"Featuring Music From": Song, Sound, and Remix

Racquel Gonzales

I Heard it on a Video Game Radio…

What is the role of a popular song in video games? We are used to thinking of music in games as Nintendo-theme style, but gaming has long benefitted from full varieties of sound designs, scores, and soundtracks to support and enhance play. Popular albums like Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* are translated into 8-bit game sound while NES game music is remixed into techno-dance beats. Yet, games are often left out of discussions on popular music in media and this response hopes to illuminate some of the forms and functions song can have within a gaming experience.

Anyone who's played *Guitar Hero* (Harmonix 2005), *Rock Band* (Harmonix 2007), or *Dance Dance Revolution* (Konami 1998), so-called music or rhythm games, know they offer unique engagements between songs and players. Their popularity has changed music marketing and song release for many bands and artists. They blur the distinctions between music and audiovisual media because their game play requires physical interaction with music, whether dancing, singing, or "playing" these songs on instruments/controllers. The experience mixes play with performance, aural memory, and often acting as audience if you're waiting for an empty slot.

Non-diegetic game music typically functions similarly to film and TV: to set an ambient atmosphere and connect the fictional world with a time period, the latter of which exemplified by horror/first-person shooters *Bioshock* (2K Games 2007) and *Bioshock 2* (2K Games 2010), which use the Great American Songbook as soundtrack for their dystopian alternate 1960's. These pre-planned moments make players aware of the game design at work. But how can a game have diegetic music when dependent on player interactivity? The radio has become an interesting trope, foremost used to integrate players into the game worlds. *GTA IV: Liberty City* (Rock Star Games 2008) has a variety of radio stations and music to enhance the open world environment. The PC version even allows players to craft their own personal line-up on Independence FM. However, this music can also convey time: each radio station is on a loop since there are limited licensed songs, making gamers often painfully aware how long they've been playing.

While some player-activated radios merely provide background music, others function as anticipatory commentary. Meaning, game designers can use diegetic music to self-reflexively acknowledge player actions, the game world, and larger thematic issues. For the futuristic post-nuclear apocalyptic game *Fallout 3* (Bethesda 2008), radios are the only working media in existence. Here, Galaxy News Radio plays a variety of songs from the Great American Songbook to both set a retro-futuristic atmosphere and recognize the pre-war nostalgia that plagues in-game characters. When Bing Crosby's "Way Back Home" croons on a player's

wrist-tech PipBoy 3000, the lyrics "Don't know why I left the homestead, I really must confess. I'm a weary exile singing my song of loneliness" take on new meaning. Where Crosby is singing about returning from war, players have been exiled from the safety of their underground vault shelter and left to explore the empty Wasteland of former Washington D.C. on their own. Likewise, the juxtaposition between navigating the irradiated landscape occupied by violent survivors while listening to the Ink Spots' "I Don't Want to Set the World on Fire" and Cole Porter's "Anything Goes" generates ironic commentary and new meaning within this fractured world.

When considering popular music's role within games, we must consider medium-specificity: how do players interact with songs differently than characters and/or viewers with a film or TV show? We might consider musical cues because how do games get players to engage with diegetic radio music? The radio in *GTA IV* and racing game *Burnout Paradise* (Electronic Arts 2008) are automatically forcing players to switch them off. In *Fallout 3*, a game hint reveals GNR's signal is available for listening while the horror-suspense game *Alan Wake* (Microsoft Game Studios 2010) give a game achievement for listening to all radio stations.

Finally, the inclusion of video games into our conversation explores limitations beyond copyright issues and artist permission. Looking at the use of popular song in games is inherently also a study of the technology itself: exploring the evolutions of game systems, programming code, and chip technology and their limitations. Early games like *Tetris* (1984) contained recognizable songs in 8-bit music tones because the technology at the time was not equipped to play original recordings while playing. Sound cards and sound logic for PC systems and game consoles were not developed at the same speed as the games themselves. Yet when game systems and game software had the capability, the music industry wasn't always eager to feature music in this typically derided medium.

So, how might histories of media technology aid our ongoing conversation about the popular song in audiovisual media?