions. *Journey* has no combat, dialog, or written back-story. The player must piece together his or her own ideas of purpose and what drives the story. Through an alternating two note musical chime, one of the few action commands, the player must learn how to express his or herself and communicate with a randomly assigned anonymous player who embarks on this journey with them. This paper explores how music plays a center role in the delivery of story and immersion of the player into the created world.

Bioshock, 2007

This game takes place in the 1960's in an underwater utopian society that has failed. As the player, the plane that you are traveling in crashes over the Atlantic Ocean and as the player seek shelter in the only thing nearby, a lighthouse. Upon entering the lighthouse you find your way into a bathysphere and travel to the underwater city of Rapture (founded in the mid 1940's), a supposed paradise where artists are not censored and scientists are not bound by morality.

- Non-diegetic music creates feelings of isolation
- Use of sting instruments shows recurring ocean theme
- Ebb and pull of dynamics, and low cello and bass bowing shows unrest
- Diegetic music from radios play licensed music that immerses the player into the 1950's world

"Atmosphere is Bioshock's single greatest asset. It uses period music and art design in a unique fictional setting" (VanOrd, 2011).

Journey, 2012

This third person, very atypical game, starts out without giving the player any instruction except that tilting the controller moves the character. As a simple cloaked wanderer, the player wanders through lands of sand and deserted structures. In certain parts of the game the player can weave together a story and that he or she is on a pilgrimage but there is no spoken or written dialogue. The player can be teamed up randomly with another player online. During this there is no indication of gender or what language the other player speaks. Also during any time the other person may leave and be replaced with another. In the game you form a bond with the only other living being like yourself, even though you know nothing about them and can only communicate via a chime created by pressing a button.

"Though he or she is far from vital to making progress, the company is invariably welcome; it's a powerful contrast to the solitude of voyaging alone through a mostly empty desert, and when you drift apart forever, it's curiously sad" (Douglas, 2012).

Fallout 3, 2008

The year is 2277, 200 years after a war of resources ended in a nuclear holocaust. The game takes place in a post apocalyptic wasteland that used to be the Washington DC area. As the player you emerge from a vault (a fallout shelter) following in your wayward father's footsteps. In the world you find various factions either warring over resources or tying to survive, haven for refugees, super mutants, ghouls, raiders, cannibals, mutated wildlife, and the remnants of past military powers.

- Mainly diegetic music through radio on player's wrist
- Three main radio stations: Galaxy News Radio (1930's-50's), Enclave Radio (propaganda and patriotic tunes), and Agatha's Station (classical violin pieces)
- Game's music is seen as light musical accompaniment

Dead Space, 2008

This game takes place in 2508 on a mining vessel that has gone dark. As the character Isaac Clarke, you are an engineer that is part of a team that receives a distress signal and thus investigates only to have their ship become inoperable upon arrival. After boarding the ship you find that the situation is not as simple as it seems. The ship is a derelict that has come under attack by a hostile infection that first destroys the mind and then mutates the body into necromorphs. This infection does not halt at the host's death. Isaac is tasked with surviving not only the necromorphs but also the crushing pressure of attrition, loneliness, and the leering possibility of losing his mind.

- Non-diegetic music builds up tension, suspense, and feelings of isolation
- Violins usually represent the necromorph enemy through jump scares and crawling sounds that move across the sound-scape
- Won multiple awards including 7Th Annual GANG Awards: Audio of the Year and Sound Design of the Year (Misazam, 2009).

"The plan from the very start was to create mood through overall sound design. We weren't going for traditional music composition or memorable themes, but instead approached the entire sound-scape as a single unit that would work together to create a dark and eerie vibe" Don Veca, audio director (Misazam, 2009).

Conclusion

Music plays an important role in both immersing the player into the game's environment and evoking emotional cues. Although each game uses music differently, the adaptability of sound creates endless options for video game composers. Through music, players can be manipulated, misguided, and rewarded for their accomplishments. Without music, video games would become two dimensional and lack the ability to connect with the player on an emotional level.

Resources

Douglas, Jane. "Journey Review." *Gamespot.* 02 March 2012. Web. 11 February 2014. <http://www.gamespot.com/reviews/journey-review/1900-6363693/>

Misazam. "All About the Sound of Dead Space" Designing Sound. 22 June 2009. Web. 14 May 2014.
http://designingsound.org/2009/06/all-about-the-sound-of-dead-space/

VanOrd, Kevin. "Why it matters: Music". *Game Spot*. April 21, 2011. Web. 14 May 2014. <http://www.gamespot.com/articles/why-it-matters-music/1100-6309616/>