Film Scores and Game Music: Links, Lacks and Looks

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Music in Film
Films have a long history of music whereas with video games, it is only since the mid 90s that new technology enabled the player to download a lot of music with the game. The fundamental issue with video game music is that it is ***open-ended***, with multiple possibilities, unlike film music, which is fundamentally ***linear***. It must be noted that sound design has long been emphasized in video games, but in films, the process is different: the music has traditionally been composed separately from the sound design. However today, because of the advance in technologies and the expectations of audiences of a certain kind of sound experience, ***music and sound design*** are becoming increasingly difficult to separate.

There are three elements that must be considered while analyzing soundtracks for films – these include film genre, style and function.

The opening of a film score usually ***sets the mood*** and gets the audience into the world of the film. For a film like *The Firm*, the opening is a jazzy, almost bluesy solo piano composition. It was gutsy of the composer Dave Grusin to do this because most studios like big orchestral scores for their big budget movies. However the piano with its quick tempo manages to convey effectively information about Tom Cruise's character—where he is in his life, his environment as well as his inner state as we see him in quickly cut shots, doing different activities around the Harvard campus. The ***beat is what holds*** the opening sequence of the film together. Cruise's character is soon going to join a law firm that will change his life completely and make it almost like a prison; that is why the music stops immediately when he reaches the environment of the firm. This is an example of how one can convey a lot even by using a very limited musical palette.

The music in *Star Trek II* that is played ***whenever the crew is seen*** aboard the Enterprise is almost like a 19th-century (Romantic) symphony:- it is full of rich writing for strings—especially the cellos—and its function is such that whenever the audience hears it and sees the Enterprise crew, they wallow in the lush romance of the music and ***empathize*** with crew members.

This is in contrast to the war-like, martial music that is used as the theme for the Klingons. This idea of using ***contrasting themes for different characters*** or groups of characters for functional purposed is a classical Hollywood tradition of music scoring. It is drawn from opera, especially the work of Wagner. The tradition arose of calling such symbolic themes ***leitmotifs***, and in today's language we can call them ***motives***, or ***guiding themes or character themes***. The idea is basically that the score has several melodies that become ***associated***, and developed, as the film goes forward, with different people, places, things.

A fine recent example of how themes can become representative of objects and ideas is found in the film *The Two Towers*. Since the film is part of a grand fantasy quest, it almost demands a Wagnerian kind of grand score—one that can connect the three films in the series. ***The Ring theme*** for example, keeps on growing in power and significance from the first film till the third.

Mission Impossible as a film is difficult to slot – it is certainly an action film, and it could also be considered almost like an action game – with the end result known because of the genre conventions and the interest being in how the film plays itself out. It could also be considered a mind game, with all its twists and turns. The

film's music reflects this and the composer Danny Elfman, who loves mixing things up (classical with pop, jazz with rock) alludes to the original Mission Impossible TV theme throughout the film, but by using different instruments, makes the film score very unique and reflective of the nature of the movie.

In a very different way, the title sequence of the film Signs is powerful and menacing. It has a complex musical form and symphonic orchestration. The music virtually drives the titles forward with its power.

Music and Sound in Video Games
Sound as Drama

The traditional use of music in games was to enhance the game experience by supplying "*ear candy*" to the visuals, or to create a *simple narrative ambience* via "theme music" for certain characters, events, etc. However, in today's games, the music can greatly enhance the gaming experience by making sound an *integral element of the gameplay*. The virtual story-making canvas can be expanded by uniquely *constructing character and drama* through audio. Like film music, the sound in video games can peak and fall into hills and valleys and sound cohesive and complete despite the fact that will not be heard in a linear fashion as in films. Thus video game sound is organic/dynamic but it can be drawn from the same cinematic notions (for instance – *suspense*) as film sound. In the video game *Metal Gear Solid*, sound is dramatically used to create *tension*. There are *musical patterns* in the game – musical cycles that rotate around different events and different levels. It is like a simulator of film music – a kind of 'Tom Clancy movie music generator' that fits perfectly into the aesthetics of the game genre, which in this case is derived from the film genre that includes films like *Mission Impossible*.

Sound as Storytelling

On the other hand a game like System Shock 2 uses sound, not music, to tell the story of the game in a unique way. Games utilize sound to tell stories in unique and different ways from films. In system Shock 2 – there are *two levels of sound* happening. (The genre is that of a sci-fi war game – it is set on a space station, where 'things have gone wrong'.) The first level is the real time sound – of the player's character actually walking around and playing the game. The second level consists of a narrative of what happened in the characters' past – the recordings consist of audio objects of the past that play out even as you are playing the game in real time. What the sound achieves in this game is the possibility of telling two *stories at once – a narrative multitasking*. So the character might come across a dead body in the game's real time, and then hear the person's last words in the second level of sound. The experience is bi-sensory and multi-dimensional and it achieves an intense feeling of "virtual reality" or "emergence". [*Emergence* refers to complex patterns becoming clear in the constituent parts or behaviors of characters. The structure of the game or the relationship of the characters becomes less ambiguous.]

Sound as Space

Grand Theft Auto is one of the few games that use popular songs in games. It is surprising that such few game designers do this. The makers of *Grand Theft Auto* decided that the music of the game would be songs that people knew and remembered. They leveraged this to create the game that was about the world, set in the 1980s. So the entire *aesthetic of the game is that of the 1980s* including the game music. On top of that, as a similar strategy to the aforementioned *System Shock*, where you can hear two levels of sound, *Grand Theft Auto* too has one level which is the world of what is happening in the game, but there is also a second level that includes the entire pop culture of what

is going on in the background that is heard through the music the player can play on the in-game radio. How these **two levels interact** makes for an interesting game experience. The radio enables the player to switch channels and navigate through various types of 80s music.

Sound as Characterization

Sound as **characterization** is related to the idea of games being a spatial storytelling medium and if you can actually **locate something in space musically** and have the music being dictated by the space and by the player moving through it, it creates an intense game experience. *Silent Hill* is a horror game that creates a psychological soundscape for the player to navigate. Your character is in a town with scary things occurring all around – and when you move towards or away from places, a feeling is generated – and the **intensity** of it depends on **how close you are** to the phenomenon or place.

An Introduction to Film Sound
by Jane Knowles Marshall

Though we might think of film as an essentially visual experience, we really cannot afford to underestimate the importance of film sound. A meaningful sound track is often as complicated as the image on the screen. The entire sound track is comprised of **three essential ingredients**:

1.the human voice 2.sound effects 3.music

These three tracks must be mixed and balanced so as to produce the necessary **emphases**, which in turn create desired effects. Topics which essentially refer to the three previously mentioned tracks are discussed below. They include dialogue, synchronous and asynchronous sound, and music.

THE HUMAN VOICE: dialogue

Dialogue **authenticates** the speaker as an individual or a real person rather than the imaginary creation of a storyteller. As is the case with stage drama, dialogue serves to tell the story and expresses feelings and motivations of characters as well. Often with film characterization the audience perceives little or no difference between the character and the actor. Thus, for example: Humphrey Bogart is Sam Spade; film personality and life personality seem to merge.

When **voice texture fits the performer's physiognomy and gestures**, a whole and very realistic persona emerges. The viewer sees not an actor working at his craft, but another human being struggling with life. It is interesting to note that how dialogue is used and the very amount of dialogue used varies widely among films. For example: In the film *2001* little dialogue was evident, and most of what was used was banal. In this way the filmmaker was able to portray the "inadequacy of human responses when compared with the magnificent technology created by man] and the visual beauties of the universe."

The comedy, *Bringing Up Baby*, on the other hand, presents practically non-stop dialogue delivered at break-neck speed. This use of dialogue underscores not only the dizzy quality of the character played by Katharine Hepburn, but also the absurd duality of the film itself and thus its humor. The audience is bounced from gag to gag and conversation to conversation; there is no time for audience reflection. The audience is caught up in a whirlwind of activity in simply managing to follow the plot. This film presents pure **escapism** – largely due to its frenetic dialogue.

SOUND EFFECTS: synchronous and asynchronous sounds

Synchronous sounds are those sounds, which are **synchronized or matched with what is viewed**. For example: If the film portrays a character playing the piano, the sounds of the piano are projected.

Synchronous sounds contribute to the **realism** of film and also help to create a particular **atmosphere**. For example: The "click" of a door being opened may simply serve to convince the audience that the image portrayed is real, and the audience–may only subconsciously note the expected sound. However, if the "click" of an opening door is part of an ominous action such as a burglary, the sound mixer may **call attention to the "click" with an increase in volume**; this helps to engage the audience in a moment of suspense.

Asynchronous sound effects are not matched with a visible source of the sound on screen. Such sounds are included so as to provide an appropriate **emotional nuance**, and they may also add to the realism of the film. For example: A film maker might opt to include the background sound of an ambulance's siren while the foreground sound and image portrays an arguing couple. The asynchronous ambulance siren **underscores the psychic injury incurred in the argument**; at the same time the noise of the siren adds to the realism of the film by acknowledging the film's (avowed) city setting.

MUSIC: background music

Background music is used to add **emotion and rhythm** to a film. Usually not meant to be noticeable, it often provides a tone or an emotional attitude toward the story and/or the characters depicted. In addition, background music often **foreshadows** a change in mood. For example, **dissonant** music may be used in film to indicate an approaching (but not yet visible) menace or disaster.

Background music may aid viewer understanding by **linking scenes**. For example, a particular musical theme associated with an individual character or situation may be repeated at various points in a film in order to remind the audience of salient motifs or ideas.

Film sound is comprised of **conventions and innovations**. We have come to expect an acceleration of music during car chases and creaky doors in horror films. Yet, it is important to note as well that sound is often brilliantly conceived. The effects of sound are often largely subtle and often are noted by only our subconscious minds. Yet, it behooves us to foster an awareness of film sound as well as film space so as to truly appreciate a twentieth century art form, the modern film.

Designing A Movie For Sound
(excerpts)
© by Randy Thom

The biggest myth about composing and sound designing is that they are about creating great sounds. Not true, or at least not true enough.

What is Sound Design?

  You may assume that it's about fabricating neat sound effects. But that doesn't describe very accurately what Ben Burtt and Walter Murch, who invented the term, did on "Star Wars" and "Apocalypse Now" respectively. On those films they found themselves working with Directors who were not just looking for powerful sound effects to attach to a structure that was already in place. By experimenting with sound, playing with sound (and not just sound effects, but music and dialog as well) all through production and post production what Francis Coppola, Walter Murch, George Lucas, and Ben Burtt found is that sound began to **shape the picture sometimes as much as the picture shaped the sound**.

The result was very different from anything we had heard before. The films are legends, and their soundtracks changed forever the way we think about film sound.

  What passes for "great sound" in films today is too often merely loud sound. High fidelity recordings of gunshots and explosions, and well-fabricated alien creature vocalizations do not constitute great sound design. A well-orchestrated and recorded piece of musical score has minimal value if it hasn't been *integrated* into the film as a whole. Giving the actors plenty of things to say in every scene isn't necessarily doing them, their characters, or the movie a favor. Sound, musical and otherwise, has value when it is part of a continuum, when it changes over time, has dynamics, and resonates with other sound and with other sensory experiences.

  What I propose is that the way for a filmmaker to take advantage of sound is not simply to make it possible to record good sound on the set, or simply to hire a talented sound designer/composer to fabricate sounds, but rather to *design the film with sound in mind*, to allow sound's contributions to influence creative decisions in the other crafts. Films as different from "Star Wars" as "Citizen Kane," "Raging Bull," "Eraserhead," "The Elephant Man," "Never Cry Wolf" and "Once Upon A Time In The West" were thoroughly "sound designed," though no sound designer was credited on most of them.

A Thing Almost Alive
 It is a common myth that the time for filmmakers to think seriously about sound is at the end of the film making process, when the structure of the movie is already in place. After all, how is the composer to know what kind of music to write unless he/she can examine at least a rough assembly of the final product? For some films this approach is adequate. Rarely, it works amazingly well. But doesn't it seem odd that in this supposedly collaborative

medium, music and sound effects rarely have the opportunity to exert any influence on the non-sound crafts? How is the Director supposed to know how to make the film without having a plan for using music?

  A dramatic film, which really works, is, in some senses, almost alive, a complex web of elements which are interconnected, almost like living tissues, and which despite their complexity work together to present a more-or-less coherent set of behaviors. It doesn't make any sense to set up a process in which the role of one craft, sound, is simply to react, to follow, to be pre-empted from giving feedback to the system it is a part of.

Taking Sound Seriously
 My opinion is that film is definitely not a "visual medium."   I think if you look closely at and listen to a dozen or so of the movies you consider to be great, you will realize how important a role sound plays in many if not most of them. It is even a little misleading to say "a role sound plays" because in fact when a scene is really clicking, the visual and aural elements are working together so well that it is nearly impossible to distinguish them. The suggestions I'm about to make obviously do not apply to all films. There will never be a "formula" for making great movies or great movie sound. Be that as it may........

Writing For Sound
  Telling a film story, like telling any kind of story, is about creating *connections between characters, places, objects, experiences, and ideas*. You try to invent a world, which is complex, and many layered, like the real world. But unlike most of real life (which tends to be badly written and edited), in a good film a set of *themes emerge* which embody a clearly identifiable line or arc, which is the story.

  It seems to me that one element of writing for movies stands above all others in terms of making the eventual movie as "cinematic"

as possible: establishing point of view. The audience experiences the action through its identification with characters. The writing needs to lay the groundwork for setting up "point of view" before the actors, cameras, microphones, and editors come into play. Each of these can obviously enhance the element of point of view, but the script should contain the blueprint.

Let's say we are writing a story about a guy who, as a boy, loved visiting his father at the steel mill where he worked. The boy grows up and seems to be pretty happy with his life as a lawyer, far from the mill. But he has troubling, ambiguous nightmares that eventually lead him to go back to the town where he lived as a boy in an attempt to find the source of the bad dreams.

The description above doesn't say anything specific about the possible use of sound in this story, but I have chosen basic story elements, which hold vast potential for sound. First, it will be natural to tell the story more-or-less through the pov of our central character. But that's not all. A steel mill gives us a huge palette for sound. Most importantly, it is a place, which we can manipulate to produce a set of sounds which range from banal to exciting to frightening to weird to comforting to ugly to beautiful. The *place can therefore become a character, and have its own voice*, with a range of "emotions" and "moods." And the sounds of the mill can resonate with a wide variety of elements elsewhere in the story. None of this good stuff is likely to happen unless we write, shoot, and edit the story in a way that allows it to happen.

The element of dream in the story swings a door wide open to sound as a collaborator. In a dream sequence we as film makers have even more latitude than usual to modulate sound to serve our story, and to make connections between the sounds in the dream and the sounds in the world for which the dream is supplying clues. Likewise, the "time border" between the

"little boy" period and the "grown-up" period offers us lots of opportunities to compare and contrast the two worlds, and his perception of them. Over a transition from one period to the other, one or more *sounds can go through a metamorphosis*. Maybe as our guy daydreams about his childhood, the rhythmic clank of a metal shear in the mill *changes into* the click clack of the railroad car taking him back to his hometown. Any sound, in itself, only has so much intrinsic appeal or value. On the other hand, when a sound changes over time in response to elements in the larger story, its power and richness grow exponentially.

Characters Need to Have the Opportunity to Listen

When a character looks at an object, we the audience are looking at it, more-or-less through his eyes. The way he reacts to seeing the object (or doesn't react) can give us vital information about who he is and how he fits into this situation. The same is true for hearing. If there are no moments in which our character is allowed to hear the world around him, then the audience is deprived of one important dimension of HIS life.

Picture and Sound as Collaborators

Sound effects can make a scene scary and interesting as hell, but they usually need a little help from the visual end of things. For example, we may want to have a strange-sounding machine running off-camera during a scene in order to *add tension and atmosphere*. If there is at least a brief, fairly close shot of some machine, which could be making the sound, it will help me immensely to establish the sound. Over that shot we can feature the sound, placing it firmly in the minds of the audience. Then we *never have to see it again*, but every time the audience hears it, they will know what it is (even if it is played *very low under dialogue*), and they will make all the appropriate *associations*, including a sense of the geography of the place.

The contrast between a sound heard *at a distance*, and that same sound heard *close-up* can be a very powerful element. If our guy and an old friend are walking toward the mill, and they hear, from *several blocks away*, the sounds of the machines filling the neighborhood, there will be a powerful contrast when they arrive at the mill gate.

Art Direction and Sound as Collaborators

Let's say we're writing a character for a movie we're making. This guy is out of money, angry, desperate. We need, obviously, to design the place where he lives. Maybe it's a run-down apartment in the middle of a big city. The way that place looks will tell us (the audience) enormous amounts about who the character is and how he is feeling. And if we take sound into account when we do the visual design then we have the potential for *hearing through his ears this terrible place he inhabits*. Maybe water and sewage pipes are visible on the ceiling and walls. If we establish one of those pipes in a close-up it will do wonders for the sound designer's ability to create the sounds of stuff running through and vibrating all the pipes. Without seeing the pipes we can still put "pipe sounds" into the track, but it will be much more difficult to communicate to the audience what those sounds are. One close-up of a pipe, accompanied by grotesque sewage pipe sounds, is all we need to clearly tell the audience how *sonically ugly this place is*. After that, we only need to hear those sounds and audience will make the connection to the pipes without even having to show them.

It's wonderful when a movie gives you the sense that you really know the places in it. That each place is alive, has character and moods. A great actor will find ways to use the place in which he finds himself in order to reveal more about the person he plays. We need to hear the sounds that place makes in order to know it. We need to hear the actor's voice reverberating there. And when he is quiet we need to hear the way that place will be without him.

Starving The Eye, The Usefulness Of Ambiguity

Viewers/listeners are pulled into a story mainly because they are led to believe that there are *interesting questions to be answered*, and that they, the audience, may possess certain insights useful in solving the puzzle. If this is true, then it follows that a crucial element of storytelling is knowing what *not to make immediately clear*, and then devising techniques that use the camera and microphone to seduce the audience with *just enough information* to tease them into getting involved. It is as if our job is to *hang interesting little question marks in the air surrounding each scene*, or to place pieces of cake on the ground that seem to lead somewhere, though not in a straight line.

Sound may be the most powerful tool in the filmmaker's arsenal in terms of its ability to seduce. That's because "sound," as the great sound editor Alan Splet once said, "is a heart thing." *We, the audience, interpret sound with our emotions, not our intellect*.

Editing Picture With Sound In Mind

One of the many things a film editor does is to get rid of moments in the film in which "nothing" is happening. A desirable objective most of the time, but not always. The editor and director need to be able to figure out when it will be useful to linger on a shot after the dialog is finished, or before it begins. To stay around after the obvious "action" is past, so that we can listen. Of course it helps quite a bit if the scene has been shot with these *useful pauses in mind*. Into these little pauses sound can creep on it's stealthy little toes, or its clanking jackboots, to tell us something about where we have been or where we are going.

Walter Murch, film editor and sound designer, uses lots of unconventional techniques. One of them is to spend a certain period of his *picture editing time not listening to the sound at all*. He watches and edits the visual images without hearing the sync sound, which was recorded as those images were photographed. This approach can ironically be a great boon to the use of sound in the movie. If the editor can imagine the sound (musical or otherwise) which might eventually accompany a scene, rather than listen to the rough, dis-continuous, often annoying sync track, then the cutting will be more likely to leave room for those beats in which *sound other than dialog will eventually make its contribution*.

Sound's Talents
  Music, dialogue, and sound effects can each do any of the following jobs, and many more:

  * **suggest a mood, evoke a feeling**
  * **set a pace**
  * **indicate a geographical locale**
  * **indicate a historical period**
  * **clarify the plot**
  * **define a character**
  * **connect otherwise unconnected ideas, characters, places, images, or moments**
  * **heighten realism or diminish it**
  * **heighten ambiguity or diminish it**
  * **draw attention to a detail, or away**
  * **indicate changes in time**
  * **smooth otherwise abrupt changes between shots or scenes**
  * **emphasize a transition for dramatic effect**
  * **describe an acoustic space**
  * **startle or soothe**
  * **exaggerate action or mediate it**

  At any given moment in a film, sound is likely to be doing several of these things at once.

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