

Traversing the Territory Between Diegetic and Non-diegetic: Case Studies of Musical Discovery in the *Legend of Zelda* Game Series

by Sheryl K. Murphy-Manley

Student co-authors: Conner Morgan and Michael Salinas

Sam Houston State University

mus_skm@shsu.edu

AMS-SW Conference, Fall 2013

Rice University, Houston

Traversing in the territory between diegetic and non-diegetic music in film can result in surprising uncanniness, but this ambiguous territory in videogame music is far more common. This paper will examine how this nebulous musical territory between diegetic and non-diegetic often holds special significance. In opposition to a pre-determined film product, the game world can be altered by the player, thus creating an interesting conflict when applying the traditional terms, *diegetic* and *non-diegetic*, and Kristine Jørgensen's newer term, *transdiegetic*. Diegetic music is that which is heard by the character in his world (as in a scene in a film or play). In this photo from the film *Amadeus*, the character, "Mozart" hears the music he is conducting. On the other hand, non-diegetic music is not part of the character's world, and is not heard by the characters, only by the audience.

Diegetic Sound



Non-diegetic Sound here would include the violin's musical motive being played as background music in this Hitchcock scene of *Psycho*.



In a game, since the player is more than a passive listener, the issue of categorizing the function of music becomes multi-layered. Often game music should be placed within the continuum of transdiegetic music, somewhere between the two polar opposites. Transdiegetic music is first perceived as non-diegetic, only to become, diegetic later, or vice versa. We will propose a clarification for the labeling of various levels of communication within this transdiegetic continuum, taking into account previous literature addressing the issue of categorizing types of videogame music.

Identifying motivic function and meaning isn't a new topic, and game enthusiasts are fluent in systems of leitmotifs and thematically derived motives that carry intricate meanings, historically and programmatically. I'd like to suggest a parallel thread with some well-known game players in music history that I find relevant to this discussion. Our AMS chapter member, Dr. Drew Stephen has written extensively about the historical game of the hunt and how these hunting signals were transplanted into 19th-century opera carrying with them specific meanings.¹ The game of the hunt, and all that it entailed, helped shape a number of musical artifacts in the 18th and 19th centuries. When I think in retrospect about hunting gestures, and their embedment into instrumental and stage music, carrying specific meanings, I find an interesting springboard into the conversation of game music today. These horn signals and motives possessed game information, and when the players of that hunting game heard the calls, (even in a different context such as in a symphony), meanings were not lost. Those working in the field of Ludomusicology,² a field that is quickly becoming our sister discipline, have discussed applicable ways to explore meaning and function in videogame music, pursuing meaning in motive and gesture, not too unlike the meanings carried in motives of past eras.

In addressing game music, one apparent question is whether or not the player-character in the game can "hear" the musical motive, sometimes offered as a reward, thus making the sounds, diegetic. The transdiegetic territory between the two polar perceptions, diegetic and non-diegetic, blurs when the character in the storyline *is* the player, and is capable of altering and affecting the game world and progression of the story. Players use the terms PC (for Player-Character) and NPC (for Non-Player Character) fluently as part of game discussion, and this recognition of the player's investment in the game world is integral to a discussion of terminology that might better suit game music. An additional thing to consider is the player's previous knowledge, even of games apart from the one he is playing; this knowledge plays a role in determining if the musical motives are viewed as part of the game world, or as part of a non-diegetic commentary made by the composer or game designer. In this manner, designers can reveal insider knowledge just as Haydn could reveal insider court knowledge in his instrumental music by using hunting gestures in a piece that otherwise had nothing to do with the actual game of the hunt. What if we viewed the Esterházy Court members as actual game players? The hunt motives can be perceived as diegetic for those players of the hunt. When would crossing the line between diegetic and non-diegetic music unnerve us enough to alter our perception of the space, whether it be in a film, concert, or game? Quentin Tarantino has traversed between the boundaries of diegetic and non-diegetic sound with his use of radios and TVs in his 1994 film, *Pulp Fiction*. The most obvious moment of non-diegetic sound being revealed as diegetic sound in that film, is the moment when the non-diegetic music from the beginning credits, becomes diegetic music on the radio in the film's first scene. Imagine the Esterhazy court crossing this boundary by releasing a fox into the room during a performance of Haydn's Symphony No. 31 at the moment of the hunting signal in the first few measures of the first movement. Perplexed reactions might range from delight

¹J. Drew Stephen, "The Role of the Hunt in Opera from Hiller to Wagner," Diss. University of Toronto, 2002.

²<http://www.ludomusicology.org/>

to fear. The merging of expectations of two distinct experiences, 1). being involved in the function of a hunt, and 2). being an uninvolved observer, would create a confusing perception. But, for a player-character of a videogame, this shifting between diegetic and non-diegetic becomes a common occurrence. To complicate the discussion, a player's insider knowledge that he brings to the table when digesting musical moments in a game is not something innately present in every listener, so the musical experience and perceptions vary across players. Likewise, not all who heard the hunting gestures in Haydn's instrumental music understood the full meaning and function of the motives. Knowing the hidden meanings behind a musical gesture offers the feeling of being in-the-know, and when a meaningful motive is a hidden nugget to discover, the insider knowledge becomes more significant and desirable. When motives are used in games, or series of games, they carry meaning that only players will recognize as significant, invoking a rich history of meaning from a prior game or narrative. Whether or not a player interprets game music as diegetic, or just as a commentary by the designer, depends on his knowledge. Sometimes, one game series uses another game series' tunes or motives, thus creating an even more complex, layered function. When a tune is accessed as an Easter egg, which is a surprising hidden discovery in a game, the motive is laced with further meaning of tradition and history, knowledge only shared by videogame players. This is especially true for the *Legend of Zelda* series, because the series has such a long, intricate, fictional history, and the music serves a canonical purpose helping to place events within the game into a broader context.

Example 1.

We would like to present seven examples of music from several games in the *Legend of Zelda* series and then propose a method for clarifying specific types of transdiegetic music. The first excerpt demonstrates a clear example of diegetic music used in a scene during which the player-character, Link learns to play a short descending chromatic motive on an ocarina (Link's flute) in the 1986 classic videogame, *Legend of Zelda*. The player-character, Link, can play the tune at will, allowing him to travel instantaneously to a predetermined location. Not only is the musical moment diegetic, it is participatory for Link who has the power to use the music later, which becomes a tool inside the game for the character to transport inside the gameworld. The little chromatic descending motive that interrupts the other background music is the tune we are speaking about here. [Michael Salinas created the video clips for our paper; he labeled the excerpts 1-7 at the following website. Click on the video number that corresponds to the example discussion once at the YouTube website.]

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mzn0jfkqQ1E&list=PL2pb3DMSbIo3BpmG5YLfT8zjBN8ezEPV8>

Example 2.

The next example dates from a decade later in 1998, in the game *Ocarina of Time*. Here, Link's descending chromatic motive that he learned in 1986 is explicitly used as non-diegetic music during the showing of the title screen. Although the tune is non-diegetic (and augmented here, by the way), it carries a narrative history with it, so that players understand its deeper significance from the earlier game.

Example 3.

Our third example also comes from *Ocarina of Time*. First you'll hear a melody playing on a harmonica of sorts as non-diegetic music. As Link runs under the gate in this video clip, the tune transitions to a voice. As Link further explores the ranch, he discovers that the tune's source is actually a young girl named Malon. After engaging in conversation with her she prompts Link to take out his ocarina by suggesting that they play together. She then teaches him the tune, which is Epona's song. At this point we experience transdiegetic music. The tune began as non-diegetic and traversed fully into participatory, diegetic music. Once Link learns the tune from the girl, he then "possesses" it to use in the game. She sings to him and he imitates her on his flute.

Example 4.

In our next example from *Legend of Zelda Wind Waker* from 2003, Link is searching for a character named Makar, and the only indication as to his whereabouts is a tune heard earlier in the game. This tune leads Link to Makar's location. (You'll hear the monophonic melody on a digital stringed instrument in the background at first.) Before Makar is located, the tune seems non-diegetic to the player, but eventually, through the use of visual cues and the change in volume with proximity to Makar's location, the tune is revealed to actually be diegetic being played by the character.

Example 5.

Our fifth example presents most clearly the need for new terminology. Whenever the player-character Link is approached by an enemy, even if he does not have a visual cue to the enemy's location, an audio cue used as important communication plays polyphonically over whatever non-diegetic background music is playing, alerting the player to its proximity. There is no immediate or obvious source of the audio cue, which would suggest, using the conventional terminology, that the proximity music is non-diegetic. However, the player interprets this audio cue and acts accordingly, reacting to the music as if it were diegetic, in this case a foreboding tremolo. This moment demonstrates the participatory nature of games and the function that music plays in shaping the player's actions.

Example 6.

Our sixth example is perhaps one of the most intricate in *The Legend of Zelda* series, converging diegetic, non-diegetic and transdiegetic, in a layer of historical context. In *Majora's Mask* from the year 2000, in order to complete a task, Link must perform with the remaining living members of a fictitious rock band. Link visits each musician in turn and hears them practice short arrangements of tunes that were present in older past Zelda games, including the "Cave Theme" from *A Link to the Past* (1991), and the "Dungeon Theme" and the ending credits from *The Legend of Zelda* (1986). These tunes were non-diegetic in those games. The placing of these tunes here in *Majora's Mask* is targeted for the long-time gamers of the Zelda series. In this game the tunes are Easter eggs that are meaningful for people who have grown up with these games. It is significant that these tunes were non-diegetic in the older games, and only the player heard those tunes, but now here in 2000 the tunes are diegetic so that the character also hears the music. At first (in the older games) the player and the character were separated in their

perceptions, and it is here in *Majora's Mask* that the player and character finally merge into one, breaking the 4th wall. The player and character finally listen to the tunes at the same time. Michael will be narrating this longer video clip.

Example 7.

Our last example demonstrates the notion of secret insider knowledge, particularly edifying for players of Nintendo's games. The composer and voice actor, Kazumi Totaka (b. 1967), has taken the idea of Easter eggs into an especially interesting realm. As composer for over 15 games, including the *Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening*, he has reportedly hidden his 19-note tune as an Easter egg in most of the games on which he has worked.

Totaka's Song

Kazumi Totaka



In *Link's Awakening*, he hides the tune in three places, only two of which have been found as of yet. To give you an idea about how a player might uncover an Easter egg such as this, I'll describe one place in *Link's Awakening* where Totaka's tune can be found. Richard is a character in this game; if the player goes into Richard's house, which is filled with frogs, by the way, and waits for 2 minutes and 34 seconds, the tune will appear as a reward, one second later, for the unusual action of waiting so long in one spot. To add a more complex layer of meaning, Richard's presence comes as a cameo appearance from a 1992 Japanese action, role-playing game called, *Kaeru no Tame ni Kane wa Naru* ("For the Frog the Bell Tolls"). Only experienced gamers (or at this point, just game designers) would realize this connection. At this moment in the Easter egg discovery, Totaka's tune, which is heard by the player-character functioning in the game, (making it diegetic), becomes non-diegetic for the experienced gamer as the tune connects him outside the gameworld to the technical issues of game creation, to Totaka, and to the designer. A further layer of meaning comes from the fact that this game is referencing Ernest Hemingway's famous novel, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, which is an allusion to John Donne's famous *Meditation XVII (17)*, "No Man is an Island."³ This more distant reference further removes the player from the moment in the game, which is now functioning completely as diegetic, non-diegetic, and transdiegetic, simultaneously. The placement of Totaka's tune, and the delight by players in finding it, is a particularly

³Daiker, Brandon (July 11, 2011). "How exotic! For the Frog the Bell Tolls". *N-Sider.com*.
<http://www.n-sider.com/staffview.php?staffid=11>

interesting sort of transdiegetic sound. This specialized use of music offers a place for the composer, and those with specialized knowledge of Nintendo games, to exercise their detailed understanding of videogame tradition and history, much like the members of the Esterházy Court were able to do with their understanding of the hunt and its musical signals removed from the actual game of hunting. The video excerpt begins as we are inside Richard's house. The Easter egg tune will appear shortly after a little, rhythmic burst.

Approaching game music as a “communication vehicle” might better serve academic discourse. Kristine Jørgensen discussed terminology in her 2011 Chapter, while debating her own suggestion of using the term, *transdiegetic sound*.⁴ She summarizes alternative approaches that have been proposed by videogame scholars such as Karen Collins, Alex Stockburger, Alexander Galloway, and Mark Grimshaw, and those of her own from 2011, while also presenting what others in film theory and literary theory have suggested for similar issues in their respective fields.⁵ While most of the authors she mentions suggest discontinuing the use of the terms diegetic and non-diegetic, I would like to suggest that despite the complaints lobbied at the terms when applied to game music, these two well-defined opposites should continue to be used. What *does* need to be redefined is the transdiegetic territory in between. I suggest this, because what the attempts over the years at new terminology share, is a desire to classify this transdiegetic state of music. I believe keeping the framing terms of diegetic and non-diegetic, and merely reshaping the classification of function and participatory aspects of music within the transdiegetic territory can achieve a useful method.

From the earliest discussions on game music, such as those by Alex Stockburger who was the first academic to define sounds by their use in the game environment, there has been an interest in codifying the functional role of sound. Karen Collins, one of the first to publish on game music, separated sound into two broad categories: interactive sound and adaptive sound. Another attempt in 2006, this time by Galloway, distinguished between sounds created by the player (operator) and those created by the game system (machine). Galloway described all actions as executed either “inside” or “outside” the world of “gameplay.” (Jørgensen, p. 84) Although Jørgensen concentrates on the functionality, location, and referentiality of sounds (2007), she isn't pleased with her term, *transdiegetic*, and therefore attempted in 2011 to recodify music as part of a gameworld vs. a gamespace.

⁴Mark Grimshaw, ed., *Game Sound Technology and Player Interaction: Concepts and Developments* (IGI Publications, 2010), p. 78-97.

⁵Alex Stockburger, “The Game Environment from an Auditory Perspective,” in *Proceedings of Level Up: Digital Games Research Conference*, 2003; Karen Collins: *Game Sound: An Introduction to the History, Theory, and Practice of Video Game Music and Sound Design* (MIT Press, 2008); Alexander Galloway: *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture. Electronic Mediations*, Vol. 18 (Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2006); Mark Grimshaw: *Game Sound Technology and Player Interaction: Concepts and Developments* (IGI Global Press, 2011); Kristine Jørgensen: *A Comprehensive Study of Sound in Computer Games* (Edwin Mellen Press, 2009).

Although the matter won't be settled today, I believe a categorization similar to the following will prove useful in the quest of the best solution for determining effective terminology for game music. The two polar ends of diegetic and non-diegetic are preserved in our system, and the middle territory between the two is redefined according to purpose, source, and function. Sounds within this transdiegetic territory function fluidly, often changing in purpose, source (including perceptions of source), and function as the sounds are actually taking place. What makes game music so special is that it can be functioning in one, two, or all three categories, and fluctuate in, out, and between these classifications of sound. Within these three broad categories of purpose, source, and function, there are more specific types of music or sound.

- Background music/sounds
- Sounds generated by actions of the player
- Sounds created by the player-character
- Sounds created by other characters in the game
- Instructive or guiding sounds including rewards
- Action sounds that do something (e.g. flute tune teleporting Link)
- Sounds created by the system outside of the gameworld

Gamers already have an extensive vocabulary that includes slang and acronyms, and I envision a new system of jargon that can readily refer to any type of sound in a game, taking into consideration the three broad categories.

Purpose

Source

Function

If we assign acronyms to the seven subcategories of purpose, source and function, we can have a system that demonstrates fully how game music is functioning at any given moment.

BG = Background music/sounds

PAS = Player action (sounds generated by actions of the player)

PCS = Player-character (sounds created by the player-character)

OCS = Sounds created by other characters in the game

IS = Instructive sounds or rewards

AS = Action Sounds that do something

SS = System sounds (sounds created by the system, outside the gameworld)

As an example of how such a system would work, take our third video example. When Link heard Epona's Song on the ranch being sung by Malon, the purpose of the tune was **IS (to Instruct him)**, the source of the sound was **OCS (a sound created by another character)**, and it became **PCS (Player-character sound)** and **AS (action sound)** as he learned and played the tune for himself. So, Epona's song began **IS-OCS**, and traversed into **PCS-AS**. Additionally, when Link is on the ranch, the tune even could have been perceived as background music at some point, adding **BG** to its label. Acronyms are no more complex for players than the layers of meaning behind the motives. Even if our system isn't adopted, helping to clarify the types of transdiegetic sounds through their purpose, source, and function will hopefully lead to a more fluent discourse as game music takes a place in our academic conversation.