Scoring Play – Soundtracks and Video Game Genres

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Sound has been a crucial element in the design of video games, even if the academic discussion of audiovisual media has often overlooked it, being too captivated by the images displayed on the screen. But since the heyday of arcade games in the late 1970s and early 1980s, characteristic sound designs have been associated with popular games, from the thumping of the *Space Invaders* (1978) and the smacking of *Pac-Man* (1980) to the intrusion of an UFO interrupting the pounding sounds of *Asteroids* (1979). Sound design patterns in video games have developed from singular (in their directness, almost cartoonlike) effects to complex soundscapes contributing to the construction of virtual game worlds that reach from the straightforward fun-ride of a traditional jump'n'run game like the *Super Mario Bros* series (since 1985) to the world-building of MMORPGs such as *World of Warcraft* (2004).

Parallel to the differentiation of sound effects, the forms of music featured in video games have become more and more sophisticated. The jingles from early arcade games underscoring triumph and loss have turned into catchy theme songs and short MIDI-symphonies. With the storage possibilities of the CD-Rom, introduced in the early 1990s, game scores were finally able to become as versatile and comprehensive as their cinematic counterparts. The ties between music and games became further established by well-known rock groups and electro-artists' contributions to game soundtracks, such as in the futuristic racing game *Wipeout* (1995), which featured exclusive tracks by dance acts Prodigy, The Chemical Brothers and Daft Punk.

Nowadays the association between music and video games constitutes an omnipresent part of popular culture offering a vast variety of synergistic effects, from the enormous success of rhythm games like *Guitar Hero* (2005) and *Rock Band* (2007) to the popular orchestral performance of scores written exclusively for video games as well as the distinguished sound branding of transmedia franchises such as *James Bond* and *Star Wars,* instantly recognizable by the first notes of their theme tunes ringing out across several media platforms.

The following essay examines the aesthetics and conventions of game soundtracks in relation to their cinematic counterparts as well as how the issue of genre creates expectations and associations in regard to the setting as well as the gameplay. In the cinema, established score patterns like the dynamic spy thriller music by Lalo Schifrin or John Barry create certain associations with regard to the setting and

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plot of the film. In video games, the knowledge of genre conventions evoked by the soundtrack is more difficult, since the arrangement of the score itself can depend upon the behaviour of the player. In contrast to the forms of realism encountered in simulation games, sports genres such as 1st and 3rd person shooter-games, action adventures and role-playing games opt for another form of realism. With the means provided by better graphic engines and higher processing power, their look has eventually become more naturalistic. But nevertheless, games like the *Tomb Raider* series (since 1996) or *Grand Theft Auto* (since 1997) do not try to offer a realistic version of the South American jungle or the streets of New York City. The game designers refer to mind maps and mental images created by the cinema and popular culture.

1 Rhythm is it

The use of cinematic audiovisual devices within games is based rather upon the impression of realism than on conventional ideas about authentic representation. Game scholar and sound expert Karen Collins explains in her study *Game Sound* that "in many ways the realism aspired to in games is not a naturalistic realism in the sense of being a simulation of reality, but a *cinematic* realism that relies on established motion-picture conventions." (Collins 2008: 134) Collins suggests the term 'cine-real' for the construction of cinematic worlds in games: "The 'cine-real' is a sense of immersion and believability, or verisimilitude, within a fantasy world. It is the imagined real of the sound of explosions in space (which should technically be silent), or of the clarity of sounds underwater (which should technically be muddled.)… Sound is as much an aesthetic choice as it is a reproduction of the imagined space." (Collins 2008: 135) Comparable to the cinema of attractions which sets the key for many Hollywood adventure films, the score of several action-orientated games indicates the rhythm of the events. In games from the *Tomb Raider* franchise or the later installments of the *Resident Evil* series (since 1996), this aspect becomes essential to the ludic architecture of the game since the player willingly acts as a slave to the rhythm. If his or her performance does not match the patterns expected by the program, Lara Croft's quest for hidden artifacts will end before she has even passed the first set piece.

The orchestration of movement indicated by the interaction between the player's moves and the arrangement of sound effects and score creates a rhythm comparable to the cinematic rhythm which French film theorist Jean Mitry believed to be essential to the experience and artistic qualities of film. He defined cinematic rhythm as "a sequence of events in time." (Mitry 1997: 104) If the images were treated as pure signs they would become hieroglyphs. According to Mitry, the cinematic rhythm felt by the viewer does not equal the mathematical constructed

rhythm of a musical composition, but it is created by a series of events presented on the screen that depend on intensity and duration. (cf. Mitry 1998: 123) Mitry considered the ability "to create a context whereby one is not sure whether one is hearing the images or seeing the music" (Mitry 1998: 267) to be one of the outstanding artistic merits of film.

Video games continue this tradition and even take it one step further. Now the feeling of the cinematic rhythm is not only suggested by the editing and the mise-en-scène of the film, but also by the input of the gamer. The rhythmic patterns of the avatar's movement can be purported by the gameplay similar to notes and tempo indicated on a sheet of music. For example, quick-time-events urge the player to press certain buttons at the right time in order to see his or her avatar succeed in a pre-recorded cutscene. If the wrong sequence is performed, the character on screen cannot escape his or her fate. In contrast to game segments with such pre-determined rhythmic structure that often hint at an important plot point or provide closure to a certain area of the game, other concepts of level design offer the player the freedom to move through the level at his or her own pace. Examples for both design concepts can be found in the Lara Croft-reboot *Tomb Raider Legend* (2006): in chase sequences, the rhythm is forced upon the player by the forward movement of the persecutors. A spectacular drive through Siberia features a quick-time-event at the end that presents an impressive motorcycle stunt that could not be created within the game engine. The levels featuring car and motorcycle chases are accompanied by a tight up-tempo score, while the soundtrack cues used during levels focusing on exploration and puzzle solving help to establish an atmosphere of mystery and hidden secrets reminiscent of the exoticism displayed in classical Hollywood adventure films. In those levels the player can choose whether Lara Croft passes through the secret caves and ancient ruins with the same high velocity as Angelina Jolie in the two films based upon the video game, or if she should take the time to admire every corner of the catacombs and discover every hidden extra in a discovery of slowness that makes Wim Wenders look like Paul Greengrass.

In reference to Mitry's theoretical observations on the rhythm in film, its counterpart in video games is not only defined by the context constructed by the game designer, but its intensity and duration is actually co-authored by the player and his or her sense of pacing. The visualization of the rhythm created by play in video games can be an abstract journey into spatial sound as well as a navigation through a cinematic three-dimensional space. The accompanying score does not only relate to several cues that can be used as a form of leitmotif, it also becomes a form of dynamic audio which Karen Collins defines as "both interactive and adaptive audio. Dynamic audio reacts both to changes in the gameplay environment and/or to actions taken by the player." (Collins 2008: 4)

While interactive audio is directly influenced by the actions of the player, adaptive audio depends on changes in the simulated environment of the game world: for

example, a musical theme which is triggered by nightfall or a cue underscoring the actions of a non-player character. In cinematic language, the most explicit synaesthetic convergence between image and sound can be found in video clips and abstract avant-garde films. Its equivalent in video games would be the genre of rhythm games in which adaptive and interactive audio are combined within the framework of simulated musical performance.

In one variation of rhythm games, the score is played by the user through abstract actions. In experimental video games like *Amplitude* (2003), a shooter in which the player has to switch between several tracks in order to create a sequence of sounds, or *Bit.Trip.Beat* (2009), a variation of *Pong* (1972), in which the bat produces different musical notes on hitting the ball, the well-known gameplay of established genres like the shooter or minimalist sports games turns into conducting an abstract symphony.

Another more popular and traditional concept is offered by the extraordinarily successful musical casual-games franchises *Guitar Hero, Rock Band, SingStar* (2004) and *DJ Hero* (2009). Their design is closer to simulation games and not really abstract. The user plays the notes shown on the screen with a special game controller reminiscent of a musical toy. *Guitar Hero* employs a plastic guitar with five buttons simulating the fret and another button used to imitate the strumming. *DJ Hero* is played via plastic turntables and *Rock Band* features a whole selection of instruments. In his book *A Casual Revolution,* discussing the success of casual games during the late 2000s, video game researcher Jesper Juul writes about the magic crayon quality of those games:

> "On some level it is true that these are not real instruments, but what makes them not real? The basic experience of playing these games is that if you press the buttons correctly, music appears – it feels as if you are making music. Interestingly, this is quite similar to learning an instrument." (Juul 2009: 115)

Although on an aesthetic level with the stylized guitarists of *Guitar Hero* representing different rock'n'roll clichés, the games employ a cartoon-like aesthetic and aim for the realism of a traditional simulation in gameplay. If a note is played the wrong way, it can be clearly heard and the virtual audience starts booing. In the depiction of famous pop icons, the game tries to be more realistic than in the design of fictitious musicians. Just as famous sports stars license their names for popular games like *FIFA Soccer* (since 1993) or *Tony Hawks Skateboarding* (since 1999), well-known musicians such as hard-rock guitarist Slash, AC/DC, Aerosmith, Metallica, and The Beatles offer their likenesses and their songs for well-paid virtual appearances or even special editions of music games. In the game *The Beatles: Rock Band* (2009), players can revisit animated reconstructions of the group's famous performances from their first appearance on the Ed Sullivan Show, which started the British

invasion in the U.S., to their last improvised concert on the roof of Apple Studios. In an ironic way, the punk credo of "anyone-can-do-it" is applied to its musical counterparts as well as to its own legacy in those games. The Sex Pistols even re-recorded their hit song *Pretty Vacant* to be featured in *Guitar Hero*. In contrast to playback, music-rhythm games require a form of "non-trivial effort" (Aarseth 1998: 2) that Espen Aarseth deemed to be characteristic of video games in comparison to passive listening. In *Guitar Hero* and *DJ Hero*, which feature exclusive tracks pre-recorded for player performances by famous DJs such as Grandmaster Flash and DJ Shadow, the correspondence between soundtrack and gameplay is quite obviously arranged by playful performances. But what happens if games use cinematic soundtrack conventions without being able to rely on the structure of a fixed symphony?

2 Adaptive Mickey Mousing

Simulation and rhythm games have in common that their use of sound effects and music relates to predominantly realistic criteria. The use of popular songs in sports games follows the aesthetic established by fun sports which are accompanied by well-known pop, rock, rap or electro tunes. In contrast to this concept, game genres presenting ludic fictions like action-adventures, larger-than-life shooter-games or role-playing games follow other ideas of realism, the audible reality of cinematic genre conventions that are adapted to the ludic space. Karen Collins aptly explains that sound in games is "a simulacrum of the real" (Collins 2008: 135). In arcade classics like *Pac-Man, Donkey Kong* (1981) or *Ghosts'n'Goblins* (1985), the sound effects and melody fragments featured in the score complement each other as a kind of synthetic symphony consisting of the sound effects produced by the interaction between game and player. Because of storage limitations, the soundtrack is often reduced to a short main theme. The surreal soundscape encountered in traditional arcade games that are not simulations is reminiscent of the sound design in cartoon films. The sound effects do not even try to imitate the spectacular explosions offered by action and adventure films. They are restricted to cartoonlike and abstract sounds. An instructive example for this effect can be observed in the arcade video game based upon the film *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* released by Atari in 1985. In direct contrast to the dark atmosphere of the second film in the *Indiana Jones* series, the video game seems to be closer to *Roadrunner* cartoons than to the movie which inspired it. With Indiana Jones whipping the evil thugs, resulting in stars circling around their beaten heads, the image of human victims having their hearts taken out before they get burned alive in a pool of lava does not come to mind even though the game picks up the setting from the film. The short samples turning the threatening chanting from the film into cartoon sounds and the

continuous replay of three musical themes additionally underscore the comical aesthetic of the game.

The influence of cartoon aesthetics on film history left its mark on the terminology of soundtracks early on. Film theorist and historian David Bordwell explains how the hero of classic Disney films became the inspiration for a scoring technique that still can be found in current Hollywood blockbusters: "Mickey Mouse and other Disney characters often move in exact synchronization with the music, even when they aren't dancing… Matching movement to music came to be known as *Mickey-Mousing*." (Bordwell 2008: 276)

In regard to dynamic audio compositions, the effect of Mickey-Mousing can be forced upon the player when the speed of the music is increased to signal the approaching end of a countdown or the limited duration of available special powers. If he or she wants to succeed in the game segment, the avatar either has to hurry up or put the additional skills to effective use. Examples for adaptive Mickey-Mousing that depend on changes in the game world but at the same time signal the player to adjust his or her rhythm to the demands of the gameplay can often be found in jump'n'run and platform games. In *Bubble Bobble* (1986), the acceleration of the main tune warns the player that he or she has only a small amount of time left before an indestructible opponent arrives. An additional boost to the already fast-paced movements of *Sonic the Hedgehog* (1991) is indicated by a faster version of the hero's theme and, in *Marble Madness* (1984), the rather abstract task of navigating a marble through a labyrinth is orchestrated by an emotional score.

The ideal example to illustrate the technique of Mickey-Mousing would, of course, be Warren Spector's *Epic Mickey* (2010), a jump'n'run game for the Nintendo Wii console in which the namesake of this scoring concept has to travel through wastelands and cartoon universes and meet inhabitants like Oswald the Rabbit, Mickey's historic predecessor abandoned by Disney Productions decades ago. In best Mickey-Mousing tradition, the main theme composed for Mickey becomes adjusted to the actions performed by the player. Similar strategies of scoring can also be found in many Nintendo games such as the *Super Mario* or the *Donkey Kong Country* series (since 1994). The exalted comic style of many jump'n'run games corresponds very well with Mickey-Mousing. In some cases it can produce involuntarily funny results if the triggers for the musical cues are not dynamic enough. If a heroic theme designating the escape from the opponent's fortress, and originally providing closure, gets played uninterruptedly in a first-person shooter, even though you notice that you are still missing one piece to the puzzle and have to walk all the way back to the starting point of the level, the effect is not immersive any more, but rather has the absurdity of a genre parody by comedy expert Mel Brooks.

3 Dynamic Symphonies

An important tool to avoid those limitations of the musical loop was developed by LucasArts, a label famous for idiosyncratic cult graphic adventures from the late 1980s and early 1990s such as *Maniac Mansion* (1987), *Day of the Tentacle* (1993), *Sam and Max – Hit the Road* (1993) and *Grim Fandango* (1998) before it turned to producing games based upon the *Star Wars* franchise, on which is built the fortune of its founder George Lucas. One of its most successful series that is still being produced today is the *Monkey Island* saga (since 1990) created by Ron Gilbert, a highly innovative mixture between a homage to adventure movies from the classical Hollywood era, a postmodern sophisticated parody and horror elements such as voodoo and ghost pirates. For its second part, *Le Chuck's Revenge,* published in 1991, Michael Land invented the iMuse system. This programming device prevented the score from being caught up in unintentional loops not suited to the events in the game. It set up logical parameters for the MIDI-score by fading certain instruments in and out or by providing seamless transition from one cue to another depending on the input chosen by the player. The score became adjusted to the game rules and was no longer dependent on the linear structures employed by traditional narrative structures. If the main character, blundering wannabe pirate Guybrush Threepwood, entered a new location, the musical score changed without any significant interruption. The iMuse orchestrated soundtracks reflected very precisely the ironic attitude central to many LucasArts adventures. In *Sam and Max – Hit the Road*, an adventure based upon comic book characters created by LucasArts designer Steve Purcell, the two protagonists, a psychopathic rabbit and a cozy dog, embody a parody of traditional hardboiled heroes. Besides the aesthetics which were inspired by classical animation film conventions, the cartoonlike character of the locations and events is underscored by the music. For example, the visit to a surrealist museum featuring Salvador Dalí's melting clocks and, in a more camp than surrealist tradition, an all-knowing billiard ball combines musical score and puzzle-solving with the characters changing their size in regard to their position in the room. The effect of iMuse compositions in LucasArts adventures can be compared to the form of adaptive Mickey-Mousing which I discussed in relation to jump'n'run games. But even though it adapts to the moves chosen by the player, the score in adventure games contributes rather to the ludic atmosphere in general. It does not indicate a state of continuous movement as it would in many games from the jump'n'run genre. In *Rogue Leaders*, a book on the history of LucasArts, journalist Rob Smith comments on the new possibilities offered by adaptive scoring systems such as iMuse:

> "Essentially, iMuse enabled in-game music to transition seamlessly between tracks in reaction to whatever the player was doing. In movies, music is paced to match the

> on-screen action. The freedom of movement that a game affords, however, means that the designers don't know where players may move or how they act, so musical cues can't be predicted in advance. But iMuse allowed the composers to test out numerous transitions, mix effects, and judge how they might sound as parameters based on the players' actions." (Smith 2008: 65)

iMuse was also crucial to adapting the scoring techniques from the *Indiana Jones* and *Star Wars* films for several video games based upon the franchises. The adventure game *Indiana Jones and the Fate of Atlantis* (1992) presented a self-contained fourth part to the popular film series sixteen years before the actual film sequel *Empire of the Crystal Skull* (2008) was released. The soundtrack included the well-known *Raiders March* by John Williams and developed its own themes composed exclusively for the game. The cinematic role model was referred to in two different ways: first in an ironic way, for example, when Indy is accompanied by his heroic theme even while searching the archive of his university during the opening credits, and, second, in applying the compositional structure from the film to action sequences as well as to the discovery of hidden labyrinths and clues leading to the sunken continent of Atlantis.

In the first *Star Wars* games *X-Wing* (1992) and *Tie Fighter* (1994), with flight and combat simulators offering a parallel story to the first trilogy (1977-1983), the cinematic soundtrack patterns were adapted into a ludic context. Besides the famous fanfare establishing the diegetic space of a galaxy far, far away, the musical cues alerted the player when enemy starfighters attacked. This kind of musical sound brand allows an orientation based upon the knowledge gained from watching the films and, at the same time, it signals the spreading of the franchise across several media platforms, each contributing to the collective world-building created by Lucas and other authors and game designers. Game scholar and media researcher Michael Nitsche comments on the different functions of the score in the *Star Wars* games:

> "Players familiar with the film expect a certain fictional world to be connected to this soundtrack and are preconditioned to read the game as such. This expectation transcends media and can be used for dramatic purposes in the fictional virtual worlds. It also indicates the value of music for the creation of a context or atmosphere." (Nitsche 2008: 133)

In the game *Tie Fighter,* the conventions established by the *Star Wars* soundtracks are used for an interesting inversion of the films' narrative perspective. After the first bars, the heroic main theme switches to the threatening *Imperial March*. The accompanying text of the opening scrawl no longer informs the audience about the courageous fights of the rebel alliance against the evil empire, but it reads like an official announcement by the Emperor's press office referring to Luke Skywalker

and his allies as mere terrorists destabilizing the established government. In comparison to strategy games like *Star Wars – Empire at War* (2006), in which the soundtrack provides one of the closest links to the films with the gameplay being not really related to the fictional world, the score in *Tie Fighter* not only provides the acoustic trademark, but it also develops an emotional quality of its own.

The Midi-compositions arranged by iMuse set the path for more elaborated scores that were enabled by the successful introduction of the CD-Rom and its storage capacities in the early 1990s. *Star Wars* games like *Rebel Assault* (1993), *Shadows of the Empire* (1996) and *The Force Unleashed* (2008) combined cues from the films with new material written exclusively for the games. During the cutscenes the scoring is very similar to the techniques found in the films. The musical reference to the films also helps to establish connections between plot developments from the two *Star Wars* trilogies and the stories from the games that take place before, between and after the events depicted on the movie screen. *The Force Unleashed* covers events during the twenty years between *Episode III* and *IV*, depicting the birth of the rebel alliance as the result of a failed coup d'état by Darth Vader. In its tutorial level, which introduces Darth Vader's secret apprentice, the inclusion of the melodramatic *Anakin's Betrayal* from *Star Wars III – Revenge of the Sith* (2005) commemorates Anakin's turn to the dark side and puts the following scenes of Vader becoming a mean foster father to the son of a slain Jedi in relation to the events of the film. In comparison to other transmedia franchises such as *James Bond* or *Ghostbusters,* the score in many *Star Wars* games not only connects film and video game, but the soundtrack compositions also take on a life of their own.

The points of reference taken from the film soundtracks make up the foundation upon which dynamic symphonies are built. These suit the interactive non-linear parts of a game as well as the narrative architecture of an epic journey. Especially in regard to the genre of role-playing games (RPG) such as *Star Wars – Knights of the Old Republic* (2003), the influence of epic cinematic scores can be observed. During the tutorial in which the protagonist has to escape from a run-over Jedi space ship, the soundtrack and the level structure are reminiscent of the opening sequence of *Star Wars Episode IV – A New Hope* (1977), in which the dynamic droid duo C3PO and R2D2 escape from Princess Leia's rebel cruiser, Tantive IV, which has been boarded by Imperial troops. Later in the game, when the player explores the urban planet Taris, the soundtrack turns into a rather atmospheric ambient piece. But as soon as the avatar gets into a fight or makes a decision resulting in his or her further affiliation towards the light or the dark side of the force, a musical cue signals the changed situation. The non-linear main section of the game offers independent themes for the several supporting characters that can be chosen to accompany the protagonist as well as thematic melodies introducing the different planets. Comparable to the iMuse system, but more appropriate than the Mickey-Mousing

of permanent musical illustrations, the soundtrack gets constructed in relation to the sort of gameplay chosen by the user.

In establishing the fictional world and the fantasy-sci-fi-genre setting of the *Star Wars* universe, the use of the musical cues can be compared to cinematic conventions. Nevertheless, at the same time, the composition is not defined by a fixed sequence of events, but it has to change dynamically in relation to the actions performed by the player. As in the films, the soundtrack transports the emotional journey of the main character, but contrary to the former, the protagonist's fate is decided by interactions according to the game rules. The soundtrack cues which depend on the user's decisions are arranged comparable to the branching structure of the story, which includes several possible outcomes. The same pattern for scoring play can be found in other sophisticated variations in other productions by the studio Bioware, which produced *Knights of the Old Republic*. In games like *Mass Effect* (2007), *Jade Empire* (2005) and *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009), the soundtrack compositions employ a full orchestra. They no longer refer to cinematic predecessors, but create musical gameworlds of their own which develop innovative approaches towards the representation of Chinese wu xia legends (*Jade Empire*) or of the ambivalent settings of Dark Fantasy (*Dragon Age: Origins*).

The independent artistic value of game soundtracks is not only demonstrated in regard to the complexity of the non-linear and completely stringent scores, but also in their emotional development. The conventions created by RPG soundtracks and their influence on game design standards also become apparent when considering their parodies. The inversion of parody requires that the expectations associated with a genre in regard to setting and gameplay have been clearly enough established, otherwise the audience would not get the joke when the epic fanfares of heroic fantasy are replaced by easy listening-grooves.

4 Performance and Parody

The conventions established by the dynamic symphonies of epic RPGs have become so recognizable that, like every set of genre rules, they provide a welcome target for satire and parody. The British comedy ensemble Monty Python deconstructed the heroism displayed in classic adventure films by showing the Knights of the Round Table imitating the sound of horseshoes by clapping coconuts while the musical non-diegetic soundtrack employs every cliché imaginable. Continuing in the same spirit, *Monkey Island* designer Ron Gilbert spoofed the gameplay, dramaturgy and aesthetics of action-orientated RPGs like *Diablo II* (2000) in the cartoon epic *Deathspank* (2010). In best Mickey-Mousing tradition, every move of the self-absorbed and arrogant hero is underscored by a surf soundtrack reminiscent of the films by Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodriguez, which are not really associated

with the setting of a fantasy RPG. The game design offers precise ironic sideswipes against the stereotypes of the genre: as a replacement postman, the naïve protagonist has to deliver dozens of packages echoing the numerous errand-boy quests in MMORPGs such as *World of Warcraft* and acts as a surrogate daddy to a spoiled orphan who demands a cell phone and a pony, and, in the second installment *Thongs of Virtue* (2010), Deathspank even encounters the end of the game world by entering the developer's studio before invading the North Pole and killing the corrupted Santa Claus in the final battle. This satirical approach is reflected by the soundtrack. When Deathspank uses a special weapon enabling him to spin around like a Tasmanian devil, the score employs an upbeat melody reminiscent of traditional cartoon scores. On overcoming a pirate ship in the final act of *Thongs of Virtue,* the soundtrack changes to an easy-listening melody, accompanied by the singing hero undoing any idea of epic discovery. During the game itself, the soundtrack echoes the ironic attitude by ignoring the epic musical style of RPG scores completely and offering easy-listening music instead. On the other hand, during cutscenes, the comical effect is achieved by a demonstrative compliance of the conventions of heroic fantasy. But, of course, the story about the five thongs of virtue corrupting their owners, among them a chef-de-cuisine turned fast-food manufacturer and an obsessively religious nun, turns into a parody of the similar plot from *The Lord of the Rings* that appears to be even funnier due to the solemn voice of the narrator and the pathos of the soundtrack. During the game, the artifact which elicits the protagonist's more or less heroic quest turns out to be not only a pure MacGuffin, but also a completely worthless object.

The comical effect in *Deathspank* results from the precisely arranged dysfunctions that sabotage the gameplay and aesthetics of heroic fantasy games. The player has to perform ridiculous tasks sooner or later. He or she can only decide to what degree the vain avatar participates in the deconstruction of his very own genre. For example, some ludicrous quests are optional, such as getting, for a talking tree, a lava lamp and psychedelic rock album that are located just a few steps away, or delivering business magazines between two entrepreneurs only a little less self-obsessed than the hero. The grooving score provides the appropriate soundtrack for this mocking of RPG heroics. In the tradition of movie parodies such as the films by Monty Python, Mel Brooks or Zucker-Abrahams-Zucker, it foils the conventions of the genre being mocked.

A strategy for the ironical use of music that can only be found in games leaves the parody to the performance of the player. It is no longer a given genre pattern, but an option that depends on the behaviour of the user. The popular series, *Grand Theft Auto* by Rockstar Games, includes many satirical deconstructions of the American pursuit of happiness. At the same time, despite a quite linear development of the main plot, it provides the player with the freedom to choose whether to beat the missions with the solemn grace of a Martin Scorsese film or to turn it into

the genre-carnival of a Robert Rodriguez neo-Grindhouse movie. The accompanying radio programme can be selected by the player, and even allows him or her to include MP3 tracks from his or her own collection. In *GTA – Vice City* (2002), which features reams of references to 1980s pop culture such as the cult TV series *Miami Vice* and Brian De Palma's *Scarface* (1982), the player can select the car and the soundtrack for infiltrating an opponent's cocaine factory. The traditional way to solve this mission would be to find an appropriate vehicle and to choose the tracks by *Miami Vice* composer Jan Hammer from the collection of songs featured in the game. But you can also transport your hit squad in a rather inappropriate tourist bus and select a romantic song by Roxy Music, thus providing a harsh contrast to the brutal shoot-out. In this case, the ironical use of the soundtrack is completely created by the player's performance. It is significant for the creative possibilities of video games like *GTA* that they do not force a tongue-in-cheek-attitude upon the player, but allow it as an option provided by the rules.

5 Coda

Soundtracks in video games have developed from isolated cues and theme tunes in classic arcade games, which often merged with the sound effects, to elaborate scores. In rhythm games like *Guitar Hero* or *Rock Band*, the synergy between gameplay and sound is constitutive to the gameplay itself. In other genres, such as jump'n'run / platform games, the adaptive nature of the score becomes quite obvious since many of the player's moves and the changing conditions of the game are accompanied by pre-eminent soundtrack tunes. In many aspects, this technique of scoring can be compared to classical film-score patterns like Mickey-Mousing. The introduction of better storage devices such as CD-Roms and DVDs enabled the recording of complete orchestral scores for video games, while systems like the iMuse, developed by LucasArts, provided structural devices for organizing the tracks in a seamless interactive way. The *Star Wars* games produced by LucasArts offer an interesting example in which the music from the well-known films is not only picked up by the game in order to refer to an established branding, but is further developed as a musical transmedia patchwork. In ludic fictions which offer a combination of gameplay and story performance within a fictional scenario, the soundtrack can be used to define the genre setting by referring to conventions taken from film scores and, at the same time, because of the demands established by gameplay mechanisms, it becomes dynamic. Further research on this creative interplay between musical genre and gameplay conventions, on the one hand, and the new contexts created by the input from the players, on the other hand, promises to be especially significant in the analysis of transmedia franchises and audiovisual media convergence. The differentiation in the design of game soundtracks in recent

years constitutes only an overture to the creative possibilities offered by video game genres, from the abstract art of experimental games to the dynamic orchestral symphonies in full swing featured in high budgeted RPGs.

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