



FUNCTIONS OF GAMES AUDIO

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While games audio typically maintains all of the functions found in film or television sound, (see Berg 1973; Cohen 1999; Chion 1994; Gorbman 1987; Kozloff 1988; Lissa 1965; Manvell & Huntley 1975; Smith 1998), there are also some distinct differences in the ways audio functions in games.

Commercial Functions: Increasingly, games are used as marketing tools and have become part of media franchises that may include film or television spin-offs.

Kinetic Functions: The direct participation between a player and the audio takes on a new role in kinetic gestural games. These games are designed to have players directly physically participate and respond to the sound. Of course, such games are enjoyable—as is evidenced by their popularity—but the music is also sometimes intended as part of the edutainment role of some of these games (as in training basic motor skills in toddlers, for instance), or designed for aiding in physical fitness, such as *EyeToy Kinetic* (Sony 2005), which is clearly implicated in the marketing of these games. The sound in the case of kinetic games serves as a main motivating factor, arousing the player physically, and is also the part of the game on which the player must focus attention and with which the player must respond.

Anticipating action is a critical part of being successful in many games, particularly adventure and action games. Notably, *acousmatic sound*—that is, sound with no clear origin visually—may inspire us to look to the direction of a sound, to “incite the look to go there and find out” (Chion 1994, 71, 85). This function, while present in films (even if we cannot force the camera to go in that direction, we mentally look there, argues Chion), is far more pronounced in games, as sound gives the player cues to head in a particular direction or to run the other way.

Drawing attention: Particularly important to games is the use of sound symbols to help identify goals and focus the player’s perception on certain objects. As Cohen describes, sound focuses our attention, as when a “soundtrack featuring a lullaby might direct attention to a cradle rather than to a fishbowl when both objects are simultaneously depicted in a scene” (2001, 258). In *Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*, for example, the lesser enemies all have the same music, and beneficial items like gems or pieces of heart likewise all have the same or similar sounding cues. In other words, symbols and leitmotifs are often used to assist the player in identifying other characters, moods, environments and objects, to help the game become more comprehensible and to decrease the learning curve for new players. The use of recurrent musical themes can help to situate the player in the game matrix, in the sense that various locales or levels are usually given different themes. By listening to the music, the player is able to identify their whereabouts in the narrative and in the game.

Structural Functions: Music can be used to enhance the overall structure of the game. These can include direct structural cues, such as links or bridges between two scenes, or which indicate the opening or ending of a particular part of gameplay. A drop to silence (the “boredom switch”) can also tell the player that they should have completed that segment of the game, and that the game is waiting for a player to overcome a particular challenge or exit the area. A pause or break in music can indicate a change in narrative, or, continuous music across disparate scenes can help to signal the continuation of a particular theme (Cohen 1999, 41).

Reinforcement Equally important in reinforcing elements of gameplay is the dialogue, which can, for instance, disclose clues, or assign goals (Kozloff 2000, 5). For example, there are often hints and goals given in the dialogue in *Grim Fandango*. When Eva tells us she needs our teeth, for instance, we have to go and find an object that will suffice before we can progress in the game. Listening to dialogue, then, becomes a key element in solving the game. Sound and dialogue can likewise reveal details about places or characters—whether they are a friend or a foe, for instance, either by their musical accompaniment or by the accent/language/timbre of their voice and voice-over narrations can let us access a character’s thoughts and feelings (Kozloff 2000, 5).

Illusionary and Spatial Functions: Part of the role of audio in a game is the suspension of disbelief, adding realism or creating illusion. The illusion of being immersed in a three-dimensional atmosphere is greatly enhanced by the audio, particularly for newer games which may be developed in 7.1 surround sound. Even more simple stereo effects still have a considerable impact. While this function of game audio does not differ significantly from that of film, it must be recalled that a game may take thirty to forty hours to complete even when the “correct sequence” of events are known, and audio plays a crucial role in helping the player to recall places and characters, and to situate themselves in such a massive setting.

Environmental Functions: Another important immersive element Gorbman (1987) and Berg (1973) both discuss in relation to film is the historical function of covering distracting noises of the projector in the era of silent movies. A similar function may be attributed to games sounds created for an arcade environment. Arcade games have tended to have less polyphony and more sound effects and percussion, as part of the necessity of the environment, which meant that the games must be heard over the din to attract players. In consoles designed for home gameplay, music may mask the distractions of the computer fan, or sounds made by the surrounding environment (Cohen 1999, 41).

Communication of emotional meaning occurs in games audio in much the same way as in linear media. Here, a distinction must be made between communication of meaning through music, and mood induction: “Mood induction changes how one is feeling, while communication of meaning simply conveys information. One may receive information depicting sadness without him or herself feeling sad.” (Rosar in Cohen 2001, 42.) Mood induction and physiological responses are typically experienced most obviously when the player’s character is at significant risk of peril, as in the chaotic and fast boss music (the final major enemy of a level or series of levels in a game) in the *Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*, for instance. In this way, sound works to control or manipulate the player’s emotions, guiding responses to the game.

Citations

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