The Synchretic Network: Linking Music, Narrative, and Emotion in the Video Game *Journey*

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Abstract

In the 2012 video game *Journey*, music is an important component of the playing experience. This study adopts an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on narratology, semiology, and film-sound theory to examine the relationship between music, narrative, and emotion in *Journey*. After first discussing video games' interactivity in general, philosopher Dominic Lopes' theory of digital art is presented as a means of articulating the interactive aspects of *Journey*'s soundtrack. Theories set out by scholars Jochen Kleres and Michel Chion—which deal with the narrativity of emotions and audiovisual meaning, respectively—are then integrated to produce the "synchretic network": a theoretical framework for analyzing the effect of the juxtaposition of music, moving images, and an emotional response that occurs when a viewer or player engages with audiovisual art. This is followed by an analysis of a personal experience of *Journey* using the synchretic network to understand how the game's music performs narrative functions. Finally, this study reflects on the synchretic network and its potential to be broadly applicable, including in the study of other audiovisual media such as film.

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In 2012, journalist Keith Stuart summarised his view on the video game *Journey* for *The Guardian*, writing that the "responsive soundtrack by composer Austin Wintory is essentially what guides not only the emotion, but [also] the narrative. The sound is the story."[1] Indeed, Stuart's remark suggests that the interactive music in *Journey* performs important narrative and emotional functions. Designed by the American game development firm thatgamecompany, *Journey* was released globally in March, 2012, by Sony Interactive Entertainment. A defining quality of the game is that it lacks many contemporary video game conventions: *Journey* can be completed in just one to two hours, it features no dialogue, nor any information fixed on the screen to advise the player, and no substantially progress-threatening enemies. Players simply travel alone or with an online

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1. Keith Stuart, "Sound as story: Austin Wintory on *Journey* and the art of game music," *Hookshot Inc.*, last modified 1 June, 2012, http://www.hookshotinc.com/sound-as-story-austin-wintory-interview/.

companion through different environments, controlling the game's main—and only—character: an androgynous, armless humanoid dressed in a red hooded cloak which obscures the character's face. By flying and jumping across structures—akin to the gameplay of classic, two-dimensional video games like *Super Mario Bros.* (1985, Nintendo Co.)—the player's goal is to reach a mysterious mountain. However, unlike conventionally designed games such as *Super Mario*, *Journey*'s challenges do not sharply increase in difficulty, and there are no resources to obtain or lives to be lost. Players are invited to infer many details about the game-world that are never directly explained, including *Journey*'s geographical setting, its protagonist's identity, and the importance of the mountain.

The design of *Journey* foregrounds music as an important component of the playing experience, inevitably linking music to the game's broader narrative, and to its intimate, co-operative play. Composed by Austin Wintory, the soundtrack consists of two main components, the first being a mostly orchestral and thematic score featuring electronic instruments. This music is interactive, able to adapt in real-time to player input and changes in game state. Players also perform short calls that are made up of various woodwind and string instruments, birdsong, and vocal tones, all of which are generally consonant with the principal music.[2] The calls form the only means by which players can directly communicate with each other in-game, and facilitate crucial interaction between players and *Journey*'s different environments. This study demonstrates how music performs

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2. thatgamecompany, *The Road Less Travelled: The Making of Journey* (Pd Multimedia, 2012), video documentary included in *Journey: Collector's Edition*.

important narrative functions in *Journey*, as players interact and become emotionally involved with the soundtrack in a minimalist game-world without language or multiple characters.

To convey this understanding of *Journey*'s music as linked with narrative and emotion, this essay is structured in three parts. Part I discusses interactivity in video games, and outlines terminology through which the interactive aspects of the game's music can be understood. This is followed by a consideration of Jochen Kleres's theory of narrative emotions and Michel Chion's principle of "synchresis", which I integrate to form a framework for analyzing the juxtaposition of sound, image, and the player's emotional response while playing a video game.[3] This situates music within a novel theoretical schema for music in audiovisual media, that I call the synchretic network: a tripartite relation in which auditory, visual, and emotional meanings are mutually influential. I apply Lopes' theory of digital art and the synchretic network to a personal experience of *Journey* in Part II, focussing on the game's penultimate chapter—as a means of analyzing how the game's music performs narrative functions, and shedding light on the broader relationship between *Journey*'s musical, emotional, visual, and interactive dimensions. Finally, Part III explores the limitations of the synchretic network, as well as its broader applicability.

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3. Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 5.

I

Most literature on music in video games suggests that interactivity—including system responses to user input as well as different haptic, mental, and social forms of engagement—is what sets video games apart from older audiovisual media such as film and television.[4] Clearly, as a medium designed around interactivity, video games can offer multiple narratives that facilitate a wider range of user experiences. Nevertheless, many contemporary games—including *Journey*—feature only one narrative, whilst maintaining the user-experience diversity through varying degrees of control in defining the moment-to-moment action of gameplay. Dominic Lopes' distinction between "strong" and "weak" interaction provides a useful framework for understanding different levels of user control in digital art.[5] Games, Lopes argues, are strongly interactive, in the sense that player input can at least partially determine their "structures" and alter subsequent states of play.[6] Contrarily, Lopes asserts that the experience of watching a film or listening to an album is only weakly interactive, because the appreciator engages with a predetermined structure that cannot be directly influenced by

4. See Erica Kudisch, "Selected Annotated Bibliography," in *From Pac-Man to Pop Music: Interactive Audio in Games and New Media*, ed. Karen Collins (Farnham: Ashgate, 2008), 189–194, and "Bibliography," *Society for the Study of Sound and Music in Games*, accessed 6 May, 2017, https://www.sssmg.org/wp/bibliography/.

5. Lopes, "The Ontology of Interactive Art," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 35:4 (2001), 65–81.

6. Ibid., 68.

user input.[7] Video games can therefore present a singular story while being strongly interactive. Players may, for example, influence a game's structure and how its action unfolds from moment to moment, while the overarching narrative remains predefined. When player input structures a game's narrative in a strongly interactive way, game scholar Grant Tavinor points out that the story becomes "personalized;" this personalization can also extend to a game's music and broader soundscape.[8]

Despite the established theoretical discourse about player interaction with video games, questions remain. What implications might strong interactivity have for music's relationship with narrative and players' emotions? Furthermore, when players are tasked with overcoming gameplay challenges and exploring a singular narrative, to what extent can they personalize that story through strongly interactive music and gameplay? If the strongly interactive music also entails music-mediated communication, how can the relationship that arises between music, narrative, and emotion be accounted for?

Philosopher Peter Goldie suggests that emotions have an inherent narrativity, because they are "episodic and dynamic" phenomena that necessarily are part of "an unfolding sequence of actions and events, thoughts and feelings—in which the emotion itself is embedded."[9] Elaborating Goldie's theory, narratologist Jochen Kleres argues that emotions are "names of narrative

7. Lopes, "The Ontology of Interactive Art," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 35:4 (2001), 68.

8. Grant Tavinor, *The Art of Videogames* (Malden, Massachusetts: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 122.

9. Goldie, *The Emotions: A Philosophical Exploration* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2009), 13.

plots," plots which refer to specific configurations of actors, contexts, and actions that develop sequentially and constitute overall "emotion narrative" structures.[10] Therefore, narratives can be understood as inherently emotional, and emotions as having intrinsic narrativity.

Asserting that music has innate emotional narrativity in the same way, however, is more theoretically challenging. Semiologists like Jean-Jacques Nattiez argue that musical sound consists of discrete, expressively inert signs, which only become meaningful through interpretation—interpretation that is contingent on both lived experience and shared cultural "codes" such as the conventions of Western tonal music.[11] From this perspective, music cannot express emotions or perform narrative functions; rather, music's meaning and value are socially constructed. By contrast, Eero Tarasti argues that music can be thought of as fundamentally narrative because "it unfolds in time, and very often we feel that something happens in a musical piece—even if we are completely unable to verbalise our experience."[12] Nattiez's and Tarasti's conflicting arguments can be reconciled by the simpler, experiential approach of film and new media scholar Rod Munday: he suggests that it is a "discernible tendency of human beings to ascribe narrative

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10. Kleres, "Emotions and Narrative Analysis: A Methodological Approach," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 41, no. 2 (2010), 188.

11. Nattiez, *Music and Discourse: Toward a Semiology of Music*, trans. Carolyn Abbate (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 3–19, 41–68.

12. Tarasti, "Music as a Narrative Art," in *Narrative across Media: The Languages of Storytelling*, ed. Marie-Laurie Ryan, (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 283.

meaning to the most inert or abstract phenomena."[13] Music is certainly abstract, at least when contrasted with arts that tend to be explicitly representational (such as film), so musical experience is often articulated in metaphorical, narrative terms, even if it is beyond music's semiotic capacity to make explicit extra-musical references or function as a narrator.

Musical experience in the context of audiovisual media like video games is arguably guided not only by a sense of narrative and emotion, but also by the visual component; music's abstract meaning and form is explicated by the images that accompany it. This sound-image synchronism is encapsulated by Chion's principle of synchresis, which refers to the "weld" of auditory and visual meaning that is experienced by film viewers owing to the synchronicity of sounds and images.[14] Musicologists Nicholas Cook and Annabel J. Cohen elaborate synchresis by suggesting that viewers' interpretation of music's emotional meaning is also informed by simultaneously moving images. As Cook puts it in his monograph *Analysing Musical Multimedia*, "the broad expressive potential of musical sounds acquires specific meaning by virtue of alignment with words and pictures."[15] Music is therefore a "source of emotion" in film for Cohen, emotion that associates "automatically" with "the visual focus of attention

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13. Munday, "Music in Video Games," in *Music, Sound and Multimedia: From the Live to the Virtual*, ed. Jamie Sexton (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 60.

14. Chion, *Audio-Vision*, 63.

15. Cook, *Analysing Musical Multimedia* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 22.

or the implied topic of the narrative."[16] Extending this further, I suggest that, because emotions have inherent narrative structures (as Kleres's and Goldie's theories suggest), experiencing music emotionally in an audiovisual setting is to also experience music narratively, through what I call a synchresis of narrative affect. This theory aligns with Lawrence Kramer's position on musical narratology, and can be summarized by his conclusion that the narrative elements of music represent, ultimately, "forces of [emotional] meaning."[17]

In a complex audiovisual setting, multiple synchreses of narrative affect will inevitably be at play, collectively constructing a wider network of synchretic associations—or synchretic network for short—between music, moving images, and emotion. This network is represented in Figure 1, below. Each component within the synchretic network mutually informs understanding of the other elements, by virtue of their juxtaposition in an audiovisual setting such as that of a video game. Musical meaning is contingent on the narrativity of synchronous visuals and that of the player's (or viewer's) emotions, allowing music to perform narrative functions. *Journey* and its music can be analyzed through this framework—a framework that provides a theoretical basis for answering the questions raised above regarding music, narrative, and emotion, set in the context of a personal gameplay experience and the

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16. Cohen, "Music as a Source of Emotion in Film," in *Handbook of Music and Emotion: Theory, Research, Applications*, ed. Patrik N. Juslin (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 880, 889.

17. Kramer, "Musical Narratology: A Theoretical Outline," *Indiana Theory Review* 12, no. 1 (1991), 161.

strong interactivity underpinning the game's design.

Figure 1. A schematic representation of the network of synchretic associations. The double-headed arrows show a mutual association of meaning between each component in an audiovisual medium.
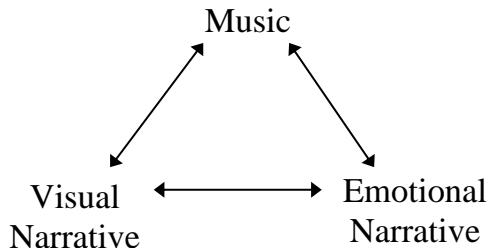
II

  Journey facilitates both free and restricted play: players determine how the game's action unfolds in a strongly interactive and therefore personal way, while the game also guides them through a singular narrative. This personalization occurs through music, primarily as players perform calls for gameplay reasons and to communicate with each other. Musical communication is not necessary for completion of the game; however, the calls nevertheless add to *Journey*'s broader soundscape and mediate players' in-game behaviour, engendering the performance of new musical conversations in an interactive feedback loop.[18] The calls

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18. This unique approach to online multiplayer gaming in *Journey*

are sonically intricate and constitute an indeterminately large collection of short pulses, whose duration varies depending on how they are performed, either through a half-second button tap or a longer, one- to two-second hold. Players therefore maintain creative agency in controlling the calls' repetition and duration, and the calls tend to harmonize with either the tonic or dominant of the currently-sounding principal music, granting consonance to players' musical contributions despite their otherwise unpredictable assembly in terms of pitch, volume, and timbre.

Players can also induce larger scale and sometimes less perceptible shifts in *Journey*'s music, as a secondary consequence of their movements through, and interactions with, the game-world. For example, the Pink Desert chapter features tonally ambiguous modular loops and synthetic textures if the player lingers in the area's southernmost environment; approaching a tower may be accompanied by the melody of a solo cello or texturally dense strings chords depending on whether the player is alone or with an online companion; more conventionally teleological, melodic (and cinematic) scoring underscores the transition between chapters when the player's freedom to explore the game-world is restricted. With each play-through of *Journey*, then, the player's experience becomes characterized by a unique soundtrack and emotional narrative.

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highlights two themes that are beyond the scope of my study, but nevertheless important in contemporary video game music studies: music as mediating (or affording) social interaction, and music as a communicative medium. See William Cheng, "Role-Playing toward a Virtual Musical Democracy," in *Sound Play: Video Games and The Musical Imagination* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 113–138, and Tim Summers, "Communication for Play," in *Understanding Video Game Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 116–142.

To understand how a personalized *Journey* soundtrack can perform narrative functions, the synchretic network can be applied to a personal experience of the game. I focus this application on the penultimate Mountain chapter, where a dramatic section of gameplay occurs before players can finally reach the mountain's peak, prompting both co-operative play and musical communication through calls. The section begins as players encounter an area patrolled by a large, flying stone Guardian which circles the area, with a spotlight shining from its singular eye. Should players be caught in that spotlight, the Guardian immediately strikes them, temporarily hindering their ability to jump and fly and therefore advance through the game. Several huts sized to comfortably fit two players are also noticeable throughout the area, clarifying the gameplay pattern: players must move between huts while the Guardian is distant to arrive safely at the passage's end.

As suggested above, players may successfully pass by the Guardian section by using their flying ability. This ability is the essence of *Journey*'s gameplay, and can be augmented as players collect more hidden symbols throughout the game-world.[19] Although this flying ability depletes through repeated use, players can restore it co-operatively through music, by performing extended calls near a companion, and somewhat inefficiently, by bringing their avatars into close proximity. Regardless of whether players use calls or physical proximity, close on-screen contact between their avatars is needed for efficient progress. This is true

19. A special white cloak which permanently improves the player's flying ability also becomes available if all the symbols are found, incentivizing multiple playthroughs of the game in order to find them.

throughout the Mountain chapter, which features a blizzard that significantly slows players' movements and necessitates proximity, deepening the camaraderie between players that is already promoted by *Journey*'s two-player mode.

I experienced music as a prominent narrative force in one memorable playthrough of the Guardian section. The synchretic network provides a means of understanding how the game's musical elements performed communicative and narrative functions, in turn enabling the success of my companion and I. As we reached the first hut, our chance to move was limited, as the Guardian was quickly approaching. Accordingly, I entered the blizzard and triggered three voice-like calls, intending to replenish my partner's flying ability and convey a message akin to "Now! Let's go!" The calls I performed acquired an urgent affect, owing to their synchronicity with the dramatic visual action and the narrativity of my emotional state. Fortunately, my companion followed, and we arrived at the next hut by moving in close proximity. My partner then performed two short flute-like calls that, juxtaposed against an increasingly dense and dissonant texture of stringed instruments, articulated the scene's broader narrative of tension and my feelings of uncertainty. As we moved again, a longer call from my companion restored my flying ability, and we successfully avoided the Guardian and reached the passage's end. In contrast to my initial urgency and uncertainty, my companion's musical gestures showed they knew the gameplay pattern, affirming the solidarity implicit in our earlier interactions and gameplay. These were synchreses of narrative affect in action: the narrative structure of both the gameplay and my emotional response influenced how I interpreted the principal soundtrack and my companion's calls, allowing the broader

soundscape to perform a narrative-communicative function. My various interpretations of the soundscape, visual narrative, and emotional narrative were mutually influential, forming a broader network of synchretic associations that characterised the gameplay experience.

III

Interactivity and emotion are at the heart of *Journey*: in its intimate co-operative gameplay*,* and in the narrative functions that its music performs. This stems from the player's ability to contribute to the visual and musical aspects of the game in an emotional and strongly interactive way. By extending Chion's principle of synchresis, I have shown how the juxtaposition of sound, image, and an emotional response in video games can be described in unorthodox theoretical terms as a synchresis of narrative affect. Application of this theory has been limited to a close reading of a single, personal experience of *Journey*'s two-player gameplay and soundtrack, which may facilitate a richer understanding of the music's relationship with narrative and emotion than might be possible through only a single-player focus. However, broader empirical investigation is still needed to both account for diverse player experiences and achieve a more comprehensive understanding of how *Journey*'s music is 'performed' by players within the game. A synchretic network analysis may be particularly rewarding when performed in a phenomenological or narrative research context, given the network's articulation of how music functions emotionally and narratively in the playing or viewing experience. Applying the synchretic network to a larger set of gameplay data may also help

to refine it as a theoretical framework, potentially leading to a widely-applicable analytical model for music in more conventionally designed video games, as well as weakly interactive audiovisual media like film.

Although it has yet to be broadly applied and grounded in empirical data, the synchretic network is important for several reasons, especially as a theoretical framework that incorporates film-sound theory, semiology, and narratology. Firstly, it facilitates a more nuanced understanding of how music can function narratively in video games, and perhaps also in film, by articulating music's narrative function in terms of both the on-screen visuals and the player's emotional response. Indeed, the potential for music to function narratively in video games has been addressed by scholars, including musicologists William Gibbons and Tim Summers.[20] However, the synchretic network acknowledges both player agency and the importance of interpretation in this process, such that it is not "the music itself," but rather music's juxtaposition with visual action and the player's narrative emotions, that enables it to perform narrative functions. The synchretic network may also offer a new lens through which music can be perceived as a narrative art, or a means of reconfiguring our understanding of audiovisual media more distantly related to video games—such as musical theatre and opera—from a different theoretical standpoint. Ultimately, this study has demonstrated how the synchretic network can be

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20. William Gibbons, "Wrap Your Troubles in Dreams: Popular Music, Narrative, and Dystopia in *Bioshock*," *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 11, no. 3 (2011), www.gamestudies.org/1103/articles/gibbons; Summers, *Understanding Video Game Music*, 121–7.

applied to understand *Journey*'s music, and how it contributes to a broader sense of narrative in the gameplay experience. As the study of music in video games continues to develop, the new triangulation of music, narrative, and emotion I have presented here may not only broaden the discourse around music in video games, but also contribute to an enriched understanding of interaction between music and play.

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