

Sounds and videogames

By Aurelio Meza

Through a basic search on Google and Worldcat I came across an article on chiptune music by Israel Márquez (curiously, it's in Spanish, meaning there seems to be an interest in this movement in Spanish-speaking academia), as well as a book called *Playing with sounds: a theory of interacting with sound and music in video games* by Karen Collins. That sounds more like my field of interest, but I'm afraid I won't finish the book before the course ends. Tomorrow I'll have a look at these texts, but for the time being I can start exploring some of the topics suggested by Darren, Stephanie, and Patrick.

First, there's the consideration about indexical association (one of the main features of sounds as signs in the Peircean model). As I mentioned, sounds in videogames are just as mediated and socially constructed as the ones found in an MP3 file. These sounds quickly became indexes of videogames and their cultural context. It is no wonder that music and videogame enthusiasts would want to incorporate them to their artistic creations, either by literal techniques like sampling, or by hacking platforms and hardware. I assume that not only do these enthusiasts cover tunes found in video game soundtracks, but also compose pieces of their own using these sounds as their foundation. Therefore, my initial question(s) would roughly be, How (and why) do sound artists and musicians incorporate videogame sounds to their creative work?

Second, the issue of "fidelity." While I was listening to the profs I remembered a workshop by Darsha Hewitt, where she showcased the Sideman 5000, an analog drum machine that predates the mythic Roland TR-808 by several decades (thus dramatically modifying drum machine history). She showed the Sideman's pre-recorded rhythms, among them samba, and a Brazilian participant said it did not sound like real samba at

all. Darsha mentioned how pre-determined rhythms in later musical devices, such as the digital synthesizer Yamaha DX7, also failed at resembling the original musical styles. Another participant, a Montreal-based DJ, said these sounds are never really used by musicians, and probably they are not even used for didactic purposes (i.e., that someone learns how to compose pieces in a particular style using the pre-recorded rhythms). Somewhat apologetically, she said this proved how pre-recorded sounds are part of drum box and mainstream synthesizer history. All these considerations are relevant to my interest in videogame sounds, and it makes me think of another set of questions—How are sounds and rhythms in the “real world” reproduced in a videogame environment? And, When did we start to think that pre-recorded sounds in videogames must resemble real sounds? What is “real” in sound and its perception by humans, anyway?

I feel these questions can be a good starting point, and they will obviously be refined in the next few days.