

Chapter 18

New Wine in New Skins: Sketching the Future of Game Sound Design

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ABSTRACT

With the disappearance of technological constraints and their often predetermining impact upon design, computer game sound has the opportunity to develop into many innovative and unique aesthetic directions. This article reflects upon related discourse and design practice, which seems strongly influenced by mainstream Hollywood film and by a striving for naturalism and the simulation of “reality.” It is proposed that this constitutes an unnecessary limitation to the development and maturation of game sound. Interestingly, a closer understanding of aesthetic innovations of film sound, in particular in relation to what can be termed “liberation of the soundtrack,” can indicate thus far unexploited potential for game sound. Combined with recent innovations in creative practice and technology, they serve as inspiration to propose new directions for game sound design, taking into account the inherent qualities of the interactive medium and the technological and aesthetic possibilities associated with it.

INTRODUCTION: THE CREATIVE DEAD-END IN GAME SOUND DESIGN

Growing up and maturing is usually associated with acquiring independence from one’s parents and leaving the family home, to follow one’s own, autonomous destiny. This archetypal human narrative could well be applied to game sound,

which, having matured significantly over the last two decades, in many ways still seems to live with its parents, Mrs. Film Sound and Mr. Realism. This manifests itself in both game design practice and technological developments, as well as in the discourse that permeates it all. At present, like a child, the game sound has a limited horizon and is oriented very much to its “parents”.

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Just a Chip off the Old Block?

You might suggest this is not a problem and, perhaps, even quite a normal situation. In fact, once again using film as an example, movie makers have drawn their aesthetic points of reference upon theatre, photography, pure document, and so on. But the greatest advances within the medium occurred when it developed its very own, emancipated aesthetics. In their “Realtime Art Manifesto”, Auriea Harvey and Michaël Samyn suggest that, to develop a unique language for the real time 3D medium and to avoid imitation of any old medium, artists should: “Imitate life and not photography, or drawings, or comic strips or even old-school games” (Harvey & Samyn, 2006). This is probably overstating (after all, it is a manifesto!) but still raises an important point. I suggest that the computer game represents a young medium that still needs to find its own, autonomous identity, in particular concerning sound aesthetics.

I propose that an understanding of the driving force behind the maturing and emancipation of film sound can contribute to aesthetic innovation in game sound design. This sounds contradictory at first, but there are good reasons for this strategy. In principal, I argue that film sound undertook a similar path towards maturity. Of course, it would be misleading and naïve historicism to think that the aesthetic developments of film can be directly applied to games. An examination of the history of film sound predominately serves as point of reference, showing what basic strategies of innovation could be used. Underlying principles are carved out and translated to the realm of game sound by relating them to specific qualities of the medium. To this end, historical, theoretical, technical, cultural, and formal aspects of film sound aesthetics are investigated. Ultimately, the idea is to encourage a fresh approach to game sound design that, although inspired by film sound in some ways, actually detaches it from this heritage.

In this article I would like to contribute to a discussion which is slowly emerging and could be

labelled: How do we ensure that the wine (sound design,¹ aesthetics) we put into the new skins (the medium: computer games) is not mouldy, but fresh and fruity?

To cut a long story short: I do not have a definite answer and there probably isn't one. But a travel through the creative history of film and game sound, and through the consideration of some of the intrinsic qualities of computer-based interactive games, suggests several creative approaches that could very well be a useful contribution. The aim of the article is thus not to provide ready-made solutions, but rather to enrich an existing discourse by cross-fertilizing with other fields. Therefore, those of you who believe that the journey sometimes is the reward, please read on.

Overview

The first section will describe the state of the art in game sound design, and shall elaborate upon the reasons for the creative limitations as they stand. I will outline the recent historical developments in creative practice and technology while also taking the underlying discourse into account. I will focus on significant contributions to innovations, inspired by both the technological advances and the innovative approaches taken by mainstream commercial and independent developers.

Following this, the second section will provide an overview of relevant developments within film sound design, from the arrival of sound film to the present day. Most importantly, it will describe the new design strategies resulting from the “liberation of the soundtrack”.

The third and final section proposes directions for game sound design, which in particular build upon the underlying concepts that motivated the innovative aesthetics in game and film sound and partially proposing entirely new approaches based on the essential qualities of interactive computer games and the unique experience they provide. These propositions will also be discussed in the light of technological approaches that could be

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