

Chosen Question

Question 4. From the SOUND & MOVING IMAGE research strand lectures, choose a theme, movement, or selection of artists or designers that relate to your practice or interests, and construct a 2,500-word essay. Consider primary themes, key writers, and relevant practitioners.

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How Does Sound In Games Impact The Players Emotional Response?



Introduction

In this essay, I want to look at how sound in video games impact the player's decision making and emotional reaction to the game. I will be looking at Detroit Become Human (2018) in particular as this game has heavy emotional impact and relies purely on what the player chooses.

The reason I want to analyse this game is because of the game's reliance on emotionally connecting the players to their characters; as the game and the narrative within it solely depends on what the player is thinking and feeling and because of this the game needs to work towards provoking the desired emotions such as fear, sadness, compassion, etc.

With a media such as video games, there are a lot more opportunities to provoke an emotion from its audience as opposed to film and tv media, as instead of being a passive audience member, you play an active role in the story. Because of this interactive element, the player feels a much stronger need to create a happy ending, especially in a game such as Detroit Become Human (2018) because what you choose to do and say has consequences on both the characters and story world. So when there are intense scenes with confrontation you feel more affected by the emotions in the characters because you share the same emotions.

So in games, they want to try to stir as much emotion as possible from the players, using sound and music to help achieve this goal.

Characters Sound Identity



In Detroit Become Human (2018) there are three main characters you play as; Connor, Markus and Kara. Each of these characters have three vastly different stories all taking place at the same time and space with their stories overlapping and affecting one another, and the soundtrack for the game also reflects this core gameplay element as each character has their own individual music sounds and because of this it also means that every character has their own respective composer who created each of their unique scores.

"...we focused the music on bringing emotion which is interactive and supports the characters arc."

- Aurelien Baguerre (Lead Audio)

The soundtrack perfectly reflects each character's personality, Connor's theme is very cold and robotic, Markus' is both hopeful and intense and Kara's is very dramatic and soothing. They achieved this by giving each character their own specific theme tune acting as the 'DNA' that they would then integrate into all the musical pieces for the characters soundtracks, they would even use specific instruments for characters as well as building custom made instruments in order to create completely unique sounds. For example, Nima Fakhara who was the composer for Connor's soundtrack used metal

pipes and piano strings stretched across 20ft to create a mechanic rumbling sound that they could use within the music.

However, because they all still live in the same world, there are still similarities between the three sets of music by using parallel sounds that tie them all together, such as using synthesizers and having this overall urban, technological melody which helps ground us in this futuristic setting that we are experiencing

As the studio made this decision to make each character have their own musical identities, it means that we can instantly tell who will appear in the scene purely based on the music that we hear creating an instant connection between the player and the character which can create a feeling of nervousness or excitement for what could happen next depending on how the player themselves feel towards the character's arc. It also means that because of this it allows opportunities in the game to either meet or subvert expectations depending on what reaction they want to get out of the player which can be a useful tool in creating the desired emotional response.

A great example of this idea of a character having their own individual 'sound identities' is the piece of music Peter and the Wolf (1936) where each instrument in the orchestra represents a character being told in the story and as you go through the music you instinctually recognise what character has appeared without having to think too much or remember what instruments represent who.

Using this idea creates a relationship between what you are hearing and what character is being portrayed and you develop this unconscious bond similar to Michel Chion's Audiovisual Contract from Audio-Vision (1990); where you agree that what you're hearing is what you see and isn't just noise coming out of the speakers. But in this case, what you are hearing are the characters themselves, it starts to shift in a way where the music is a key part of the character and isn't just music being played in the background but is a core element of who that character is, and this is evident throughout Detroit Become Human (2018). Using this technique is especially great in this media as it amplifies the feelings you develop for these characters which is vital as you want the players to connect and empathise with them as much as possible in order to create the biggest emotional impact possible.

Scene Analysis/Breakdown

I want to focus my analysis primarily on the opening scene with Connor as I feel like his soundtrack and scenes are particularly striking from the rest of the characters because of the emotions that come from them and are emotions that majority of the time can only be truly experienced in the form of video games.

In the very beginning of the game, the first mission you playthrough is a hostage situation and the goal is to calm the deviant android and save the girl. The first thing you experience is this pinging sound and an electronic beeping and it fades in to reveal Connor flipping a coin and the beeping is the sound of the elevator passing each floor as it goes up the building. The sounds are very reminiscent of a heart monitor which naturally induces an uneasy feeling as sounds that remind us of heartbeats instantly connote with a feeling of stress or sickness.

As we get closer to the destination, the sounds of the coin-flipping get faster and are no longer in time with the sound of the elevator which again creates even more unease as we naturally want it to be timed together and having that slowly taken away from us removes any feeling of satisfaction. This is a great set up for the start of this mission and it encapsulates the entirety of what you feel for this entire mission within just the first couple seconds of starting.

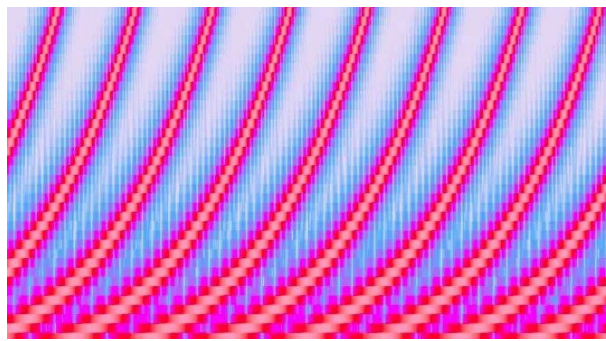


When you reach the top floor everything goes silent and there's a moment to breathe and then the music kicks in as you step out of the elevator and you begin gameplay, by using that space of silence it provides an even bigger impact when the music begins which heightens this sense of focus and lets the player get into the mindset that it's time to complete the mission. Just by doing that simple thing it puts the player in Connor's mindset; he is an android and his only goal is to complete the mission and by making the player also have this strong sense to be successful it already increases the players response as you already relate to the same ideologies as the character your playing as and this is being established within the first 30 seconds.

The music itself is fast-paced and jarring and creates a feeling of urgency which again suits this mission as you have to work fast to collect clues in order to discover what happened so you can create the best possible outcome to save the hostage, by making the music this way it helps to put more pressure on the player which can result in them making rushed choices in order to reach the hostage faster and is encouraged by the music.

Within this set of music, there are multiple elements that help create anxiety in players, there are undertones of what sound like sirens or alarms which automatically heightens the idea that something is wrong. There are also parts of the music that creates a '3D audio' effect where it sounds like the music is rotating around you or is going from one ear to the other, this represents the idea of trying to calculate and figure out what has happened, similar to the expression of the gears turning in your head; which further allows the player to get into Connor's mentality as the music reflects what Connor is thinking and feeling. Using audio like this also immerses the player deeper into this world as the sound is happening all around them and is not just coming from one spot. On top of all this the music almost has similar effects of what sounds to be a shepard's tone, which is an auditory illusion and is perfect for creating tension because of the never-ending tone that never provides any relief.

"...there is a high-pitched tone, a middle-pitched tone, and a low-pitched tone that all rise in pitch until they loop back to the start. By the end of the track, the highest-pitched tone has become quiet, the middle-pitched tone stays loud, and the low-pitched tone has become louder. Because you can always hear two tones rising in pitch, your brain skips the loop and believes the tone is infinitely ascending."



Put all these different factors together into a single musical piece and the result is anxiety-inducing and accompany that with the fact that your frantically trying piece clues together in order to come up with the best solution to save this little girl, you are establishing a high emotional response and shock from the player and wouldn't be accomplished if it wasn't for the soundtrack.

Aside from the music helping to create feelings of apprehension and to put the player into the character's headspace, there are a few other things of note to take in interest in that help allow the player to connect further with the characters.

One of these things is that the game uses internal sound which is when there are only certain noises that can only be heard by the character such as internal dialogue, so this excludes other characters in the environment but can be very subjective as it depends on how the audience interprets it. For example, you discover a pair of headphones playing music that reveals that the hostage wasn't able to hear the initial attack, this is diegetic sound as all the other characters would be able to hear this inside the scene.



However when you are analysing clues there are various whirring and digital sounds and whereas this could be thought of as just adding more interest in the game so your constantly receiving both visual and audio feedback, I believe this is an instance of internal sound that acts as an additional way of letting the player connect with Connor more. When you enter this analysis mode all the other sounds around you become muffled and time slows down while you examine the clues which enhances this concept

that you are in the moment focusing and ignoring everything else around you which fits in with Connor as a character, so it would make sense that Connor can also hear these sounds along with the player.

At the finale of this mission when you make it outside to start talking to the hostage the sounds are all building into this crescendo moment. There is an onslaught of both the music, helicopter whirring, the hostage screaming and both Connor and the deviant android shouting on top of all the noise just to be able to talk and hear each other. With all these different factors building up, it reflects the chaotic emotions that the player and the characters have, there is an overwhelming feeling that there is too much going on at once.

At one point during the conversation the deviant android asks you to get rid of the helicopter in order to stop the constant white noise the helicopter is producing so that they are able to think more clearly, which again subconsciously is reflected back into the player; and depending on what you choose, if you let the helicopter leave it allows both you and the characters to think clearer as there's less noise going on which results in the deviant android calming down but if you refuse and the helicopter remains it increases the stress level of the deviant.

Something as simple as this helps to deepen this ideology that instead of watching characters and watching their reactions as you would in a film; instead you are the character and you share the same emotions towards the situation, which means you are a lot more empathetic and invested in the story as you are the one in control of what you say and do which makes it a lot more personal and the sounds help to accomplish this.



Another reason the sound in games creates a more personalized experience in comparison to film and tv is that depending on the outcome of the situation or what choices you made that led up to this moment the music changes and flows along with what you do. It is necessary for the music to have different tones and pitches depending on what happens as it needs to fit the mood being shown in the scene and needs to encourage the player to have the appropriate emotional response.

Depending on the outcome of this hostage scene, if you failed or you were successful and whether you died or survived the music will accompany these alternative endings. If the deviant android shoots Connor, all sounds come to a halt and the only prominent sound is the girl screaming, and the music switches to a deep bass and is slowed down eliciting from the player a feeling of dread and regret. If you are successful in your mission however and you shoot the deviant, the music instead changes tone and picks up the pace as Connor walks away giving a feeling of pride and accomplishment.

Conclusion

In conclusion sound and music is an essential part as without the sound, the visuals would not produce the same feelings in the player, and with Detroit Become Human(2018) it is one of the most important things to make the player have heightened emotions as you become more attached and invested in the story unfolding before you. The way sound is used to heighten emotions in players is by forcing you to connect with the characters and essentially become the characters in the story by having the noises and music reflect what they are thinking and feeling which inadvertently is what the player also thinks and feels, along with the soundtrack pushing you to feel the required emotion throughout the game.

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