

Chapter 10

Listening to Fear: A Study of Sound in Horror Computer Games

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ABSTRACT

This chapter aims to explain how sound in horror computer games works towards eliciting emotions in the gamer: namely fear and dread. More than just analyzing how the gamer produces meaning with horror game sound in relation to its overarching generic context, it will look at how the inner relations of the sonic structure of the game and the different functions of computer game sound are manipulated to create the horrific strategies of the games. This chapter will also provide theoretical background on sound, gameplay, and the reception of computer games to support my argument.

INTRODUCTION

Computer game sound is as crucial to the creation of the depicted gameworld's mood as it is in its undeniable support to gameplay. In horror computer games, this role is increased tenfold as sound becomes the engine of the gamer's immersion within the horrific universe. From the morphology of the sound event to its audio-visual and videoludic staging, sound cues provide most of the information necessary for the gamer's progression in the game and, simultaneously, supply a range of emotions from simple surprise to the

most intense terror. In horror computer games, it is not recommended that the gamer divert their attention from the various sound events, as a careful listening will allow for—or at least favour—the survival of their player character. In his thesis on the sound ecology of the first-person shooter, Mark Grimshaw (2008) underlined that in common day life, where dangers are limited, the auditory system “can operate in standby mode (or, in cognitive terminology, [the] auditory system is operating at a low level of perceptual readiness) awaiting more urgent signals as categorized by experience” (p. 10). Just as Grimshaw did about the genre at the heart of his study, I suggest that “the hostile world of the [horror computer] game

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requires a high level of perceptual readiness in regard to sound” (p. 10). The level of attention required *vis-à-vis* sound must be increased all the more so as computer game environments are often designed to limit the visual perception of the gamer. Whether it is by means of a constraining virtual camera system (Taylor, 2005), by using stylistic effect such as the thick fog shrouding the streets of *Silent Hill* (Konami, 1999), or by drastically reducing sources of light, game designers have, through time, found a variety of ways to force the gamer to utilise their ears in order to help their player character survive in the nightmarish worlds in which they play.

To fully comprehend how horror computer games manage to frighten the gamer, one must understand how sound is structured, as well as be aware of how the gamer makes meaning with the information the sounds carry. From this point, many questions arise. What are the implications of the generic context on the reception of the sounds in horror computer games? On what basis should we approach the sound structure of those games? How does this structure allow for the *mise en scène* of the dreadful elements or horrific strategies of the games? What are the basic functions of horror computer game sounds and, once again, how can the game work on these functions to create a sentiment of fear and dread in the gamer?

As it will be further explored in the next sections of this chapter, I make the hypothesis that sound in computer games should be approached directly in regard to its purposes towards gameplay. After all, gameplay is what mainly distinguishes computer games from their linear audio-visual counterparts: the main difference between computer games and films being situated in the participatory and interactive nature of the videoludic medium. Therefore, it is mainly through a study of gameplay that true understanding of the role of game sound can be achieved. In this perspective, I also suggest that sound should be addressed in a way that is both accessible to designers and the most common gamer. In order to do so, I firmly

believe that adopting a position that emphasizes reception issues of gameplay can provide a more productive model than one that would be grounded directly in the production aspects (implementation and programming) of game sound.

Overall, this text aims at explaining how horror game sound works in a way to elicit specific emotions in the gamer. Adopting a gamer- and gameplay-centric perspective, it wishes to highlight how the inner relations of the sonic structure and the different functions of game sound are used to create strategies based on the micro events and on the overarching generic context that regulates these events. With examples borrowed from the *Alone in the Dark* (I-motion, 1992-1995, Infogrames, 2001 & Atari, 2008), *Resident Evil* (Capcom, 1996-2009) and *Silent Hill* (Konami, 1999-2008) series, and from the computer game *Dead Space* (Electronic Arts, 2008), this paper will also try to demonstrate how the notion of genre, instead of being merely a tool to classify games, rather impacts on the expectations of the gamer and therefore structures the way they organize and make meaning of sound in relation to the game context.¹

APPROACHING HORROR COMPUTER GAME SOUND

Before we try to understand what purposes sounds serve in horror computer games and how they contribute in generating fear, it is essential to take a look at the numerous factors which condition the gamer’s journey and influence their listening through their gaming sessions.

The Horizon of Expectations

In her book *Game Sound: An Introduction to the History, Theory, and Practice of Video Games*, Karen Collins (2008) noted that “game [sound] has been significantly affected by the nature of technology [...] and by the nature of the industry”

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