

MUSIC AS A FORM OF STORYTELLING

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Abstract. *This article presents a comprehensive exploration of the narrative dimension of music, building upon existing research through real-life implementations. Drawing on a diverse variety of data, we engage in qualitative analysis and case studies to investigate how independent musicians complexly craft stories through songwriting, scrutinising both lyrical and musical elements. Furthermore, we deepen into the main role of music in cinematic narratives, scrutinising how film composers augment storytelling through thematic motifs and innovative sound design techniques. Moreover, we examine the immersive qualities of video game music, emphasising its capacity to dynamically adapt to user choices and move narrative arcs forward. By synthesising insights from various disciplines, this interdisciplinary study gives a view on the creative processes and cultural significance of music within contemporary storytelling instruments. Through our research, we contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between music and narrative, offering valuable perspectives for both scholars and practitioners in the field.*

Keywords: *diegetic music, non-diegetic music, narrative, soundtrack, video games.*

Introduction

Music has always been a huge part of human existence. Music is performed at key moments of human life such as weddings, births and funerals. While earlier people had to listen to music only at concerts, with the use of technology they can now enjoy their favourite pieces directly through phone, making music more accessible. That is why now the study of music has accelerated because it has become more integrated in human life than ever.

One of the branches of music studying is studying narrative in music. There is a term for albums which have some story or where the songs are linked together - "concept albums" [1]. This is a popular type of composing as it allows the musician to express their ideas in more expanded form. Some concept albums include "The Wall" by Pink Floyd, "Kid A Mnesia" by Radiohead [2], "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band" by The Beatles [3] and others.

Worth mentioning music in cinema: such composers as Hans Zimmer, Ludwig Göransson, John Towner Williams and others prove that music in cinema plays a crucial role. Music in video games often created by film composers, too, also enriches storytelling in games, making the plot more balanced and engaging.

Narrative through music

Music, when composed independently, acts like a narrator introducing listeners to the author's tale. Both music and stories share a similar structure: "Introduction," "First Group," "Transition," "Second Group," and "Closing Group" in music, and "Exposition," "Rising Action," "Climax," "Falling Action," and "Resolution" in stories. This similarity suggests that although they can stand alone, music and literature are interconnected, serving the same overarching goal. That results in the music using the same techniques as the literature. To catch the attention of the listener into the music are inscribed the "plot-twists" as ascending and unexpected descending of the sound etc, Chekhov's rifle, understatement.

Considering a fully written story here it was impossible not to mention the Gorillaz artwork album “Plastic beach” (March 3rd, 2010). It is built itself like a whole story where song after song describes the plot, which emphasises the problem of the forming of the plastic pollution islands in the world's oceans and the problems that they are bringing. “Orchestral pit”, which is an intro slowly brings the listener to the “island”, “Welcome to the World of the plastic beach” plays the same role. After that occurs escalation and climax on the song “On melancholy hill” that brings an ending to the “Plastic beach” and then comes the falling action through: “Broken”, “Cloud of unknowing”, “To binge” and the resolution as “Pirate Jet” in which the lyrical characters leave the destroyed island, but the problem remains, because there are more such “Plastic beaches” in the world. In this work [4] is done the research on this artwork and it summarises the work of every song as one complete piece. This emphasises the connection between two different arts and practically erases all the walls in art.

Expanding the connection between music and narrative, it will be a huge blunder not to consider the role of the scenes and characters. Stories are perceived through the actions which the characters take, therefore the music creates its own characters. Musical events, including gestures, assertions, responses, resolutions, goal-directed motions, and references, are viewed as characters in the context of perceiving music as a narrative [5]. As a classic example will be considered “Strangers in the night” by Frank Sinatra (April 12, 1966), the song describes an event of meeting two characters which forms a scene. The environment is slightly outlined by the instrumentarium and echo, where slow passing deep saxophone and singer vocals described the warm midnight in contrast with the, usually, cold lonely nights. The lyrical characters are outlined by violas, subtly introducing them in the scene. As the song progresses the warmth of the sound as well as the volume are escalating as the relationship between two characters, resulting in the catharsis of the story. This exemplifies how different parts of music, like lyrical characters in a story, adjust the plot, making you sense and indwell the situation.

Diegetic and non-diegetic music in cinematography

Film music serves different purposes in a film. P Rothbart states [6] that music in a film sets the environment by establishing time and place; moreover, it creates the mood of the film and the evidence of that is better described below. Music can create atmosphere in the film with use of both non-diegetic and diegetic sound. Also, music as an important tool in storytelling, allows to link the scenes together by the same song. Most of the films are ended by so-called “credit songs”. Finally, it helps reveal drama which is not seen through the camera.

There is a continuous study of non-diegetic music in films which investigate the importance of it in storytelling. For instance, the study of Christopher Nolan’s movie “Interstellar” (2014) [7] showed how music was used to create dynamic and tension in the film. Films of Tünde Kélaní [8] use African and Western musical rhythms and folklore to express the cultural part of the characters of the film. Stanley Kubrick [9], Tim Burton [10] and other directors are known to pay meticulous attention to music chosen for film and get recognition for it. Another example of music study in a film is “Lord of Rings” film series [11]. The researchers again went through the significance of music in the film proving that music is a source of enriching the storytelling. The study of British TV drama series “Peaky Blinders” demonstrated that music can be as important as dialogue in a film and sometimes it changes the focus to itself [12], especially in emotional moments of the films, such as weddings.

Music's impact of perception of film

Non-diegetic music takes a role in changing the viewer’s attitude to characters in a film. A study shows [13] that music can change the character's likeability; melodrama music increases and thrilling music decreases liking of a character compared to the character's presence in a scene with no music. Music also can change the viewer's judgement of character [14]. Another study [15] shows that the same clip from a film can be perceived differently with different music

accompanied. The clip might be seen as depressing, anxious, exuberant and content in dependence on music. This proves that music should be chosen carefully, and the film composers need to work together with directors and screenwriters to underline a detail of the film. This is how Christopher Nolan collaborates with Hans Zimmer and Ludwig Göransson and other composers. Music was also shown to be able to change the viewer's attention to particular details and even the perceiving the film genre [16]. This fact allows us to assume that music can be more important than dialogue which was discussed above.

The role of diegetic music

Diegetic music also plays a crucial role in cinematic storytelling. For instance, *Barbie* (2023) film which received critical acclaim for its original song, garnering prestigious awards and recognition [17], was noted by researchers to have an important role in storytelling with use of diegetic music [18]. In the *Barbie* movie, "Push" by Matchbox Twenty serves as a pivotal diegetic song, intricately woven into the storyline to reflect the emotional state of the Ken characters and their relationships with Barbies. The lyrics of the song resonate deeply with the character's experiences, prompting them to repeatedly sing it, thus reinforcing its significance within the narrative.

Diegetic music, as demonstrated by Quentin Tarantino's adept incorporation of popular songs, enriches cinematic narratives by seamlessly blending handpicked tracks into scenes. This enriches the audience's engagement, rendering music an integral element of the film's cadence and character [19].

Significance of music in video games

Rod Munday, lecturer in Digital Culture and Gaming at Aberystwyth University, starts his video game music section in the e-book "Music, Sound and Multimedia: From the Live to the Virtual", edited by Jamie Sexton [20] by affirming that the notion of video-game music no longer exists. He asserts that technology has advanced enough for composers to no longer be limited to a few bits of the arcade days and now it "inhabits every style imaginable". This opens up the gates to the whole new field for music.

Video-game music has evolved to a point where it can be analysed as distinct pieces of art. Naturally as a piece of art it has the capacity to convey emotions and feelings in its listeners.

Video games have become more cinematic over the years, so music artists have adopted similar methods to composing as in cinematography. Music in videogames can add to the atmosphere, enhance emotions felt by both the players and in-game characters and complement the action with its rhythm and intensity. One of the best examples of the latter is the soundtrack for the *DOOM* (2016) and its sequel *DOOM Eternal* (2020), composed by Mick Gordon where the riveting sound design and songs have become synonyms with its gameplay.

In general video-game music falls into 2 categories based on the type of game it was composed for:

Pop-like. Usually in games with less accent on the narrative or story and more on gameplay and its characters. This is often seen in PVP games such as fighting games. Guile's theme from the *Street Fighter* franchise (1991) is very well known and beloved to this day.

Focused. Generally single player games with a focus on narrative have masterful pieces that would not look out of place in an orchestral concert. Beloved franchises like *Zelda*, *Elder Scrolls* and *Dark Souls* feature extensive soundtracks which make you feel a plethora of emotions from awe at the beauty of the world to absolute terror while facing primordial abominations. My favorite example of the latter is the theme of Ludwig, *The Accursed & Holy Blade* from the *Old Hunters* expansion of *Bloodborne*. This song is a good segway to the next section.

Character description through music

The 1st part of the track has a lot of dissonance which matches the situation you are in fighting a distorted monster. In their article "On Musical Dissonance" [21] the author explains that "tonal theories attribute dissonance to violations of harmonic principles embodied in Western

music”. In essence this discord deviates from expectations set by harmonic principles. This subversion of expectations triggers our primal fear of the unknown.

The 1st phase of the track (and the fight) starts off with a menacing duo of vocals and cello, among other instruments. The chants in the background going with the orchestra underline the monstrosity in front of the player, describing it, retailing its story. The chorus [22] describes a brave hunter, whose “sword is bathed in blood”.

The lyrics tell the hunter to “neither lose your way at night / nor become drunk with blood...”. Without getting into the story of the game, this basically alludes to the fate that this character has suffered by implying that his current form is the result of not following those “guidelines”. After each verse the music “sinks” letting the player breath for a second before starting over again. Whether intentional or not, this could well be a metaphor for the never-ending cycle Ludwig is in.

After the second cycle of the verse, a transition occurs, and the fight just as the song transitions to the next part.

As Ludwig regains part of his humanity the dissonance in the melody partially disappears as well. The moonlight of the blade illuminates both the scenery and the mind of the beast. The chorus now sings about the current situation of Ludwig [23]. The lyrics: “With a powerful sword and robe / the lord does not fall away (from the path)! / Cursed beasts, cursed chains! / Become the blade of the honorable god!” describe how he is chained to this fate and forced to continue to fight the beast in the name of that god.

Another distinct change is the strings in the background. The rhythm of the melody is that of a waltz. This perfectly describes the horrid dance the player and the monster are locked in.

Conclusions

In this paper, analysis on music as a form of storytelling was performed. We consulted sources which explored music narrative as highly connected to literature storytelling, having the same structure and purpose. Our research also revealed its multifaceted role in expanding and refinement the film plot, having an enormous impact on the perceiving of the film. The film composers’ view of music was examined by analysing their approach to composing music together with directors. Game soundtracks, their variety and their significance were described in the last section of the paper. It was said that music becoming increasingly expressive and scenic, now requires more careful choice of background music like what has been happening in the film industry for decades. To sum up, reviewing music significance in different domains makes it clear that further investigation of it is still needed for a comprehensive definition of its role in our culture, nevertheless it is obviously an important part of our daily life.

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