

Chapter 4

Diegetic Music: New Interactive Experiences

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ABSTRACT

Music which is performed within the scene is called diegetic. In practical and theoretical literature on music in audio-visual media, diegetic music is usually treated as a side issue, a sound effect-like occurrence, just a prop of the soundscape that sounds like music. A detailed consideration reveals a lot more. The aim of this chapter is to uncover the abundance of diegetic occurrences of music, the variety of functions they fulfill, and issues of their implementation. The role of diegetic music gains importance in interactive media as the medium allows a nonlinearity and controllability as never before. As a diegetic manifestation, music can be experienced in a way that was previously unthinkable except, perhaps, for musicians.

INTRODUCTION

Dealing with music in audio-visual media leads the researcher traditionally to its non-diegetic occurrence first, that is offstage music. Its interplay with the visuals and its special perceptual circumstances have been largely discovered and analyzed by practitioners, musicologists, and psychologists. Its role is mostly an accompanying, annotating one that emotionalises elements of the plot or

scene, associates contextual information, and thus enhances understanding (Wingstedt, 2008).

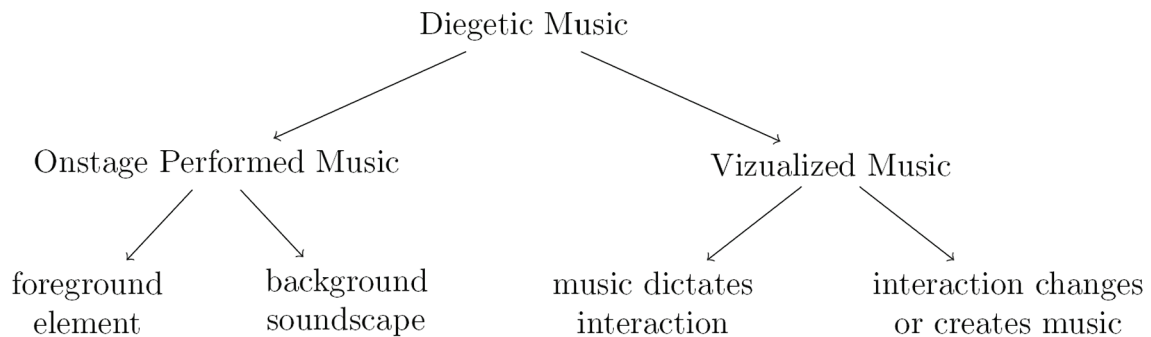
Comparatively little attention has been given to diegetic music. As its source is part of the scene's interior (for example, a performing musician, a music box, a car radio), it is audible from within the scene. Hence, it can exert an influence on the plot and acting and is frequently even an inherent part of the scenic action. In interactive media it can even become an object the user might be able to directly interact with.

This chapter addresses the practical and aesthetic issues of diegetic music. It clarifies

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Diegetic Music

Figure 1. A systematic overview of all forms of diegetic music



differences to non-diegetic music regarding inner-musical properties, its functional use, and its staging and implementation. Particular attention is paid to interactivity aspects that hold a variety of new opportunities and challenges in store, especially in the context of modern computer games technology. This directly results in concrete design guidelines. These show that adequate staging of diegetic music requires more than its playback. The problem area comprises the simulation of room acoustics and sound radiation, the generation of expressive performances of a given compositional material, even its creation and variation in real-time, amongst others.

The complexity and breadth of these issues might discourage developers. The effort seems too expensive for a commercial product and is barely invested. Game development companies usually have no resources available to conduct research in either of these fields. But in most cases, this is not even necessary. Previous and recent research in audio signal processing and computer music created many tools, algorithms, and systems. Even if not developed for the particular circumstances of diegetic music, they approach or even solve similar problems. It is a further aim of this chapter to uncover this fallow potential. This may inspire developers to make new user experiences possible, beyond the limitations of an excluded passive listener.

The key to this is interactivity. However, different types of games allow different modes of interaction. Different approaches to diegetic music follow, accordingly. To lay a solid conceptual basis, this chapter also introduces a more differentiating typology of diegetic music and its subspecies, which is outlined in Figure 1. The respective sections expand on the different types. Before that, a brief historical background and a clarification of the terminology used are provided.

Where Does It Come From?

Early examples of diegetic music can be found in classic theatre and opera works, for instance, the ball music in the finale of W.A. Mozart's *Don Giovanni* (KV 527, premiered in 1787) which is performed onstage, not from the orchestra pit. Placing musicians onstage next to the actors may hamper dialog comprehensibility. To prevent such conflicts, diegetic music was often used as a foreground element that replaces speech. It wasn't until radio plays and sound films offered more flexible mixing possibilities that diegetic music grew to be more relevant for background soundscape design (for example, bar music, street musicians). Such background features could now be set on a significantly lower sound level to facilitate focusing the audience's attention on the spoken text, comparable to the well-known *Cocktail Party Effect* (Arons, 1992).

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