Chapter 5
Gamers (Don’t) Fear the Reaper: Musical Intertextuality and Interference in Video Games

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ABSTRACT

Given the pervasiveness of popular music in the contemporary media landscape, it is not unusual to find the same song in multiple soundtracks. Based on theories of intertextuality and communication, this chapter seeks to define the relationship which develops between two or more narrative and/or interactive works that share the same song, and to understand the effects of such recontextualizations on the gamer’s experience. The media trajectory of Blue Öyster Cult’s “Don’t Fear the Reaper” is mapped as a network to categorize the many complex intersections between video games, films and television series which feature the song. Three video games are analyzed to propose that the song’s previous associations with other works may positively or negatively interfere with the music’s narrative and ludic functions within the game.

INTRODUCTION

As licensed popular music soundtracks have become increasingly present in video games, films and television series, it is not uncommon to find the same song featured in multiple audiovisual works. Hits from the 1960s and 1970s like “Born to Be Wild” (Steppenwolf, 1968), “In-a-gadda-da-vida” (Iron Butterfly, 1968), “Sweet Home Alabama” (Lynyrd Skynyrd, 1974), and “One Way or Another” (Blondie, 1979), among many others, live on in popular culture thanks in part to their integration in a multitude of compiled scores over the past six decades. Yet, as cases such as these abound in the contemporary media landscape, very few scholars have manifested interest in the questions this phenomenon brings to light. Is there a link to be drawn between narrative and ludic works which feature the same song? If so, is it intentional on the part of the creative instances? How can the relationship between works which “borrow” a musical piece from the vast sea of popular music be defined? And, more importantly, how can the recognition of a song in a game and the recall of its previous appearances impact the gamer’s experience?

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This chapter will propose an answer to these questions through a case study of Blue Öyster Cult’s “Don’t Fear the Reaper” (1976). The original recording, as well as numerous covers of the song, have appeared in more than 40 audiovisual works since 1978, including five video games. Besides the obvious music games (Rock Band [Harmonix Music Systems /MTV Games/Electronic Arts, 2007] and SingStar Amped [SCEE Studio London/Sony Computer Entertainment Europe, 2007]), “Don’t Fear the Reaper” can be heard in an adventure game or “interactive movie” (Ripper [Take-Two Interactive Software/ GameTek UK, 1996]), a driving game (Roadkill [Terminal Reality/Midway, 2003]), and a first-person shooter (Prey [Human Head Studios/2K Games, 2006]). The objective of the inquiry is twofold. First, since musical intertextuality has rarely been addressed in the context of video games, this chapter will need to adapt existing models of intertextuality in film and television and develop a theoretical framework which can account for multiple recontextualizations of popular songs in media. Second, the analysis will seek to uncover intersections between the different uses of the song and reflect on their consequences for the functioning of music in video games. Focusing mainly on the three games with a strong narrative component, this chapter will argue that the song’s association with previous works may interfere with its functions for gameplay, either by preventing its intended affective “message” from getting across, or by adding on to its intended effect on the player.

POPULAR MUSIC IN VIDEO GAMES

The interactive movie Ripper, the first video game to feature Blue Öyster Cult’s 1976 hit “Don’t Fear the Reaper”, was among the first generation of games to integrate original recordings of popular songs. Indeed, up until technological advancements permitted CD audio to be added to game soundtracks in the 1990s (see Collins, 2005), 8-bit and MIDI cover versions were the only way to integrate well-known popular music to the medium. It was only through melody that the player could recognize songs like Journey’s “Don’t Stop Believin’” (Escape, 1981) in the Atari 2600 action game Journey Escape (Data Age, 1982), or Michael Jackson’s “Thriller” (Thriller, 1983) in the beat ‘em up game Michael Jackson’s Moonwalker (Sega, 1990). MIDI versions the likes of Steppenwolf’s “Born to be Wild” (Steppenwolf, 1968) in the racing game Rock ‘n’ Roll Racing (Silicon & Synapse/Interplay, 1993) added more instrumental texture, but they were still instrumental versions.

From 1994 onwards, integral versions of well-known songs the likes of White Zombie’s “Thunder Kiss ‘65” (La Sexorcisto: Devil Music, Vol. 1, 1992), Aerosmith’s “Dude (Looks Like a Lady)” (Permanent Vacation, 1987) and Iron Butterfly’s “In-a-gadda-da-vida” (In-a-gadda-da-vida, 1968) could be found in games like Way of the Warrior (Naughty Dog/Universal Interactive Studio, 1994), Revolution X (Midway, 1994) and Leisure Suit Larry: Love for Sail! (Sierra On-Line, 1996), respectively. By the time “Don’t Fear the Reaper” was used in Roadkill in 2003, and then in Prey in 2006, popular songs in game soundtracks had become common ground.

As is evident with the time span covered by these examples, songs from different periods coexist in game soundtracks. The development of the “classic rock” radio format in the 1990s ensured that songs from the 1960s-1980s got as much air play as newer songs, thus rendering oldies contemporary despite their “pastness”. So too with the medium of video games: although classics like the Rolling Stones’ “Paint it Black” (Aftermath, 1966) and Creedence Clearwater Revival’s “Fortunate Son” (Willy and the Poor Boys, 1969) are sometimes used to authenticate the narrative setting of Vietnam era war games the likes of Conflict: Vietnam (Pivotal Games/Global Star Software, 2004), and Call of Duty: Black Ops