Strange, Funny and Heartrending: Music and Shared Experience in *Mother 3*

Liam Clark
MMus Musicology
University of Edinburgh

Abstract

This essay discusses how music in video games can create a shared experience between the player and the characters within the diegesis by using the game *Mother 3* as a case study. Doing so further explores how empathetic music is used in gameplay and narrative contexts. This is done by using Ben Winters' framework of music and shared experience with added insights from academic literature on video game music and composition. Several key points that arise include the use of leitmotif to catalyse shared experience by changing instrumentation and melodic fragmentation, encouraging interaction with music via sound battles, and the relationship between music and the state of player agency during gameplay. These points serve as a few examples of how music in video games create shared experience, especially in consideration of the ludic nature of video games.

Recommended Music to accompany this article

Sakai, Shogo, *Mother 3 Official Soundtrack*, Nintendo, 2006.

"Mom's Hometown" https://youtu.be/Ovadt5ZDwGc.

"A Railway In Our Village!" https://youtu.be/-VstzjFCljI.

"Going Alone" https://youtu.be/rB3jtIFuVjs.

"Happy Town?" https://youtu.be/pcRaDJ9HUdE.

"And Then There Were None" https://youtu.be/M5chy26ik0s.

"Battle Against The Masked Man" https://youtu.be/njUSB4Ifxg8.

"Memory of Mother" https://youtu.be/vvMm4h1D-pg.

"It's Over" https://youtu.be/Qqv2hnVX6r4.

Strange, Funny and Heartrending: Music and Shared Experience in *Mother 3*

Have you ever played a video game and felt complete empathy with a character? This question is not exclusive to the cinematic moments as it also includes the moments where we are in their shoes controlling their actions. Writings on music in visual media have accommodated for this potential for empathy such as Michel Chion's concept of "empathetic" music by appealing with our cultural codes for emotions.[1] By the means of empathetic music, the audience can be drawn in to feel the same emotions as the characters on screen. If we can hear the underscore that compels us, can we say the same for the characters? Traditionally, this is not the case considering that the underscore is considered as non-diegetic, meaning that it exists outside the world which the characters inhabit.[2] When considering empathetic music in video games, the discussion must be stretched out to accommodate for how it affects both narrative and gameplay aspects.

In this essay, I will be discussing how music in video games can create a shared experience between the player and the characters within the story world, both in narrative and gameplay contexts. To do this, I will discuss examples from Shogo Sakai's soundtrack to the Japanese role-playing game (JRPG hereafter) *Mother 3*,[3] drawing upon Ben Winters' theoretical framework of music and shared experience. Mother 3 has the player play as numerous characters throughout the story's eight chapters but primarily focuses on a boy named Lucas who experiences a series of tragic events in the early narrative caused by the game's antagonists, the Pigmask army: his mother Hinawa tragically dies while defending her sons against a cyborg drago, a

dinosaur-like creature; his twin brother Claus goes missing, after vowing to take vengeance against the drago, and his father, Flint spends years searching the wilderness searching for Claus, leaving Lucas to take care of himself.

Released on the Game Boy Advance in 2006, the game sports a 16-bit aesthetic as per the graphical limitations of the system. In terms of audio, the Game Boy Advance makes use of digital to audio converters allowing for instrumentation surpassing the programmable sound generators from the 8-bit era.[4] Featuring an expansive soundtrack — its in-game sound player consisting of 250 music cues — the game's music has a strong degree of agency that conveys the narrative to the player. Considering this with the fact that the game frequently has moments of fourth wall breaking, the game is a suitable case study of which Winters' theory can be used to unpack the examples herein.

Music, Narrative and Shared Experience

In his book *Music, Performance, and the Realities of Film*, Winters presents the central idea that music that is heard by the audience can also be heard by the characters who reside in the story world,[5] and that to imagine even in the most synchronized of moments that these characters cannot hear the music shatters this shared experience.[6] A prime example that can be discussed from the game is from a scene in chapter two which places the player in the shoes of Duster who, alongside his elderly father Wess, sets out to recover an important item from a haunted castle as part of his thief training. After navigating the castle, a cutscene occurs in which the player encounters an underground cave with a door resembling a face to which Wess requests that Duster averts his gaze. What follows is a sequence of dance manoeuvres pulled off by Wess followed by an over-the-top underscore. Following this sequence, the face bursts out in laughter revealing the path forward for the player to proceed.

It would be difficult to deny that this scene is played out for comedic value, but what if this scene was played out without the underscore? We may disconnect ourselves from the

[1] Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 8.

[2] Chion, 73.

[3] Brownie Brown, and HAL Laboratory, *Mother 3*, Kyoto, Japan: Nintendo, 2006.

[4] Karen Collins, *Game Sound: An Introduction to the History, Theory, and Practice of Video Game Music and Sound Design*, (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2008), 76.

[5] Ben Winters, *Music, Performance and the Realities of Film* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 174.

[6] Winters, 183.

ludicrousness of what we, and the door, witnessed. It should be then argued, as Winters did, that music belongs within the diegesis: it is not invisible nor inaudible, and it exists within the same space as the events we see on screen.[7] It is these ideas that establish the potential for shared experience between player and game character.

A major feature of *Mother 3*'s soundtrack is how it contributes to shared experience via the use of musical ideas known as leitmotifs. Winifred Phillips discusses this compositional device in detail in her book *A Composer's Guide to Game Music* in which they accompany elements of the narrative including characters and locations.[8] Using leitmotifs clearly and appropriately can 'attach concrete meaning to abstract musical expression' allowing the composer to use a selection of melodies to communicate different meanings to the player. [9] She continues her discussion by saying that these motifs can allow the player to "interact with in-game characters in an emotionally satisfying way" and "develop deeper sentiments about their surroundings."[10] Summers argues that video game music use just as much leitmotifs to represent locations as they do for characters.[11] On the note of musical agency, Summers continues with the argument that video game music carries more agency than film music and stated in the context of early JRPGs that audio carries the most precedence in textual delivery since, lacking audible dialogue, the music tends to be mixed at a loud volume. In turn, Summers continues, this music becomes the primary means of setting both locations and characters, more often than any other part of the game's media.[12] Despite Summers discussing a different game within the same genre, what he says accurately describes *Mother 3* as the dialogue is delivered through text only and the music is the primary means of signifying the narrative.

An example of leitmotif and shared experience can be discussed using two examples of music that are anchored to the home locations of Lucas and his family. The first example is in the prologue with the player playing as a young Lucas, waking up one morning at his grandfather's cabin and going out to play with the dragos with Claus. The first instance of the Love Theme is heard in the track "Mom's Hometown"[13] which plays

[7] Winters, 183.

[8] Winifred Phillips, *A Composer's Guide to Game Music* (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2014), 58.

[9] Phillips, 60.

[10] Phillips, 72.

[11] Tim Summers, *Understanding Video Game Music* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 162.

[12] Summers, 163-164.

[13] Shogo Sakai, "Mom's Hometown" *Mother 3*, Nintendo, 2006. https://youtu.be/Ovadt5ZDwGc.
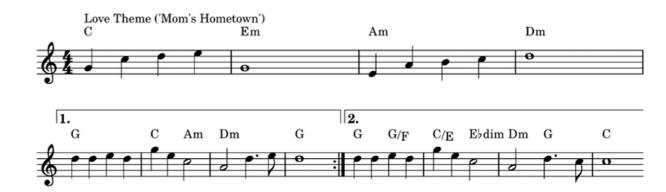
as soon as Lucas leaves the cabin. This motif is used to depict a home setting, his grandfather's remote cabin in this instance, and to anchor Lucas and his family to the motif, as we are introduced to his mother and brother. As this is a very innocent point in the storyline as we have yet to be introduced to the Pigmask army, the Love Theme appeals to the sentiment of innocence.
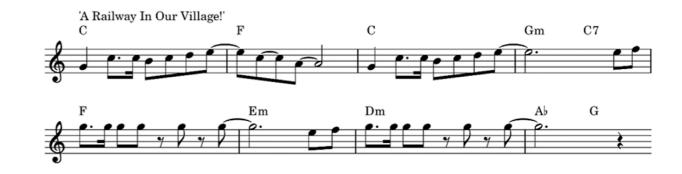
At the beginning of chapter four, set three years after the previous chapters, we are exposed to the use of "fragmentation,"[14] in which a small melodic figure from a leitmotif is taken and a new melody is composed, branching off from the end of that fragment.[15] At this point, Tazmily, the setting where the player had been inhabiting beforehand, is metropolitanised at the hands of the Pigmask army from a small humble town into one rife with modern technology such as cars and televisions. As we are introduced to this familiar setting in a different time, we are subject to a track called "A Railway In Our Village!"[16] which starts off almost identical to "Mom's Hometown" in every way: same key, same instrumentation and the same bassline which precedes the melody (Fig. 2).

[14] Phillips, *A Composer's Guide to Game Music*, 69.

[15] Phillips, 69.

[16] Shogo Sakai, "A Railway In Our Village!" *Mother 3*, Nintendo, 2006. https://youtu.be/-VstzjFCljI.

(Fig. 1: Transcription of "Mom's Hometown" and "A Railway In Our Village!")

(Fig. 2: Transcription of bassline introduction.)

It is when we hear the melody that the two pieces diverge (Fig. 1). Drawing from the first two notes of both pieces which are identical, using a perfect fourth, the player can be forgiven for being lulled into a false sense of security before hearing the fragmentation. It can be suggested therefore that "A Railway In Our Village!" can sound almost twisted especially when taken into context with the story at this point: we have seen from multiple character perspectives what the antagonists have been up to. We can especially believe this from Lucas' perspective: his home is the only building in Tazmily that is ungentrified. The antagonists are seemingly aware of this as his house has sustained a lot of suspiciously frequent lightning strikes in proximity. From this, I therefore suggest that a tighter bond is created between Lucas and us, the player, as we both know who is responsible behind the metropolitanism, as opposed to the residents who are fooled by the antagonist's veil.

The second example uses a completely different motif but changes arrangement throughout the story to deliver different contexts which is done primarily through instrumentation. Phillips writes that 'changing the instrumentation is the simplest of all thematic alterations, but can be highly effective.'[17]

The first instance that we hear this motif is in chapter one, playing as Flint, aptly named "Going Alone."[18] Playing very soon in the gameplay after Hinawa's death, this piece features a juxtaposition between on-beat synth chords and a syncopated but intertwined kick and bass which speaks of the characterization of Flint as a man who resolves to press on with his affairs, despite losing his wife the night before and only recently hearing of his son Claus' disappearance.

In chapter four, we can hear this same motif when playing as Lucas. This sound cue, "Happy Town?"[19] features the exact same melodic content against a funk instrumentation with an upbeat rhythm section which coincides with the metropolitan location that Tazmily village is becoming. Considering that we are clued into the corruption that the Pigmask army had

[17] Phillips, *A Composer's Guide to Game Music*, 67.

[18] Shogo Sakai, "Going Alone," *Mother 3*, Nintendo, 2006. https://youtu.be/rB3jtIFuVjs.

[19] Shogo Sakai, "Happy Town?" *Mother 3*, Nintendo, 2006. https://youtu.be/pcRaDJ9HUdE.

inflicted upon Tazmily as well as Lucas' household being the only ones in the village not tainted by this influence, both Lucas and the player are seeing the state of Tazmily from the same lens.

This only becomes more foregrounded as we near the end of chapter seven. Lucas returns to the shores of Tazmily only to be greeted by the track called "And Then There Were None."[20] Here, the chirpiness of "Happy Town?" is absent: the pop band instrumentation is far removed, and we are left with a sombre orchestral arrangement. At this point, the population of Tazmily seems to have substantially dropped, and conversing with whomever we can find reveals that the villagers have packed up and moved to the big city, another location where the Pigmask army reside. As this point, it can be suggested that we are mourning for Tazmily and what it used to be, through our own eyes, and those of Lucas and his friends.

Sound Battles: Player Agency and Shared Experience

So far, I have discussed examples that are purely narrative driven. As such, it is important to address how player agency is a contributing factor to music and shared experience. The fusion of ludic, "play-/rule-based" aspects, and narrative aspects has been suggested by Summers to be a tendency in video games,[21] and *Mother 3* is no exception. Its soundtrack also accounts for the ludic aspect since music that accompanies battles against enemies can be used to the player's advantage. Referred to in-game as a "sound battle," this is an optional feature in which the player can press a button along to the beat of the music to deal additional points of damage to the enemy. This is a feature that is unique to each character as they each have an instrument assigned to them when this quasi-rhythm game attack is in effect. For example, Duster's attacks are accompanied by bass guitar licks whereas Flint's attacks are accompanied by saxophone licks. This musical feature only solders the bond on a ludic level between us and the character that initiates the attack.

Mother 3's soundtrack contains examples of character motifs

[20] Shogo Sakai, "And Then There Were None," *Mother 3*, Nintendo, 2006. https://youtu.be/M5chy26ik0s.

[21] Summers, *Understanding Video Game Music*, 145.

overriding the music of the location that the player is in; these overrides are often a result of player agency. Take for instance the beginning of chapter four when we play as Lucas just recently out of bed. When we try to leave the house, we are shown a flashback sequence of his mother, Hinawa, telling him to get changed. When we proceed to inspect the mirror, we are shown another flashback of Hinawa combing Lucas' hair in front of the same mirror. Despite the location music still being mixed in with the audio, we can hear Hinawa's leitmotif sneaking in as we witness her combing Lucas' hair. As a result of player agency, we trigger a memory of Lucas and his mother which both he and we experience. It is a rather transient entity, music and all, that passes in and out without overstaying its welcome.

The idea of player agency and overriding music is culminated in the game's final battle, solely between Lucas and the Masked Man. At this point of the narrative, it is revealed that the Masked Man, who Lucas has seen and battled once before at the end of chapter seven, is Claus who became cybernetically augmented against his will by the Pigmask army. During the initial stage of the battle, the music is more ambient than other pieces of music — it sacrifices structure and tonality to focus on setting an ominous atmosphere — that we have experienced. Earlier battles contained music that is more rhythmically grounded meaning that you can naturally clap along to a beat that stays the same throughout, therefore making the sound battle possible. On the other hand, this music, "Battle Against The Masked Man,"[22] is a chaotic soundscape alternating between a lack of rhythm to rhythmic ideas that, even then, disconnect themselves from each other. There is a strong use of modulation in which the tonal instrumentation substantially speeds up and slows down. As a result, any sense of rhythm is unstable here. This is an interesting choice of musical direction, especially considering that any attempt to attack in the initial stage of this battle will result in a message stating that Lucas cannot bring himself to do so. I would like to suggest that this music serves to limit the agency that we have as a player, which mirror's Lucas' inability to fight his brother.

Throughout the battle, there are moments where we are

[22] Shogo Sakai, "Battle Against The Masked Man," *Mother 3*, Nintendo, 2006. https://youtu.be/njUSB4Ifxg8.

exposed to narrative exposition. Occasionally, the track "Memory of Mother"[23] sneaks in. The battle music remains constant and yet we hear something gentle and melancholic, not overriding but coexisting. By the time we get to this point in the story, we will have heard this piece of music enough times to know that it is Hinawa's motif, therefore signifying her presence calling out from beyond the aether and pleading for Claus to come to his senses. Her presence radiates her motif and vice versa. Her motif coexisting with the battle music only reinforces the idea that this music exists within the diegesis. We hear this, Lucas hears this, and we can see that even Claus hears this as he covers his ears and in the final moments of the battle looks around as if he is trying to find the source.

In the last part of the battle, I would like to echo a point earlier on in this essay that to imagine that the characters are oblivious to music breaks the shared experience. It is this part of the battle that the track "It's Over"[24] plays. It is the Love Theme, but it starts tonally obscured with the instrumentation being an eerie and airy synth. The melody is played in G major fighting against a harmony that strays away from the melody's key as well as the chord progression as heard previously in the game.. It eventually makes use of audio dissolving in which the music crossfades between instruments whilst seamlessly delivering the music.[25] This can imply a change between levels of the diegesis, such as a dream for example.[26] As the first dissolve happens, we become tonally grounded into the key of C major perhaps as a signifier that Claus is starting to awaken from his brainwashed state. From ours and Lucas' perspective, it can be suggested that the music is a sign that we are approaching the end of this nightmarish scenario. Throughout this final stretch, I would like to suggest that the music glues us into the moment emotionally, especially as the battle finally culminates in Claus finally removing his mask and inflicting mortal damage unto himself. The music dissolves to a lone electric piano playing over a drawn-out moment between Lucas and Claus finally embracing.

Conclusion

If we assume non-diegetic music to exist within the diegesis, we

[23] Shogo Sakai, "Memory of Mother," *Mother 3*, Nintendo, 2006. https://youtu.be/vvMm4h1D-pg.

[24] Shogo Sakai, "It's Over," *Mother 3*, Nintendo, 2006. https://youtu.be/Qqv2hnVX6r4.

[25] James Buhler, David Neumeyer, and Rob Deemer, *Hearing the Movies: Music and Sound in Film History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 82.

[26] Buhler, Neumeyer, and Deemer, 82.

are presented with an interesting way to look at the degree of agency that music has in creating shared experience. The leitmotif can catalyse this as we have heard in the motif used for Tazmily village. As we have heard variations of leitmotifs in moments of gameplay, playing as different characters per variation, we are further placed into their shoes both in a narrative and ludic sense. Though we have seen examples of music triggered by player agency, from the final battle, we have seen an example of music used to limit the amount of agency that the player has so that we feel equally as powerless as Lucas. Finally, we have looked at the use of audio dissolving to take the characters and ourselves in and out of dream states to encourage the player to take in the moments within the narrative. In this essay, I have only discussed shared experience in a narrowed scope. Using the JRPG as a focal point discussing both narrative and ludic contexts, there is room for more discussion on this concept in the field of ludomusicology using examples of other genres of video games and how they contribute to this concept.

Bibliography

Brownie Brown and HAL Laboratory. "Mother 3." Kyoto, Japan: Nintendo, 2006.

Buhler, James, David Neumeyer, and Rob Deemer. *Hearing the Movies: Music and Sound in Film History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Chion, Michel. *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*. Translated by Claudia Gorbman. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.

Collins, Karen. *Game Sound; An Introduction to the History, Theory, and Practice of Video Game Music and Sound Design*. Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2008.

Phillips, Winifred. *A Composer's Guide to Game Music*. Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2014.

Sakai, Shogo. "Mom's Hometown." *Mother 3*, 2006. https://youtu.be/Ovadt5ZDwGc.

——. "A Railway In Our Village!" *Mother 3*, 2006. https://youtu.be/-VstzjFCljI.

——. "Going Alone." *Mother 3*, 2006. https://youtu.be/rB3jtIFuVjs.

——. "Happy Town?" *Mother 3*, 2006. https://youtu.be/pcRaDJ9HUdE.

——. "And Then There Were None." *Mother 3*, 2006. https://youtu.be/M5chy26ik0s.

——. "Battle Against The Masked Man." *Mother 3*, 2006. https://youtu.be/njUSB4Ifxg8.

——. "Memory of Mother." *Mother 3*, 2006. https://youtu.be/vvMm4h1D-pg.

——. "It's Over." *Mother 3*, 2006. https://youtu.be/Qqv2hnVX6r4.

Summers, Tim. *Understanding Video Game Music*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

Winters, Ben. *Music, Performance and the Realities of Film*. New York: Routledge, 2014.