

## Chapter 5

# Time for New Terminology? Diegetic and Non-Diegetic Sounds in Computer Games Revisited

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter is a critical discussion of the use of the concepts diegetic and non-diegetic in connection with computer game sound. These terms are problematic because they do not take into account the functional aspects of sound and indicate how gameworlds differ from traditional fictional worlds. The aims of the chapter are to re-evaluate earlier attempts at adapting this terminology to games and to present an alternative model of conceptualizing the spatial properties of game sound with respect to the gameworld.*

### INTRODUCTION

Two concepts from narrative theory that often appears in discussions about game sound are *diegetic* and *non-diegetic* (Collins, 2007, 2008; Ekman 2005; Grimshaw 2008; Grimshaw & Schott 2007; Jørgensen 2007b, 2008; Stockburger, 2003; Whalen, 2004). The terms are used in film theory to separate elements that can be said to be part of the depicted fictional world from elements that the fictional characters cannot see or hear and which should be considered non-existent in the fictional world (Bordwell, 1986; Bordwell & Thompson, 1997). According to this approach, dialogue be-

tween two characters is seen as diegetic, while background score music is seen as non-diegetic. In connection with game sound, a likely adaptation of these concepts would describe the response “More work?” from an orc peon unit in the real-time strategy game *Warcraft 3* (Blizzard, 2002) as an example of a *diegetic sound* since it is spoken by a character within the gameworld. Music that signals approaching enemies in the role-playing game *Dragon Age: Origins* (Bioware, 2009) would according to this view be an example of *non-diegetic sound* since the music is not being played from a source within the game universe.

However, when analyzing the examples more closely, we see that using these terms in computer games is confusing and at best inaccurate. As a

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response to a player command, the “More work?” question has an ambiguous status in relation to the gameworld: If we ask ourselves who the peon is talking to, it appears to address the player, who is not represented as a character in the gameworld, but manages the troops and base from the outside of the gameworld. The warning music heard in the role-playing game is also ambiguous. Although there is nothing to suggest that the music is being played by an orchestra in the wilderness, there is no doubt that the music influences the players’ tactical decisions and therefore has direct consequence for the player-characters’ actions and the progression of the game. The confusion comes into being because game sound has a double status in which it provides usability information to the player at the same time as it has been stylized to fit the depicted fictional world. It works as support for gameplay, while also providing a sense of presence in the gameworld (Jørgensen, 2007a, 2009; Nacke & Grimshaw, 2011). From this point of view, diegetic and non-diegetic sounds tend to blend systematically in games, thereby creating additional levels of communication compared to the traditional diegetic versus non-diegetic divide.

Although sound may be categorized and discussed in several ways, the diegetic versus non-diegetic divide may be especially attractive for describing modern computer games since they are set in universes separate from ours and that on the surface remind one of the fictional universes of film and literature. This makes the terminology seem like an illustrative approach for describing auditory properties with respect to the represented universe in games. The concepts enable us to separate what is perceived as internal to that universe from what is perceived as external to it. However, as this chapter will argue, the concepts of diegetic and non-diegetic are developed with traditional media in mind, and are therefore confusing and misleading when attempts are made to uncritically transfer them to computer games. First, the participatory role of the player is not accounted for in this theory, which

means that the functional aspects of game sound therefore disappears when applying diegetic and non-diegetic to game sound. Also, gameworlds cannot be appropriately described by these terms since they are designed for different purposes than traditional fictional worlds. Since gameworlds invite users to enter their domains as players, they are qualitatively different from other fictional worlds, and this makes the traditional diegetic versus non-diegetic divide problematic when applied to computer games. While the aim of the chapter is to evaluate the use of the two concepts in relation to game sound, the chapter will also be a revision of my earlier theory on *transdiegetic sounds* (Jørgensen, 2008b). I will discuss my own and other attempts at adapting the concepts to game sound, based on the original meaning and uses of *diegesis*, and present an alternative way of conceptualizing the phenomena in relation to game sound. The main argument of this chapter rests on two principles. One is that the participatory nature of games allows the players a dual position where they are located on the outside of the gameworld but with power to reach into it. The other is that gameworlds differ from traditional fictional worlds in fundamental ways as they are worlds intended for play. This difference requires game sound to be evaluated on terms other than those used for analyzing film sound.

A short reader guide is appropriate. The chapter is organized according to principles of clarity where an overview of earlier theory creates the basis of the argument and, in order to get the most out of the chapter, it should be read from beginning to end rather than being dipped into. I will introduce the chapter with a discussion of the origin and application of diegetic and non-diegetic in traditional media before going on to present other attempts at categorizing game sound (Collins, 2007, 2008; Huiberts & van Tol, 2008; Stockburger, 2003; Whalen, 2004). Next, the chapter will review different attempts to adapt diegetic terminology to games (Galloway, 2006) and game sound (Ekman, 2005; Grimshaw,

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