AURAL ABJECTIONS AND DANCING DYSTOPIAS:

SONIC SIGNIFIERS IN VIDEO GAME HORROR

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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For centuries, the horror genre has ensnared audiences across generations and genre lines: ballet, opera, literature, poetry, film, and, most recently, video games have all utilized the power of terror to shock, horrify, and, perhaps most disturbingly, attract. But what does fear *sound* like? This thesis will focus on that question as it explores both the twin worlds of Konami's survival-horror title *Silent Hill* and the underwater-nightmare city of Rapture in 2KGames' 2007 hit *Bioshock*. Offering a deeper understanding of the agency video game sound employs, this thesis will engage critical gender, race, and feminist theory, confront issues of social and cultural fears evoked through sound, and offer an in-depth analysis of each game's soundscape in order to discuss the ways video game soundtracks can serve as vehicles for both signifying and unpacking complicated social and political topics that prevail in modern society.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: HEARING HORROR

Think back, if you will, to the last horror film you saw or video game you played. What did you see? Was it a monster story? A monstrous human story? What colors do you remember? Was it a thriller, or just pure gore? Was the antagonist of this world? Or could it only be found on another? Now for something a little harder: What did you *hear*? Do you remember the sharp thrills of screeching violins? Or maybe the quiet tremolos of the strings? Did the hair on the back of your neck stand up straight as the reverb of the bass played almost too low to hear? Did you feel your heartrate speed to match the clear sound of the protagonist's?

Often unnoticed, music and sound design are a major factor in a horror film's capacity to shock and terrify its audience. Sometimes it works subconsciously, lulling a viewer into a false sense of security or inducing a steadily rising sense of panic. At other times, it is jaggedly apparent, screaming terror through the speakers and jarring the audience into unplanned mental and physical reaction. It creates aural and harmonic rules only to break them a few scenes later. It harnesses and entrains bodily responses of the audience in ways that visuals alone are unable. At its most intense, sound in horror is alive.

This thesis is concerned with the ways that sound design and music work as agential characters in the world of horror video games. Over the course of the work, the pages will discover the ways that the soundscape of horror video games manipulates and entrains player responses and assumptions, often without the player ever being aware of its effects. In sum, by taking a close look at two award-winning games and their

soundtracks, 2KGames' *Bioshock* (2007) and Konami's *Silent Hill* (1999), this thesis seeks to understand how sound design and music work as technologies of horror.

In order to begin our discussion, however, I believe it is best to lay a solid foundation of some traditional horror aural tropes. In his book *The Spectre of Sound: Music and Film in Television*, film theorist K. J. Donnelly describes horror music and sound cues as "a very particular musical language with very specific effects," working in much the same way traditional film music works but "perhaps as an extreme and special case."[1] He relates several typical aural devices of horror music, including the use of organ (can "display a hint of the funeral, add "a gothic edge," or give "an overwhelming ghostly ambience"), tremolo strings, *sul ponticello* cues, the "stinger" ("a physical shock in a musical blast"), and the ostinato ("provides tension through cumulative effect, along with its first cousin, the drone").[2] Donnelly writes that the use of these effects often create a sound world much more potent than the soundtrack tropes of other film genres, as it is necessary to maintain the elements of suspense and fear. For Donnelly, "[h]orror films are created as whole environments that the audience enters, equating a mental state with a sonic construct."[3]

However, a large part of horror scoring is breaking traditional rules, including those in the horror genre, in order to continue to defy listener expectation and anticipation. Peter Hutchings writes that "trying to identify what is distinctive about music in horror films requires a sense not just of how horror music changes in relation to

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[1] Donnelly, K.J. *The Spectre of Sound: Music in Film and Television*. London: BFI Publishing, 2005. 88.

[2] Ibid, 91.

[3] Ibid, 94.

the genre's history but also the extent to which horror music deviates from the more general norms and conventions of film music."[4] For many composers, scoring horror films (and video games) offers the chance to break the boundaries of traditional harmonic and formal boundaries that are necessary in others genres, as "horror music is not defined by some single, overarching stylistic feature, but by recurrent patterns of deviation that permit 'licensed transgressions' in film scoring practice."[5] Sound designs and compositions from films such as *Psycho* (1960), *Jaws* (1975), and *Suspiria* (1977), which shattered audience expectations through novel approaches to auralizing the horror of their respective worlds, have in turn become staples in the film industry, while also encouraging the same level of innovation and ingenuity in scoring horror films.

Personally, I believe that the strength of these soundtracks and the aural atmosphere they create lies in the ability to move fluidly between the two approaches. Unique to the genre, horror soundtracks are able to simultaneously recreate lasting signifiers that cue genre-specific meanings (low tremolos to signify and create suspense, shrieking violin glissandos to emulate a stabbing knife, deep bass drones to provide creepy atmostphere) while also breaking down these same aural expectations (the two note theme from *Jaws*, the overly-loud soundtrack from *Suspiria*) in order to engender specific and embodied audience responses in a way that is unique from film to film and video game to video game, allowing the audience the ability to explore and admire the myriad sonic options horror video games are allowed.

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[4] Hutchings, Peter. "Horror: music of the night: horror's soundtracks." *Sound and Music in Film and Visual Media: An Overview*. Ed. G. Harper. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2009.

[5] Tompkins, Joe. "Mellifluous Terror: The Discourse of Music and Horror Films." *A Companion to the Horror Film*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2014. 188.

A quick note before discussing the case studies specifically: despite focusing on

sounds of horror in video games, this thesis necessarily relies on the large body of both

film study and literature theory, as the study of video games and their music is still much

in its adolescence. However, there is still danger in equating or conflating video games

and film. Video game theorist Zach Whalen, in a case study based around *Silent Hill*,

describes the problems with applying film theory to video games, citing the

indeterminacy of video game music and the play structure of the game, as well as the

necessity of the music to retain excitement for long periods of time, as opposed to film's

rigidly constructed, carefully sequenced score.[6] More lenient, comparative literature

scholar and avid video game theorist Ian Bogost embraces literary theory while

simultaneously claiming that video game scholarship "need not equate literature, poetry,

or film with videogames,"[7] but instead use these available resources to better understand

the uniqueness and beauty of the video game medium. While I fully understand and will

thoroughly consider these hesitations in my own analyses of *Silent Hill* and *Bioshock*, I

believe, much in the vein of Bogost, that although a healthy skepticism of the

applicability of literature and film theory to video game analysis is necessary for good

scholarship, there is much to be gleaned from works of theory that critically evaluate

issues, such as abjection and agency, also found in video games.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

As mentioned previously, this thesis is comprised largely of two case studies of

the soundscapes of two horror video games. Both games apply very different approaches

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[6] Whalen, Zach. "Case Study: Film Music vs. Video-Game Music: The Case of Silent Hill." *Music, Sound and Multimedia: From the Live to the Virtual.* Pgs. 68-81.

[7] Bogost, Ian. *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism*. Pg. 73.

to terror and sound while simultaneously overlapping in other crucial ways, generating a wide diversity of items for discussion in relation to sound as a technology of horror.

The first case study will revolve around Konami's 1999 survival horror cult classic *Silent Hill*. As a source of popular discussion (many theorists from several different disciplines have used *Silent Hill* as their own case studies), I found the game to be the perfect vehicle for introducing the possibility of sound working as the abject, a topic largely under-researched. By utilizing a game so heavily bolstered by its large and invaluable body of existing scholarship from a variety of disciplines, I believe this thesis is therefore more capable of exploring this new understanding of the soundscape of *Silent Hill*.

The chapter will begin with a close reading of Julia Kristeva's introductory chapter "Approaching Abjection," from her landmark *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982) as well as a brief rundown of the game's plot, visual mechanics, and a definition of what "survival horror" means—and how *Silent Hill* defies expectations within the genre. The chapter will then move to an in-depth discussion of the score and soundscape that the game's composer and producer Akira Yamaoka so skillfully created, as well as how traditional folk tales of Japanese and American horror have influenced *Silent Hill* and the ways abjection serves as an active participant in these stories. The chapter will rely on film theory by authors such as Barbara Creed and Valerie Wee, musicological study by authors such as William Cheng, and seminal works of social theorists such as Jack Halberstam, Judith Butler, and Luce Irigaray. By exploring and offering discussion on abjection in the context of the game itself, we can begin to understand the ways composer and producer Akira Yamaoka was able to *sound* abjection.

In direct contrast to the realistic horror *Silent Hill* evokes, the second case study revolves around 2KGames' 2007 award-winning hit *Bioshock*, plunging the player into the cartoonish hellhole that is the underwater city of Rapture. Unlike *Silent Hill*, *Bioshock* has been the focus of little critical study despite its explosive popularity and multiple awards, including *Spike TV*'s prestigious "VGX Award for Game of the Year" and the *British Academy of Film and Television Arts* (*BAFTA*) "Games Award for Best Game." This thesis capitalizes on the critical void by discussing the ways that *Bioshock* artfully employs character voices and environmental sounds and music in order to both heighten player dread and manipulate the player's understanding of personal agency.

Beginning with a brief background of the game, its plot, and a description of the overall atmosphere of Rapture, this second case study will then discuss the integral nature of Bioshock's voices and the diegetic music of the city. Foundational to the chapter's central arguments of agency and aural manipulation are two works by theorist and composer Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema* and *Audio-Vision: Sound On Screen*. Both comment directly on the ability of a soundscape to fundamentally change viewer perception and interpretation of a scene or, in our case, a playable sequence. His works are complemented throughout the chapter by insights from Deleuze and Guattari's seminal *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, works by prominent musicologists including Kiri Miller and William Whittington, and interviews with Bioshock's writer/director Ken Levine and lead designer Shawn Robertson. All provide great vantage points to explore the nuanced and clever use of voice acting and diegetic music, leading to a deeper understanding of the type of subtle fear *Bioshock* evokes.

With this brief introduction, I am excited to share the worlds that I have come to admire and spend hours delighting in their specific brands of thrill. It is the aim of this thesis to inspire an interest in and appreciation for the multitude of ways that the music and sounds of horror video games have helped engender such a passionate fan base and build a solid staple in the video game industry.

CHAPTER II

SOUNDING ABJECTION: NOISE AND TERROR IN

SILENT HILL

Everything is quiet in the school: only your footprints echo off the dark hallway walls, where the flashlight clipped to your chest reveals bright paint, cheerful posters, and children's drawings. In an effort to find a document revealing the possible locations of your missing child, you begin looking through available trash cans and the odd office space. After your search through a few lockers reveals nothing useful, you turn hopefully into the next available classroom.

Before the door to the room can slam shut, the radio on your hip erupts in sound, screaming a warning that something else is in the room with you. Disoriented, you spin around, gun drawn, but in the darkness with only the small circle of your flashlight to illuminate the room, you have no idea where-or *what*-the thing is. You stumble forward, and in the pale maybe of the edge of your light you think you see something. Before you can formulate a guess, a disfigured form (a child?) stumbles into the light, absurdly swinging a heavy butcher knife in your direction. While you briefly struggle on whether to laugh or vomit, the abhorrent figure stabs you, and you jolt into action. It falls after a couple shots from the gun, but the radio at your side doesn't quiet until you finish by resolutely stomping on the monster's head. Silence once again fills the room, and nothing but the dead body hints at foul play. You have just survived a typical encounter from 1999 survival-horror title *Silent Hill*.

The grotesque and absurdly horrific, as exemplified by the scene I described above, are abundant in video games-and other mediums-of the horror genre, especially in those stories that belong to the psychological, instead of visceral, horror camp. However, the question of why the depiction of these themes are so successful in achieving scares remains. Why exactly do murderous, malformed toddlers and jarring juxtapositions of dead silence with shrill, screaming sirens work so well to terrify an audience? What fears and anxieties are at play? For theorist Julia Kristeva, much of horror's potency lies in our subconscious attraction to the abject, to the rotting corpse belying our youth or the sickeningly sweet smell from spoiled milk. This perverse fascination with "the radically separate, loathsome"[8] has ensnared audiences across generations and genre lines: ballet, opera, literature, poetry, film, and, as testified above, video games have all utilized the power of abjection to shock, horrify, and (disturbingly) attract. But what does abjection *sound* like?

This chapter will focus on that question as it explores the world of *Silent Hill*. As we begin to delve into the roots of the terror inherent to the video game, we will notice how the auralities of *Silent Hill* force the gamer to contemplate and respond to complex theoretical ideas—such as gender roles, embodiment, and modern civilization itself—by utilizing an equally complex source of psychological terror: abjection. As a theoretical theme so deeply associated with the body, this chapter uses *Silent Hill*, with its wealth of critical inquiry and theory helping support my foundational claims, to move into a discussion of the possibility of sound as abject, a topic largely unrecognized. After a brief discussion of the plot, themes, and production details of the game, this paper will engage

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[8] Kristeva, Julia. "Approaching Abjection." *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982. Pg. 2.

critical gender and feminist theory on the topic, such as Kristeva's seminal *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection,* and offer an in-depth analysis of the *Silent Hill* soundscape in an effort to discuss the ways horror video game soundtracks can be understood as not simply signifying or representing the abject, but serving as abject objects in and of themselves.

<u>Welcome to Silent Hill</u>

Published by video game developer Konami in 1999, *Silent Hill* belongs to the survival horror genre, which has been defined by media theorist Ewan Kirkland as "an action adventure game employing a third person perspective, and drawing on horror film iconography, in which a typically average character navigates a maze-like landscape, solving puzzles and fighting off monsters with limited ammunition, energy and means of replenishing it."[9] The plot follows protagonist Harry Mason on a dangerous and terrifying mission to locate his missing adopted daughter, Cheryl, in the seemingly-abandoned Middle America town of Silent Hill[10]. The player quickly realizes that the eerily quiet, foggy town is not as empty as it seems: within the first few minutes of gameplay, the gamer encounters murderous babies, pterodactyl-like monsters, and flayed dogs, all intent on killing the protagonist. While the player guides Harry through the dangerous streets and differing areas of the town, such as Midwich Elementary, Alchemilla Hospital, and an abandoned amusement park, he is confronted with even more monsters and, more disturbingly, signs that demonic forces are at play. As Harry attempts to both find the

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[9] Kirkland, Ewan. "Restless Dreams in Silent Hill: Approaches to Video Game Analysis." *Journal of Media Practice*. Pg. 172

[10] This chapter frequently moves between discussions of *Silent Hill* the game and Silent Hill the town within the game. For clarity, I will use italics when discussing the game and none when discussing the town.

missing daughter and discover what is happening in the town, reality blurs and the protagonist finds himself in the nightmarish Otherworld—an even more perverse, demented, and bloody version of Silent Hill (Figure 1).

The game continues to oscillate between the two "realities" while the player solves puzzles and fights monsters, and culminates in a long, terrifying final clash when he discovers a horrifying truth. Seven years prior, in an attempt to raise a demon-god, Incubus, to destroy the earth, the townspeople of Silent Hill impregnated a young girl, Alessa, with the demon's spawn, causing the girl, in a state of both absolute pain and absolute power, to make real her nightmares, the monsters of Silent Hill, who represent Kristeva's "breakdown of borders" in their existence as somewhere between human and non-human. It is also revealed that Harry's adopted daughter, whom he had found in a graveyard as a baby, is actually a reborn half of the suffering Alessa's soul, whose rejection of the ritual caused her soul to split and become born again in baby Cheryl. It becomes clear that in order to save Harry's daughter, the gamer must defeat the now-risen demon and escape the town. With five possible endings, Silent Hill's outcome depends on the choices and discoveries made by the player, and it is completely possible for the game to end in horrifying tragedy. Since its original publication, *Silent Hill* has been recognized as a revolutionary horror title for its reliance on psychological horror and was named as one of the one hundred all-time greatest video games by *Time Magazine* in 2012[11] and has engendered multiple sequels.

Mental manipulation, as opposed to jump scares, pervades the game. One major example comes in the form of the main character, Harry Mason. Unlike other video game

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[11] "All-Time 100 Video Games." *Time.com.* 15 Nov, 2012.

protagonists at the time—and especially those of other horror titles—Harry is an "everyman," a normal person who pants when he runs and is terrible at aiming a gun. As musicologist William Cheng writes in his chapter on the interplay between themes such as power/powerlessness, fear/fun, and ethical/developmental in the music of *Silent Hill*, "Harry Mason is a ludological anomaly who lacks the extravagant powers possessed by the typical heroes and heroines of action-adventure games…an extraordinarily ordinary being whose poor offensive capabilities make him easy prey for the monsters in the game."[12] By designing an avatar that is unable to perform feats the monsters are quite capable of, the game's creators have effectively stripped a level of control from the player, psychologically compounding the terror of the game.

Figure 1: Silent Hill and the Otherworld (screenshots by author)
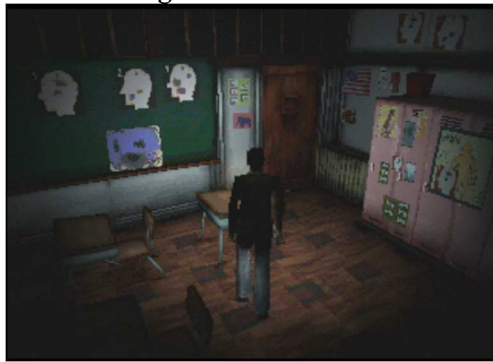
| Midwich Elementary School | Otherworld version of Midwich Elementary |

The mechanics of the game aid in the debilitation of player agency as well. Much in the style of other contemporaneous survival-horror titles, *Silent Hill*'s camera angles make movement awkward and its controls are difficult to navigate. The game also misleads the player into believing that what he is seeing is real; for example, the game opens with the player being forced to prompt Harry to chase his daughter through the pervasive fog, only to be cut down by swarms of deformed babies with butcher knives.

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[12] Cheng, 95.

The player is powerless to stop them; only granted Harry's fists as weapons, he is almost instantly cut down, despite any frantic button-mashing by the gamer. Seconds later, Harry reawakens in a diner—it was just a dream. By taking away the player's ability to defend him or herself in a fight, and forcing the gamer to watch herself die, the game has effectively changed the rules, coercing the player into a constant stasis of insecurity. "Players of *Silent Hill* might…feel as if they are at times fighting an animate apparatus, one that churns out fear through unruly mechanics and unfair outcomes."[13]

However, a more under-acknowledged aspect of Silent Hill's effectiveness at provoking sheer psychological terror lies in its inherent, coded identity as a Japanese video game attempting to emulate and portray American horror.[14] Although based in Japan, studio Konami first released *Silent Hill* in English to North America, effectively labeling the American consumer as its targeted audience and American terror its medium. In its efforts to offer commentary on American fears, however, Konami presented a fusion of Japanese and American horror, creating a world that further ostracized American players while simultaneously compelling their participation with a form of strange familiarity. The next few pages will be dedicated to a brief study of Japanese and American horror history and tropes, as well as the ways the two have intertwined in recent popular media, in an attempt to understand how this identity helped shape the narrative of Silent Hill, and through the narrative, the audio as well.

Japanese and American Horror

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[13] Ibid, 96.

[14] Chris Pruett discusses this more fully in his 2010 article entitled "The Anthropology of Fear: Learning About Japan Through Horror Games."

Japanese horror has been the subject of much study in recent years due in large part to the sudden rise of its popularity with American audiences, who are entranced with the austere and subtle beauty of its particular brand of terror. In one such analysis, "Visual Aesthetics and Ways of Seeing: Comparing 'Ringu' and 'The Ring'," film theorist Valerie Wee gives an excellent breakdown of the traditions of Japanese horror and the reasons it has so successfully worked its way into American film. This discussion will aid us in our own understanding of *Silent Hill*'s success in North America.

One of the most striking features of Japanese horror is its stark, psychological aesthetic that has guided the country's art for centuries. "Traditional Japanese theater forms," Wee explains, "…reflect the classic Japanese aesthetic that privileges a nonrational, emotion-centered perspective, and consistently emphasizes artistry, and hence artificiality, while disregarding most aspects of realism."[15] Japanese theater, including cinema, reveals this aesthetic through many different avenues, including a disregard for narrative coherence, an elliptical understanding of time, an emphasis on creating striking visuals, an enduring adherence to balance (light vs. dark, empty vs. filled spaces, etc.), and a use of symbolic mimesis in which "the most important actions were not represented but suggested."[16] This approach to narrative structure and artistic display is heavily displayed in *Silent Hill*, best seen in story's convoluted sense of time and constant insistence on cinematic camera angles, both of which often prove

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[15] Wee, Valerie. "Visual Aesthetics and Ways of Seeing: Comparing *Ringu* and *The Ring*." *Cinema Journal*, 44.

[16] W. Theodore DeBary. "The Vocabulary of Japanese Aesthetics." *Japanese Aesthetics and Culture: A Reader*, 52.

detrimental to the player's ability to understand the story or even move in any given location.

Of course, classic Japanese horror also incorporates distinct character tropes. According to Wee, most Japanese horror films find their roots in traditional *kaidan*, or Japanese ghost stories. While this genre encompasses a wide variety of stories, one of its most popular strains involves the *yurei*, or "vengeful female ghost,"[17] which is often a "central [figure] in numerous myths and folktales dating back to the Edo period (1603-1867),"[18] and provides excellent background into the narrative of *Silent Hill*. The *yurei* is often an innocent young woman who has been viciously killed by men and have returned "to wreak vengeance on their murderers and, in some instances, on society as a whole."[19] Traditionally, the ghosts are extremely pale, with long, dark hair and a facial disfigurement of some kind, and are typically found buried in dark, deep places, like wells or holes in the forest. A favorite theme in traditional Japanese theater, including *nō* and *kabuki*, the stories involving the *yurei* naturally translated into Japanese cinema, becoming a central part of Japanese horror films and, more recently, video games. As the 20th century advanced and Japanese fears shifted, according to Wee, the *yurei* trope, as well as many others associated with traditional *kaidan* narratives, began assuming traits that reflected new societal terrors: "[T]hese films also exposed the larger sociocultural anxieties of the period, which were grounded in gender shifts that saw the emergence of a generation of more independent, modern females, increasing anxiety over technological

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[17] Wee, 43.

[18] Ibid, 43.

[19] Ibid, 44.

progress, and growing concerns over a perceived loss of traditional values and identities, fears that have continued to resonate through the 1990s and into the twenty-first century."[20]

However, while describing this traditional aesthetic traits and tropes found in Japanese horror, Wee is careful to also recognize the influence of western aesthetics and styles on Japanese cinema and to warn against the idea of a closed, non-global Japanese industry. While conducting her comparative analysis between a popular Japanese *yurei* film, *Ringu*, and its Hollywood reimagining, *The Ring*, Wee writes that

> [t]he similarities and differences between the two films reflect the complex realities that govern the practice of cross-cultural adaptation that involves competing commitments to absorbing and retaining textual and aesthetic elements from the original text, while upholding culturally distinct aesthetics and perspectives.[21]

Many of the distinctly ambiguous narrative structures and austere or startling visuals can also be attributed to the avant-garde film movement in France, while the "final girl" trope found in North American horror has begun cropping up in many Japanese films, among other cross-cultural influences seen in recent films, a reality that has invaded video games as well. Indeed, Konami describes American thriller *Jacob's Ladder* as fundamentally influential for *Silent Hill*, and the disconcerting images, bizarre narrative, and heavy American symbolism resonates strongly in the game's plot and visuals. This cultural exchange was further compounded by the American defeat of Japan in WWII, which led to "[a]n alleged 'Americanization' of Japanese culture" after a "rapid industrialization of the society and an integration (imposed as well as welcomed) of American culture and

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[20] Ibid, 45.

[21] Ibid, 42.

values."[22] Still, these transnational tropes found in recent Japanese films often serve to strengthen, rather than diminish, the strong cultural ties Japanese art, including video games, maintains with its traditional past, bolstering the classic aesthetics with modern techniques, in turn creating a distinctly Japanese style that holds its own in the international cinema market.

In direct contrast, traditional Hollywood horror is predicated on the "literal, the realistic, and the representative…an extension of photography."[23] Narrative coherence, realistic scenes, and clear-cut endings with good triumphing over evil are stalwart themes of this aesthetic, which was utilized throughout much of the 20th century. However, during the 1960s and '70s, North American horror began adopting the same themes of ambiguity and identity crisis found in Europe that many Japanese filmmakers also employed. Main characters began to shift from hero/-ine to distinctly unlikeable, while monsters continuously managed to survive their traditional ending demise. Emotional and gut character responses replaced the coolly collected rationalism of their early-century counterparts.

Yet despite these changes, the demand for linearity and cohesiveness continued to pervade Hollywood horror. Audiences readily accepted the continuous resurrection of the film's monster, as long as the film described what his motivation for killing was and how he was able to return. "Plot holes" became a large part of cinematic discourse and could potentially spell critical and popular disaster for unwitting films with unclosed narratives. While Japanese and American horror clearly intersected in the French avant-garde style

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[22] Picard, Martin. "Haunting Backgrounds: Transnationality and Intermediality in Japanese Survival Horror Video Games." *Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play*, 100.
[23] Wee, 53.

and participated (and participate) in a constant cultural exchange of cinematic reference, American horror retained several key distinctions, which is best realized in Hollywood remakes of Japanese horror films and, most importantly to this study, the blend of both aesthetics in *Silent Hill*.

Perhaps the best known examples of the *yurei* in North America come in the form of Sadako (*Ringu,* 1998) and Kayako (*Ju-On,* 2002), both the ghostly antagonists from extremely popular Japanese horror films eventually remade by Hollywood studios (2002's *The Ring* and 2004's *The Grudge*, respectively). As case studies, both films (and their remakes) are excellent resources in dissecting the differences between American and Japanese horror aesthetics, although this enquiry will focus on *Ringu* and its adaptation.

The narrative of *Ringu* centers on the murder of and haunting by the young ghost Sadako (Samara in the American version). Deeply technophobic, The Ring is situated on the premise that Sadako, after her murder, has somehow managed to haunt a video recording, and seven days after a victim views that recording, is able to crawl through the victim's television set and literally scare the viewer to death. While both films maintain the same narrative, the American desire for cohesion and linearity drives the plot of the remake. For example, in the Japanese version, *Ringu*, the video Sadako haunts is made of random images, which, at best, have an abstract symbolic relation to the narrative of the film. In direct opposition, the images of the video shown in *The Ring* all eventually become linked and directly correspond to the story of Samara's murder. *Ringu* forces the viewer to make their own subjective and aesthetic assumptions about the meaning of the images, while *The Ring* neatly ties the video together, creating a satisfyingly complete

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narrative that requires no deeper understanding or personal reflection. While only a singular example of the distinctions found between *Ringu* and its remake, this helps shows the key aesthetic principles of each culture. As Wee writes, "*Ringu*'s and *The Ring*'s reliance on a female protagonist, their overt technophobia, and their adoption of avant-garde styles and visuals-alongside similar inclinations toward ambiguity, uncertainty, and despair-hint at shared cultural concerns and anxieties, issues that transcend national and cultural boundaries and that perhaps reflect the concerns of most modern, highly developed nations. Yet, amid these instances of increasingly globalized attitudes…there remain certain key elements that ground each film in its own specific cultural, ideological, and aesthetic contexts."[24]

But what happens when a Japanese studio attempts to create an American horror tale? Does the new perspective alter the horror, as is the case in Hollywood remakes of Japanese tales? And if so, what about the terror is different? As a product of this transoceanic exchange, *Silent Hill* offers distinct insight into these questions, while also helping to better understand the context and atmosphere of the game itself.

At first glance, *Silent Hill* seems to be a distinctly Japanese tale: the story revolves around Alessa, a young girl dressed in white, with long, dark hair, whose terror and desire to break from the bonds of the demon has created horrible monsters out of the former inhabitants of the town. When talking at the Game Developer Conference in 2005, composer/producer Akira Yamoako "talked about characteristics of Japanese-style horror and how they were implemented in the *Silent Hill* series. He highlighted this particular style as being marked by unseen enemies, vengeance or hatred, and usually a sad story."

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[24] Wee, 59.

[25] These themes are certainly visited in the first *Silent Hill*, with its elusive cult and equally hidden demon and Alessa's horrifying story. However, as discussed above, this story was created for American audiences, and it appeals to American audiences in uniquely cultural dimensions.

The setting of the game itself, as a middle America town complete with small streets and alleyways and diners that appear temporally suspended in the 1950s, transports the North American player directly into the heartland of their country. This is distinctly familiar: we have seen this same town in our sitcoms, our films, our theme parks, our lives. The town of Silent Hill is not some distant nightmare, it is not only real, but in our own backyards. The horror itself is also much more visceral: despite being a psychological horror, the Otherworld is covered in flayed bodies, blood, and bones. "The American-style approach to horror was convenient for [the Silent Hill team] because it allowed the team to employ 'shocking visuals' as a source of horror, rather than the more difficult-to-communicate metaphorical horror common to Japan."[26] And although the plot seems jumbled or non-linear at times, representative of Japanese aesthetic, in the end, it becomes clear that everything had a distinct narrative purpose, including seemingly random optional missions that were necessary to complete in order to achieve the "good" ending.

By designing what Yamaoka himself described as a "'modern American horror through Japanese eyes,'"[27] the team behind Silent Hill was able to effectively terrify

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[25] Picard, 105.

[26] Pruett, Chris. "The Anthropology of Fear: Learning About Japan Through Horror Games." *Loading…*, 5.

[27] Ibid, 3.

American audiences with both the familiar and alien. As we will see in our discussion of the abject and Yamaoka's score, this blend of cultures and folktales created a world much different, and much more psychological potent, than the world of video games had seen before.

While brief, this summary serves as an introduction to the world, sociocultural traditions, and transcultural exchanges composer Akira Yamaoka made audible. And while the game's history, visuals, plot, and gameplay offer plenty to remark upon, Yamaoka's score proves to be as terrifying as the game itself. But in order to understand *how* Yamaoka is able to invoke abjection through sound, we must first understand what exactly abjection *means*.

<u>Understanding the Abject</u>

As mentioned previously, this chapter will largely depend on Julia Kristeva's definition of abjection, given in the first chapter ("Approaching Abjection") from her groundbreaking work *Powers of Horror*. While written as a theoretical analysis of literature, Kristeva's work translates well into a variety of genres, including music and video games. Informed by a wealth of psychoanalytical and philosophical critical theory, *Powers of Horror* provides a solid foundation for the term.

"There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable,"[28] begins Kristeva in her introduction to *Powers of Horror*. A quest for understanding the power of disgust and revolt, "Approaching Abjection" "theorizes abjection in distinctly phenomenological

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[28] Kristeva, 1.

terms, associating the abject with all that is repulsive and fascinating about bodies, and, in particular, those aspects of bodily experience which unsettle singular bodily integrity: death, decay, fluids, orifices, sex, defecation, vomiting, illness, menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth."[29] These fears concerning bodies and their waste permeate our society today, although they are more commonly labeled as the "grotesque:" "Grotesque…describes the aberration from ideal form or from accepted convention, to create the misshapen, ugly, exaggerated, or even formless."[30] Both the grotesque and the abject function on the edges of social boundaries and are most commonly observed (and most easily understood) in the representations of "unacceptable" bodies: Frankenstein's monster, the female cyborg, the mutilated victims of Jack the Ripper.

In addition to these bodily fears, Kristeva discusses abjection in terms of Freudian psychoanalytical powers that play upon the psyche. For Kristeva, the abject represents neither object nor subject, but instead plays the role of defining the subject by existing as what the subject *is not*. Abjection describes beings that are "radically excluded,"[31] the breakdown *between* the subject and the object, the place where logic and order are abandoned. "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection," she writes, "but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite."[32] Immorality, Oedipal complexes, vomit, and, most fervently of all, the corpse all represent Kristeva's understanding of the abject, as they all force both the subject and the object to come to terms with their deepest

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[29] Tyler, Imogen. "Against Abjection: Violent Disgust and the Maternal." *Feminist Theory*, 79.

[30] Connelly, Francis S. "Introduction." *Modern Art and the Grotesque*, 2.

[31] Kristeva, 2.

[32] Kristeva, 4.

fears (breakdown of order and society/maternal autoeroticism/our own bodies/death). For

Kristeva, the abject is neither desired ("as desire is always for objects"[33]) nor Othered

("there is nothing either objective or objectal about the abject"[34]), but is instead born

from both fear and joy, a joy that subconsciously attracts and which the subject revels in,

"violently and painfully."[35] The abject is also closely related to Western religious

practices, as Kristeva believes that many of our fears arise out of religious practice,

focusing heavily on Judeo-Christian beliefs. "Abjection accompanies all religious

structures and reappears, to be worked out in a new guise, at the time of their collapse."[36]

These religious abjections-including dietary restrictions and a person's physical

embodiment of sin-are often subject to purification rituals (i.e. religious history and art),

which in turn allows the abject to root itself in religious superstition.

Metaphysics is also a key consideration in the discussion surrounding abjection.

"Approaching Abjection" considers Plato's idea of "the nurse, of all becoming,"[37] the

receptacle (*chora*) "whose only function is to contain being"[38] and has no claim to the

celebration of birth or creation, despite being the form which nurtures, supports, and

holds within itself the man-like Idea. Due to the clear association of the receptacle with

the female form and pregnancy, critical theorist Luce Irigaray, in her seminal work

Speculum of the Other Woman, criticized the way women are written about in classical

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[33] Ibid, 6.

[34] Ibid, 6.

[35] Ibid, 6.

[36] Ibid, 10.

[37] Plato. *Platonos Timaios: The Timaeus of Plato*, 171.

[38] Covino, Deborah Caslav. *Amending the Abject Body: Aesthetic Makeovers in Medicine and Culture*, 19.

texts on cosmology and metaphysics, noting how philosophers, like Plato, easily assign

concepts with feminine qualities, such as the pregnant receptacle, the role of silent,

immaterial non-objects.[39] However, whereas Plato's *chora* is being-less, Kristeva has

instead assigned the receptacle a role, a designation: abjection. Therefore, importantly,

the female form also lays claim to the title of abject, an assertion later expanded on by

theorist Judith Butler, who states that "[t]here are Christian and Cartesian precedents to

such views which…understand 'the [female] body' as so much inert matter, signifying

nothing or, more specifically signifying a profane void, the fallen state: deception, sin,

the premonitional metaphorics of hell and the eternal feminine."[40] Interestingly, this

connection to the abject allows the subject a level of protection, through automatic

repulsion to the abject, from the crushing reality of what exactly abjection signifies

(death, reduction of self to waste and immorality): "On the edge of non-existence and

hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and

abjection are my safe guards. The primers of my culture."[41] In all, the definition of abject

as presented by Kristeva (and bolstered by the analyses of theorists such as Butler and

Irigary) is concerned with attempting to understand how and why traditionally

marginalized or socially tabooed people, ideas, actions, identities, objects, etc. find

themselves labelled as abject, as jettisoned out of and from traditional social

classification and meaning, and how this subsequently leads in turn to that same society's

repulsion toward and attraction to the outcast being.

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[39] Irigaray, Luce. "Une Mere de Glace." *Speculum of the Other Woman*, 168-179.

[40] Butler, Judith. "Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions." *Feminisms Redux*, 465.

[41] Kristeva, 2.

Clearly, with the heavy reliance on Kristeva's understanding of abjection and the frequent discussion of gender and sexuality, this thesis depends, in large part, on the study and application of psychoanalysis. Indeed, I believe that Freudian theory surrounding paranoia and fear are crucial aspects to dissecting the variety of nuances that are rooted in the terror of the games I am studying. However, by simply relying on a practice so firmly entrenched in the gender and sexuality of a psychosis, the analysis risks not only potentially homophobic and misogynistic readings, but also eliminates possibilities for discussing the variety of other fears that so deeply affect horror narratives.

In the chapter "Reading Counterclockwise: Paranoid Gothic or Gothic Paranoia?" from his book *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*, seminal gender theorist Jack Halberstam writes, "Only a psychoanalytic model of interpretation insists upon the essential link between psychosexual pathology and monstrosity; the Gothic narrative itself sees monstrosity as infinitely more complex and dense."[42] For Halberstam, while psychoanalysis offers convenient gendered/sexual explanations for the variety of fears (and subsequent desires) of horror narratives, it refuses to acknowledge very real tensions of class, race, politics, and culture, devolving them simply into fears of sexuality. And while Halberstam ultimately sees the value in utilizing psychoanalysis, and does so throughout his work, he also problematizes the basic Freudian principles that serve as foundation. By focusing solely and completely on sexual libido and fear of same-sex relationships, "Freud's attempts to skewer monstrosity to sexual perversion

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[42] Halberstam, Judith. "Reading Counterclockwise: Paranoid Gothic or Gothic Paranoia?" *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters,* 111.

have frequently given rise to a gendered grammar of fear into often homophobic formulations of perversity and violence."[43]

Similarly, accepting Kristeva's arguments on the abject as true writ large risks perpetuating problematic assumptions about female bodies, and particularly the bodies of pregnant mothers. In her article "Against Abjection: Violent Disgust and the Maternal," Imogen Tyler tackles these issues by addressing the ways critical art theory has "reproduce[d] rather than challenge[d] the cultural production of woman as abject."[44] Beginning by questioning the validity of describing Kristeva as a "French Feminist" (Kristeva was not originally French and actively distanced herself from the feminist movement), Tyler later addresses the very real violence against pregnant women that Tyler claims springs, in part, from the critical affirmation of society's fear of the maternal body. "The accumulation of sociological data and testimonial accounts of violence targeted towards pregnant women…compels feminist theory to think about how histories of violent disgust for the maternal body, the disgust that abject criticism has been describing since the publication of *Powers of Horror* in the 1980s, materializes in women's lived experiences. Abjection has effects on real bodies; abjection hurts."[45] While I believe her stance to veers almost dangerously into censorship, I do agree that recognizing the problematic outcomes surrounding the issue is an obligation of this line of study.

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[43] Halberstam, 112.

[44] Tyler, 84.

[45] Tyler, 89.

Therefore, although I do not completely reject psychoanalytical theory surrounding paranoia, this thesis will also rely on critical discourse that, at time, aligns itself in direct opposition with foundational aspects of Kristeva's theory, in an effort to fill gaps that Freudian theory cannot or does not explain. In this way, I hope to engage with greater depth the ways horror is able to affect so many different people.

Framed by these contexts and concerns, my approach to abjection differs slightly from Kristeva's definition outline above. Instead of basing my understanding of the term on a purely psychoanalytical platform, I will instead be referring to the abject as that which breaks and transgresses (often viciously and horrifically) traditional sociocultural hierarchical constructs of class, gender, sexuality, race, disability, and cultural politics. This basis will be informed not solely by Freudian principles and theorems, but also by feminist social, film, and literary theory, and serves to contextualize abjection within the larger scale of the global social economy.

In the frameworks of Western and Japanese culture, it is easy to understand why this application makes sense; our cultural objects (folktales, cinema, popular songs and stories, etc.) are littered with the remnants of the lasting social predicator we call abjection. In literature, Frankenstein's monster and Dracula both exist in the realm of the taboo and the grotesque: Dracula as a living corpse consuming and tainting the young, innocent blood of beautiful maidens and Frankenstein as the projection of Western fears surrounding homoeroticism, technology, and physical deformity. The Japanese *yurei* provokes fears of loss of innocence, and, in more recent years, heightens anxieties over the rise of the "independent woman." Alfred Hitchcock's antagonists in his film *The Birds* forgo the boundaries set by the predominately white, upper-middle class residents

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of the town of Bodega Bay, California, unleashing terror and torment upon its inhabitants. In *Ringu*, Sadako climbs out of the television set into the normatively liminal safe space of our homes to murder innocent viewers. All of these serve as examples to foreground my understanding of the abject. With this foundation set, we are able to begin our discussion of the terrifyingly enjoyable world of *Silent Hill*.

From here, this chapter will focus completely on the aural atmosphere created by composer and producer Akira Yamaoka and the ways the sounds he created can be understood as abject. Delving into the twin worlds created by Konami, this chapter will provide discussion on the use of silence and noise, the gendered sonic depictions of characters and monsters, and the social signifiers these auralities reference and employ. It is through this inquiry, I believe, that the fears and nightmares that games such as *Silent Hill* so carefully manipulate will be more easily recognizable as the social paranoias they represent.

<u>Sound and Silence</u>

It is easy in video games to forget about the music. The aural qualities of the game become part of the entrenched player's subconscious, playing soundtrack not only to the on-screen visuals, but the player's virtual reality as well. It is here that music and sound have the most power, in this space between reality and virtuality, as it is here that music and sound are able to influence the actions, and therefore agency, of the player. By performing a close analysis of the diegetic and non-diegetic sounds of *Silent Hill*, it is easier to understand their power to connote complex social and political issues, such as abjection.

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The soundtrack to *Silent Hill* involves a complicated mixture of musical cells that are able to both continue, potentially forever, and quit unexpectedly depending on where the player stands in the game. This unpredictability works to propel gameplay, offering the player a seamless, uninterrupted aural advance through game time and space. However, what makes the soundtrack so effective for *Silent Hill* is its ability to blend industrial soundscapes, tonal cutscenes,[46] and complete, terrifying silence.

After watching the initial few cutscenes and playing through basic gameplay tutorials to acquaint the player with the game's mechanics, the gamer, as protagonist Harry, is left alone to discover the secrets of the town and the whereabouts of his daughter, Cheryl. A thick blanket of fog coats the town as Harry begins navigating the seemingly empty streets. And while this stark loneliness is itself discomforting, the true foreboding comes from the soundtrack: all that is heard while Harry attempts to find clues and avoid monsters is the thud of his shoes on the pavement and a soft moan that could be wind, but could also be…something else. It becomes quickly apparent, after multiple monster attacks, that the silence of Silent Hill does not signify an absence of the abjected beings that spring out of darkened alleyways. Instead, the silence seems to be the force holding monsters back, acting as container for the terror. Or, as Plato and Irigaray would describe it, a receptacle.

This silence is shattered, however, once Harry climbs into the demented Otherworld, as the background comes alive with a heavy, industrial soundscape. Commenting in an interview on the industrial sounds that dominate *Silent Hill*'s soundtrack, composer Yamaoka described how he found that only industrial music "has

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[46] Cutscenes here refers to non-interactive, filmic sequences meant to quickly develop the plot or introduce a narrative element.

so much more of the feeling I searched [for] than what I could find in 'regular' music,"

going on to relate how this aural atmosphere had a "cold and rusty feeling" that worked

perfectly with the game.[47] This industrial quality is built upon sounds that Cheng

describes as "straddl[ing] the diegetic and non-diegetic divide," including sirens, metallic

creaks, scrapes, thuds, and rattles. In using these sounds, Yamaoka has created a way to

subvert player authority by enmeshing onscreen and off-screen noise, limiting the

gamer's ability to distinguish real from virtual. In his chapter on *Silent Hill*, William

Cheng gives a disturbing recollection of his own play-through:

> At one point while playing through Silent Hill for the first time, I noticed a
> hum: low in register, soft, but timbrally distinctive enough to be audible
> amid the many layers of in-game noises already in the mix. On a notepad,
> I documented this sound as a drone...When I turned off the game twenty
> minutes later, however, I could still hear the noise. My emotional
> trajectory rapidly followed thus: panic, puzzlement, and finally
> embarrassment, when I realized that the sound was coming not from the
> television at all, but from my refrigerator. It was a noise I had long learned
> to tune out while going about daily business in my apartment-and yet,
> when mashed against the game's audio, it returned with sudden
> vengeance.[48]

Terrifying experience such as this one are common for those who have played *Silent Hill,*

as the similarity of the soundtrack to the noise of everyday life makes it entirely likely

that some of those sounds will crop up in common place settings. Conjoined with the

visuals of the decaying, bloodied Otherworld, these everyday sounds may begin to take

on connotations of abjection.

Like Kristeva's belief that bodily decay represents the most supreme example of

abjection, the rotted corpse of Silent Hill, visualized in the Otherworld with its tattered

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[47] Kalabakov, Daniel. "Interview with Akira Yamaoka." *Spelmusik.net*.

[48] Cheng, 101.

walls baring its metallic foundations, could be said to manifested societal fears, as discussed by Kristeva, of death, destruction, and perversity. This is compounded by the frequent appearance of blood-stained floors and actual corpses, often flayed and pinned with barbed wire to the walls, connecting the intangible with the tangible, joining the player's fear of death with his fear of societal degeneration. And the industrial soundtrack does nothing to assuage the player's fear, either, acting instead in tandem with the visuals, an agential character representing the Otherworld's abjected state.

Similarly, the diegetic noises work to deceive player expectations through collocations with onscreen visuals. Because the noises are heard by both the player and Harry Mason, they take on a layered reality, present in both the virtual and real worlds. And because most of the diegetic noises signal-and therefore become indices of-danger, they take on the illusion of almost-threats in the real world as well.

One of the most obvious examples of this is Harry's walkie-talkie radio, which he keeps clipped to his side. After the vicious first attack in the alley and subsequent awakening in the diner, Harry discovers a radio on the bar, which he decides, fortuitously, to bring along. Almost immediately after grabbing the radio, the thing erupts in static white noise. Wondering what is happening, he swings around, just in time to watch a pterodactyl-like monster crash through the window, which the player must then fight off. From then on, the radio becomes the player's only guide to preparing for, and avoiding, monsters, as the fog and darkness of the town's locales prevent any long-range vision. The radio static quickly becomes associated with the grotesque monsters and horrifically deformed bodies that pervade the town, much as the static television set on

Japanese horror film *Ringu* (1998) represents the presence of the film's vengeful spirit, Sadako.

Yet, the radio also works to deceive the player. During my personal gameplay sessions, there were times when the radio would go off, and I would wait, ready yet terrified, for a monster that never appeared. The screaming static would abate after a few moments, and I would be forced to continue, thoroughly shaken, into the fog. Even worse, sometimes the radio would fail to go off at all, and I would be attacked, unknowing and completely unprepared. Reliance on the clues from the diegetic noises of the game is critical for survival, making any sonic trick a terror in its own, forcing the player to feel cast out, rejected by the game's seemingly simple structures.

This is made even more distressing by the sudden bursts of tonality during the game's cutscenes. Most of the time, video game cutscenes serve as a respite, a time when the player is positive nothing bad can happen to her.[49] Many video games, however, have subverted this sense of control. The *Final Fantasy* series, for example, is infamous for its shocking cutscenes: *Final Fantasy VII* forces the player to watch as a party member (and the protagonist's love) is murdered in front of him, while the main character of *Final Fantasy XIII-2* sacrifices herself at the very end to save the world. In both instances, the player is unable to change the fate of his or her character—no button mashing or item finding will save them. *Silent Hill*'s cutscenes similarly wrest agency from players. In contrast to many games, however, *Silent Hill* also utilizes its sonic atmosphere to achieve this end.

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[49] Cheng, 95.

Unlike the industrial soundscape of the Otherworld and the hard silence of the town of Silent Hill, the game's cutscenes offer the player the first instances of classical Western tonality. Usually refreshing, however, this harmonic "normalcy" does nothing to ease the tension from the game, especially in light of the jarring dissonance between this tonal experience and the industrial soundtrack the player has become accustomed to. By using Western harmony sparingly and in direct contrast with the near-constant noise-based soundtrack, traditional tonality becomes abnormal, unnatural, and perverse, a sentiment further aided by the game's shocking on-screen visuals. One cutscene, for example, introduces the player to Alessa's mother, Dahlia Gillespie, a sallow-faced elderly woman sitting alone in an abandoned church while spouting prophecies about a religion known as "Gyromancy" and compelling the protagonist to search for his daughter in the underworld. The bell-like tones of the music serve to reinforce the scene's church setting, but against the strange dialogue with Dahlia, who spouts cult-like end-of-days predictions, this scene leaves the player with a sense of foreboding and unease. It is later revealed that the woman herself had sacrificed the child, becoming an incarnation of the monstrous-feminine so frequently observed in film and literature, a theme this chapter will discuss more thoroughly later. In her betrayal and rejection of her primal charge-to care for and cleave to her child-Dahlia has ruptured the boundaries of feminine existence, becoming an abjected version of the mother and, therefore, monstrous. By pairing with images such as this, the game has forced Western tonality—and therefore traditional sonic "normalcy"—to become complicit in the grotesque and perverse undertakings of the game's antagonists. In undoing aural reality through juxtaposition of image and sound, Yamaoka has created a soundtrack that echoes Alessa's abjected state.

Through the diegetic and non-diegetic noise that builds *Silent Hill*'s soundtrack, Yamaoka has created his own character, one that holds agency and importance in the larger framework of the game itself, and solidifies the central role of the abject in the game's thematic and musical structure. The silence in the fog-covered town works as a *kora*-like receptacle for the abjected beings, and sounds, that continuously transgress its boundaries and scream into the player's sonic atmosphere, much in the same way that Alessa serves as container for the demon. The industrialized soundtrack of the demented Otherworld thoroughly confirms the abjected position of both Alessa's demonic possession and the nightmarish reality she has created. The cutscenes' jarring transition into traditional, but dissonant, Western harmony serves to undermine and pervert traditional symbolism relating to musical depictions of right and wrong, especially in juxtaposition with the on-screen visuals. Through these devices, the soundtrack becomes representative of Silent Hill itself and the abjected state of Alessa's nightmares.

Gendered Sound, Abject Voices

While the musical soundtrack of *Silent Hill* offers plenty to discuss about aural abjection, the voices and sounds of the characters and monsters that haunt the town reveal an additional level of grotesque depravity. Despite having a male protagonist, the narrative of *Silent Hill* is largely populated—and motivated—by female characters; at times, it is clear that even our hero is simply less powerful and less important than the women whose story drives the game's plot. As matters surrounding female social and sexual power continue to dominate critical discourse about modern society, the remainder of this chapter will focus on the ways *Silent Hill* exacerbates paranoid fears of gender and

sexuality, and on how the gendered representations of the characters and their voices aid us in understanding the complex nuances of the embodied fears at play.

The variety of female characters on Silent Hill could be considered impressive for a 1998 horror video game, if not for the blatantly misogynistic undertones of the game. Alessa herself, the nexus of the town's evils and sorrow, is not simply powerful through the demon, but agential and strong in her own right. She is able to contain and subvert an earth-rendering, primeval, supernatural being within herself, preventing his ascension and the destruction of the planet. A helpful police officer, Cybil Bennett, serves as the only reason Harry is able to defend himself, as she lends him her gun and gives him advice about the area. Even Cheryl, the missing adopted daughter, spends the game actively aiding Alessa in her fight with the demon. However, perhaps the most powerful character of the game is Dahlia Gillespie, Alessa's mother, who, in her rejection of motherhood, sacrifices her daughter, and embodies perhaps the most recognizable form of gendered abjection, the Monstrous-Feminine.

In this thesis, I am applying Kristeva's understanding of abjection to horror games. Similarly, Barbara Creed, in the chapter "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine" in *Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, applies Kristeva's understanding of abjection to film theory, focusing especially on "[Kristeva's] notions of (a) the 'border' and (b) the mother-child relationship."[50] In her discussion of borders, Creed notes how the horror genre utilizes several tropes centered on corpses (the vampire as the corpse with no soul, the zombie as the living corpse, the witch as practicer of magics involving corpses), and claims that "[t]o the extent that abjection works on the socio-

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[50] Creed, Barbara. "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection." *Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, 69.

cultural arena, the horror film would appear to be, in at least three ways, an illustration of the work of abjection."[51]

Creed then moves to a conversation of the abjected mother, what she calls monstrous-feminine. As discussed earlier in this chapter, according to Plato, the mother's only position in existence (or non-existence) is to bear and care for the child. Therefore, according to Kristeva, the mother experiences instability in the child's natural attempts to distinguish himself from her. It is in this space that the monstrous-feminine is born: in an attempt to maintain her existence, the mother holds tightly to the child, refusing to grant him authority or individuality, thus refusing to grant the subject its natural autonomy, and, in so doing, breaking down the natural order and becoming, herself, abjected. This trope is common in horror films, as the idea of powerful women who subvert the male hegemonic order is a terrifying notion in traditional Western society. Murderous Mrs. Bates in Hitchcock's *Psycho*, witch-like Carrie in Steven King's novel of the same name, and Dahlia Gillespie all serve as excellent examples of the Monstrous-Feminine, and help to underpin the horror of Gillespie's filicide.

In contrast, and unlike male protagonists of most video games, Harry's position as the game's main (and only) playable character does not grant him any special properties of strength, authority, or even basic survival ability. A true "Everyman," Harry's abilities are wildly disproportionate to the power of the monsters that attack him. Although still traditionally attractive, Harry is wildly out of shape, panting after even short stints of running. He frequently runs out of bullets and is easily hurt, a problem exacerbated by his low health. Multiple deaths are an annoying certainty for the player, especially in initial

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[51] Ibid, 70.

playthroughs. However, his low stamina and lack of strength simply serve as reinforcing elements of his true status in the game: surrogate mother.

A widower, Harry has been assuming the role of both mother and father to his adopted daughter Cheryl before the two become stranded in the town of Silent Hill. And as the game's narrative itself is predicated on the plot structure following a weak, defenseless person on a quest to protect their child, it is a relatively short leap to consider Harry's character in a normatively feminine lens. And none of the few other men Harry encounters are particularly virile, either: all are hiding in some small space, terrified to leave, and even more terrified of disobeying Dahlia. In fact, the only truly powerful male in the game, a supernatural demon-god, is *still* confined by the strength and determination of seven-year-old Alessa. In comparison to the strong, deeply powerful Alessa and wickedly cunning Dahlia, an effeminate Harry reveals the game's manipulation of the Freudian fear of male castration and loss of masculinity.[52]

"The hegemonic definition of manhood is a man *in* power, a man *with* power, and a man *of* power," writes sociologist Michael S. Kimmel in his chapter "Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity."[53] He continues: "Our culture's definition of masculinity is thus several stories at once. It is about the individual man's quest to accumulate those cultural symbols that denote manhood, signs that he has in fact achieved it…It is about the power of these definitions themselves to serve to maintain the real-life power that men have over women and that

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[52] Freud's "On Narcissism" posits that early in childhood, children experience either a "castration complex" (boys) or "penis envy" (girls), which, in worrying about the presence, lack, or possible loss of a penis, he describes as a significant developmental experience which contributes to formulating their personality and sense of self.

[53] Kimmel, Michael S. "Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the construction of Gender Identity." *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States: An Integrated Study*, 85.

some men have over other men.”[54] Kimmel goes on to link man's sociocultural need to be perceived as “manly” with systematic sexism and homophobia by showing the dominance of manliness—or “flight from femininity”[55] as Kimmel calls it—in modern society. By this definition, Harry and the other men that exist in Silent Hill clearly hold no claim to “manliness,” forcing (largely male) players to participate in an effeminate capacity. Notably, in the 2006 film adaptation of *Silent Hill* by the same name, Harry is replaced by a female protagonist.

Therefore, by creating a world in which power dynamics between men and women are, to normative society, disturbingly and grotesquely flipped, *Silent Hill* has created an abjected version of American society, one that shatters the hundreds of years of carefully constructed, misogynistic, hegemonic social order between men and women, invoking primal, basic terror in 1998 Konami's typically male target audience through the use of tropes such as the Monstrous-Feminine. And by critically utilizing sounds and voices for the characters and monsters in *Silent Hill* that force players to renegotiate assumptions about gender and sexuality, Yamaoka is able to make these terrors audible.

The characters themselves proscribe to their gendered depictions described above. Dahlia, the child-murdering crone, cackles like a witch, screaming in maddening hysteria as the demon comes to life, her voice a clear designation of the Monstrous-Feminine. Alessa and Cheryl both have innocent, childish laughs and high-pitched, girlish voices that echo in rooms they inhabit. While masculine, none of the male characters, including Harry, possesses a true bass voice, all lying comfortably in the tenor range. The game's

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[54] Ibid, 86.

[55] Ibid, 86.

developers carefully chose voice actors to emulate the characters he wanted to portray, adding to the fear and chaos of the game's thematic undertones.

However, most terrifying of all are the sounds that leak from the monsters that terrorize Silent Hill. In the hospital, for instance, Harry comes face to face with horrific versions of the people who used to occupy the halls, such as the doctors that lunge down corridors armed with scalpels. However, the most terrifying monsters in the locale prove to be the nurses. As the radio's static rings, alerting the player to enemy presence, a soft, feminine sigh floats down the pitch black hall, followed by an overtly sexual moan. Unsure of what to expect, or if to shoot, the player watches as a horribly disfigured female-like form, covered in bloody vestiges of a 1950s era nurse uniform, moves toward the screen holding a knife. Her screams as the player shoots her sound more like sexual ecstasies than physical pain, and as the player ends the nurse's life, that initial feminine sigh escapes once again. On the fog-plagued streets, naked, deformed monsters called "rompers" lunge at the player in an attempt to tear at Harry's neck. Powerful, they are extremely hard to kill, requiring multiple shots from a shotgun or handgun to put down. However, the most disturbing aspect is their maniacal laughter that echoes of the buildings surrounding Harry as the romper tears through his throat. Perhaps most disturbing of all, as Harry fires the final shot into the Incubus demon at the end of the game, a soft, sweet, girlish "Daddy?" escapes the creature's mouth as he screams in conquered anguish.

The gendered voices and sounds Yamaoko chose to include in *Silent Hill* make it clear that they are complicit with the game's overall portrayal of the abject. By evoking the perverse visual elements of the game side by side with typically sweet, or desirable,

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noises, and by emphasizing a character's abjection with tropic voices, the composer has created new abjected elements to contribute to the visuals of the game, elevating his sonic world to a level of agential mastery.

Figure 2: Monsters of Silent Hill (Images taken from *Silenthill.wikia.com*)

In order from left to right: Hospital Nurse, Romper, Incubus demon

Conclusion

Akira Yamaoka's masterful use of diegetic and non-diegetic sounds in *Silent Hill* creating an overtly haunting and uniquely terrifying experience. By expertly manipulating sounds and noises from our everyday world, and then employing them both as accompaniment to images out of universally horrifying nightmares and as entities to trick and strip agency from the player, Yamaoka has created a soundtrack that is able to actually signify abjection. Kristeva's understanding of the term, along with the more nuanced definitions provided by social theorists such as Jack Halberstam, is perfectly recreated in the grotesque noises and sonic atmospheres that immerses the game's players. In sum, coupled with the variety of previous analyses and theories by musicologists, video game scholars, and film theorists such as William Cheng, Barbara Creed, and Ian Bogost, Kristeva's abjection theory allows a fluidity to more capably

discuss sound and music as abject agents themselves, with horror video games such as

Silent Hill, whose content and atmosphere is already so rooted in the abject itself, and

whose music is tied not simply to the game world but the forced participation and actions

of the player himself, serving as perfect vehicle for this discussion.

CHAPTER III

"WOULD YOU KINDLY?": AURAL MANIPULATION IN

BIOSHOCK

> Is a man not entitled to the sweat of his brow? 'No!' says the man in Washington, 'It belongs to the poor.' 'No!' says the man in the Vatican, 'It belongs to God.' 'No!' says the man in Moscow, 'It belongs to everyone.' I rejected those answers; instead, I chose something different. I chose the impossible. I chose... Rapture, a city where the artist would not fear the censor, where the scientist would not be bound by petty morality, where the great would not be constrained by the small! And with the sweat of your brow, Rapture can become your city as well.
>
> -Andrew Ryan, *Bioshock*

Imagine, would you kindly, a surreally beautiful city wrapped in Art Deco décor and brimming with the passion of unbridled capitalist dreams. A mysterious and enigmatic leader decrying the suffocating bureaucracy of parasitic governments that aim to squash the freedom of the enterpriser. A winningly charming and intelligent friend, aimed to claim his destined and hard-won power. And most of all, promises of fame and riches without restriction.

If this sounds to you like the triumphant sequel to Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged,* in which the protagonists are finally able to revel in their objectivist desires, you would be not far from the truth. The story of this particular beautiful city, aptly named Rapture, and its boasts of success and economic freedom is indeed based heavily on Randian theology. However, rather than a celebration and elevation of capitalist fantasies, this tale, 2K Games' hit video game *Bioshock* (2007), is instead a cautionary, morality-questioning, and nightmare-fueled horror story.

Bioshock plunges the player, as plane crash survivor Jack, into the cartoonish hellhole that is the underwater city of Rapture, a dystopian city full of superhuman drug addicts ("Splicers"), little girls with huge needles and multiphonic voices ("Little Sisters"), lumbering men in 19th-century diving suits with mechanical drills for hands ("Big Daddies"), and the mysterious-and deadly-architect and leader of the city (Andrew Ryan). As he begins to navigate the leaking hallways and grand (but eerily quiet) Art Deco spaces of the city, Jack is contacted through radio by a mysterious character named Atlas who makes a deal with the protagonist: Atlas will help Jack escape if, and only if, Jack first helps Atlas's wife and son escape Rapture and its evil leader as well. Jack agrees, and the game begins in earnest.

Winding his way through Rapture under the guidance of Atlas, whose Irish accent and perpetual use of the phrase "Would you kindly?" quickly garners player trust, Jack finds powerful potions, called Plasmids, that grant him superhuman powers (including the ability to freeze things, throw flames, and electrically shock enemies, among others), discovers the secret of the Little Sisters (brainwashed female children who carry within them Rapture's currency, the genetic modifier known as ADAM, making them both highly desirable and highly endangered), and slowly learns the history of the gorgeous and horrifyingly deranged city and its inhabitants (a war between the city's founder and a sympathizer of the lower class, Frank Fontaine, caused Rapture's destruction, resulting in heavy physical damage, the murder of most of the city's inhabitants, and the proliferation of the Plasmid-addicted Splicers that routinely attempt to murder Jack).

However, as the game continues and Jack becomes more heavily embroiled in the bizarre political battles still ravaging Rapture, the player is hit with a heavy revelation

upon finally coming face-to-face with his seeming enemy, Andrew Ryan: Atlas is actually none other than Frank Fontaine, who has been using Jack as a pawn against Andrew Ryan in an effort to take over the city. Even more shocking is the realization that Jack is simply another genetically modified weapon, much like the Big Daddies who protect the Little Sisters, and that the phrase "Would you kindly?" acts as a trigger, forcing Jack to do whatever the speaker says. In an effort to show the severe lack of power and agency Jack possesses, Ryan, armed with the "Would you kindly?" cue, forces Jack to kill the magnate, spiraling Jack into a mission to break the trigger. The game ends with Jack hunting Fontaine, finally overcoming Rapture's truly evil new leader in a Plasmid-fueled battle against his once-friend. Depending on the player's decisions throughout the game (dictated on a player morality scale), different endings occur after the fight and illustrate what happens to the protagonist, the Little Sisters, and Rapture itself.

The intricate puzzles, complex fighting system, stunning graphics, and shocking plot twists have contributed to *Bioshock*'s multitude of awards, including, but not limited to, *Spike TV*'s prestigious "Award for Game of the Year" as well as its "Award for Best Original Score," *British Academy of Film and Television Arts* (*BAFTA*) "Games Award for Best Game," the Academy of Interactive Arts and Science's (AIAS) "Outstanding Achievement in Original Music Composition" (among awards for sound design, story and art direction), and the Game Developer's Choice Awards for writing, sound, and visual arts.[56] In all, *Bioshock* was nominated for 26 awards in 2007, winning 20 of them, and by June of the next year had sold over 2.2 million copies.[57] Its success spawned two

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[56] "Bioshock: Awards." *IMDB.com*. http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1094581/awards

sequels: the first, Bioshock 2 (2010), acted as direct sequel to its predecessor, with a notable shift in protagonists from Jack to a former Big Daddy; the second, the seemingly unrelated *Bioshock: Infinite,* follows a private investigator, Booker, in his attempts to rescue (or capture, depending on the moment) young Elizabeth, whose father had built a Rapture-styled city, Columbia, in the skies above the United States. Although not the focus of this chapter, the award-winning sound design and original soundtrack of *Bioshock: Infinite* will also figure in the pages to come.

While the visuals and game mechanics certainly captured the attention of gamers and critics alike*, Bioshock*'s true attraction lay in its plot, and specifically the plot's commentary on player agency. As the gamer, through Jack, realizes the importance of the phrase "Would you kindly?" he is forced to reflect not only on his personal agency in the narrative of *Bioshock,* but in the narrative of video games, and especially action/adventure games, in total. This meta-narrative plays an important role in the game's overall design, as is commented upon in an interview by video game journalist Geoff Keighley with *Bioshock* director/writer Ken Levine and lead artist Shawn Robertson:

> Keighley: So that phrase ["Would you kindly?"] evolved, but talk about the sort of meta-narrative of being in a game thinking you have a sense of choice and making these decisions but then obviously realizing that the player ultimately didn't have a choice or was conditioned in a way that they would react to that. That was sort of a new idea for a game. Where did that come from on your side, Ken? Was there sort of a deeper meaning behind it?
>
> Levine: No, I think I was always interested in the concept. Whether it's Oedipus, not to get too pointy-headed here, but Oedipus thinking "I'm gonna leave this city and go to another city because there's been this prophecy about me and I'm gonna avoid my fate and I'm in complete control," then finding out he's not in control at all, to the *Manchurian Candidate* which is a story I love about somebody who

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[57] "Take-Two Interactive Software, Inc. Reports Strong Second Quarter Fiscal 2008 Financial Results" (Press release). Take-Two Interactive. June 5, 2008.

you find out is just a puppet living a life of a man, and *Fight Club*. I always love those kind of stories about "Who am I, and what is my agency in this world?" because, look, we struggle, I think everybody struggles with that. How much do we really have control over, and how much is our boss, parents, or whatever telling us what to do? So that seemed like a natural thing for a story and because it came from movies, that idea [comes up] a lot, and in plays. I don't think it had been explored in games really. And games are particularly interesting because games…

Keighley: Because you feel like you are interacting with choice.

Levine: Yeah, and you're really being, most games, most of the time, you're really just being railroaded down a corridor. It's very easy to underestimate gamers, and I think I probably did a little of my own underestimating there that they would, it would be a little too pointy-headed for people, but people seemed to really engage. Probably because it spoke to an experience they had, a struggle as a gamer they've always had, which is "I want to control, but how much control do I really have in this game?"[58]

As is evidenced by this interview, the theme of agency, for both the character and the player, was a large part of *Bioshock*'s narrative. Indeed, the revelation sequence with Andrew Ryan was once of the first designed, and one of the only to remain largely unchanged throughout the course of production.[59]

However, the appeal for commentary on player freedom and choice (or lack thereof) can be found in other, more unexpected, places as well. For example, Levine and the rest of the production team strove to develop an environment and fighting system that allowed the player a multitude of options for how to interact with and handle any situation in the game: while the narrative remains relatively linear, each level offers a wide array of hidden areas and items, some of which help the player better understand the

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[58] Keighley, Geoff, Ken Levine, and Shawn Robertson. "*Bioshock: The Collection*-Director's Commentary: #10-Imagining *Bioshock* Excelsior."

[59] Keighley, Geoff, Ken Levine, and Shawn Robertson. "*Bioshock: The Collection*-Director's Commentary: #4-Imagining *Bioshock* The Creative Process."

story or make Jack stronger (i.e. plasmids, health packs, audio logs, and posters for Rapture's past events); also, the fighting mechanics combined the straightforward First Person Shooter (FPS) combat system with the more complex and customizable Role Playing Game (RPG) mechanics (player can choose which weapons to modify, which plasmids to equip against enemies, what attributes to enhance, and even whether or not to engage with the Big Daddies). Still, in the end, the basic idea of *Bioshock* revolved around the fear of manipulation and lack of choice. As Levine describes,

> I've always liked the idea of giving the player a lot of agency in terms of their play style, and experimenting with the play style and trying different things to see what worked and didn't work and interacting with the environment. The notion that it's sort of a playground, that you get to play around with in and imprint your own desire on was great, because I think we were more skeptical about being able to do that with story at the time, so much to the point where that became almost a joke, you know that becomes the meta-joke of the game: how little agency you have in your story.[60]

It is precisely this "joke" that makes *Bioshock* such an intensely impactful and horrific experience. Unlike *Silent Hill*, this game offers no cults, no child-sacrificing mothers, and no demons from the depth. What this game *does* provide, however, are primal, existential fears surrounding freedom, choice, and personal agency. Bioshock never lets the gamer feel comfortable or fully "let-in" on the truth of any location and character. And one of the best ways it is able to do that is through sound development and design: multiphonic squeals of "Kill him, Mr. Bubbles!" scream from the tiny Little Sisters; "(How Much is) That Doggy in the Window?" echoes joyfully out of a jukebox while murderous Splicers surround you in the dark; Atlas soothes and assuages you with a lilting "Would you kindly?". Therefore, this chapter will focus on the ways that the

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[60] Keighley, Geoff, Ken Levine, and Shawn Robertson. "*Bioshock: The Collection*-Director's Commentary: #3-Imagining *Bioshock* The Deeper Shooter."

voice acting and diegetic music of *Bioshock* serve to manipulate, deceive, and bewilder the gamer in an effort to render real fear and terror at the possibilities of the unknown.

Andrew Ryan's Rapture

Before we begin discussion of *Bioshock*'s soundscape, however, it is important to become acquainted with one of the game's most important characters: Rapture itself. Working as frame for the plot and its actors, the city's unique locale, fanciful style, and verdant imagery provides necessary setting for the music, sounds, and voices heard during the experience.

Despite the very real themes presented in the game, *Bioshock*'s artistic style more closely resembles cartoons than reality. The people (including Splicers and Little Sisters) of Rapture are caricatures, humanoid figures with unnaturally large eyes and strangely odd proportions that most closely resemble demonized Pixar characters. The Big Daddies, protectors of the Little Sisters, echo the girls' nickname for the brutes, Mr. Bubbles, with their large, bulbous head and rounded eye lights. Their hand drills, while terrifying and deadly, are almost clownish, dragging cumbersomely to the side of their metallic suits. And all the while, as the player engages with these bulbous headed, comic-book-like characters, messages are written in blood on walls and these same caricatured bodies are impaled, hung, and splattered around the halls of Rapture. However, while the style direction seems somewhat absurd in the light of the game's grotesque nature, it is clearly an intentional dissonance, as Rapture is detailed in the similarly themed, and timed, Art Deco style. (Figure 3)

When the player first sees Rapture, the character is cresting an underwater hill in a small submersible with a large front window that provides full access to the

breathtaking site of the city below (Figure 4). Glittering with neon lights, tall, pointed

skyscrapers are filled with gilded staircases and light fixtures, statues of overtly chiseled

men, and posters styled straight out of the 1930s. The halls between buildings are small,

circular, intimate, and made completely out of glass, offering views of the rest of the city

surreally surrounded by oceanic plants and animals. The larger spaces are themed for

FIGURE 3: BIG DADDIES, LITTLE SISTERS, AND SPLICERS

"Big Daddy"   **"Little Sister"**

Crop and Clean by player Lego Slayer   Screenshot from Bioshock.wikia.com

"Spider Splicer"

Screenshot by player Unknown Shipper

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their purposes (an art studio, a record store, a cocktail bar, a theater) and lavishly

decorated in oxidized green flooring, golden pillars, and deep red velvet cushions.

Director and writer Ken Levine describes taking a trip to the Rockefeller Center in New

York City, and falling in love with the golden tinges and simple geometric patterns that

filled the space. From the pictures Levine sent back, Rapture was born.[61]

FIGURE 4: FIRST LOOK AT RAPTURE (SCREENSHOT BY AUTHOR)

"I chose the impossible; I chose Rapture!": The player sees Rapture for the first time while listening to a
recording by Andrew Ryan

Of course, it is almost impossible to discuss Rapture without bringing up its

equal-parts enigmatic and dangerous leader, Andrew Ryan. Although the city itself was

designed and created first, Ryan's character filled the city with life and gave meaning

behind Rapture's aesthetic and locale. "The character Ryan was sort of, he was basically

invisible through most of the game," Levine describes, "you know, except for a very

small portion, but he's very present, because he exists, the city is him…it's such a

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[61] Keighley, Geoff, Ken Levine, and Shawn Robertson. "*Bioshock: The Collection*-Director's Commentary:
#1-Imagining *Bioshock* Making Rapture Real."

representation of him. We never wanted to cut away to a cutscene where you saw Andrew Ryan…planning and scheming. We wanted him to be very present without actually being present."[62] Ryan's desire for an Objectivistic city, untainted by and removed from the rest of the world is echoed in the posters and videos scattered around Rapture: "No Gods or Kings, Only Man." declares a banner found at the offset of the game; an audio recording captures Ryan asking "What is the difference between a man and a parasite? A man builds, a parasite asks 'Where's my share?' A man creates, a parasite says 'What will the neighbors think?' A man invents, a parasite says 'Watch out, or you might tread on the toes of God...'"; and another, "I believe in no God, no invisible man in the sky. But there is something more powerful than each of us, a combination of our efforts, a Great Chain of industry that unites us. But it is only when we struggle in our own interest that the chain pulls society in the right direction. The chain is too powerful and too mysterious for any government to guide. Any man who tells you different either has his hand in your pocket, or a pistol to your neck." The leader is strong, implacable, and often cruel, refusing to entertain any theoretical ideas of social welfare and class or race equality. These Randian binaries—free will versus determinancy, choice versus social ethics and morals—pervade and influence every movement, battle, level, and, most importantly, decision the player makes and informs the premise and basis of the game's atmosphere and environment. And acting as some of the most crucial elements in this world creation are the sounds and music that complete Andrew Ryan's underwater oasis.

It is in this realm—the sounds, voices, and music of Ryan's Rapture—that the rest of this chapter will lie. While perhaps extended, the foregoing overall description of the

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[62] Ibid.

plot, narrative devices, and aesthetics of the game are crucial in understanding the place and nature of the game's sonic atmosphere. With this background, we are now able to explore and discuss the complicated, political, and horror-filled nature of the sound world of *Bioshock.*

Who's There?

In 2012, director Peter Strickland released the fantastically creepy and perfectly odd British horror film *Berberian Sound Studio.* Giving us a rare glimpse into the processes that create the sounds we hear in film, *Berberian Sound Studio* follows sound designer Gilderoy (played by Toby Jones) and his slow slide into madness as he travels to Italy to work audio for a horror movie. As Gilderoy becomes more and more involved in the film's sound production, the horrific scenes start shifting into reality, and the former nature documentarist is ultimately unable to distinguish between reality and virtuality. The film forces the audience to question pre-existing assumptions about sound and its importance in our ability to understand our environment, focusing specifically on sound's ability to deceive the listener.

Despite never seeing the images of the interior film, *Berberian* manages to trick our brains into perceiving something that does not exist, even in spite of explicit onscreen visuals portraying the opposite. The film depicts sound designers crushing watermelon to auralize splattering bodies, pulling leaves from radishes to signify hair yanked from heads, and stabbing cabbages to denote knives entering bodies. However, given even a tiny bit of backstory to the plot of *Berberian*'s interior movie, our brains still perceive crushed skulls and stabbed abdomens, without any visuals to encourage this perception. Vegetables in garbage bins begin to resemble rotting corpses and bludgeoned heads,

despite clear visual clues that they are not, all due to the mental manipulation that sound can play on the audience. Sound's ability to not only denote, but also dement, onscreen visuals plays an important role in the audience's filmic perception, and illustrates an agency rarely afforded to the phenomena. It is precisely this type of agency, the type that tricks, manipulates, and ensnares, that makes *Bioshock*'s sound and audio effects so fascinating, a phenomenon first described by French film theorist and composer Michel Chion in his seminal works *The Voice in Cinema* and *Audio-Visio: Sound on Screen* in his analyses of sound and voice in film.

Both of Chion's books present a complex and nuanced addition to the study of sound in film, offering new terms for theoretical vocabulary and an in-depth example chapter of his own methods for sound analysis. Throughout both, Chion tackles such matters as how sound acts when projected onto an image (audience perception, temporalization, localization), types of listening (causal listening, reduced listening, semantic listening), the problematic use of the word "soundtrack," and the ways voice works within and upon the narrative and visuals of a film. Most important for our argument, Chion discusses sound's ability to manipulate the audience into believing something that is untrue, whether it is simply practical sound editing (e.g. utilizing Foley effects to create a specific sound, such as walking on sand to auralize snowshoeing) or designed explicitly with this agential power in mind (e.g. utilizing sound to redirect attention or lure audience into a false sense of security). This mental manipulation of audience perception through sound, what Chion calls "added value," allows the director and sound editor to create new, coded meanings for both the sounds and images of the film, which then creates and informs the audience's understanding of the scene or plot, a

great device for films meant to terrify and disgust. "Transformed by the image it influences, sound ultimately reprojects onto the image the product of their mutual influences. We find eloquent testimony to this reciprocity in the case of horrible or upsetting sounds. The image projects onto them a meaning they do not have at all by themselves."[63] Chion's *Audio-Vision* and *The Voice in Cinema* offer a fundamental understanding at the ways sound is used to trick and deceive, often to terrifying results, and will serve as foundational texts for this chapter.

One of the most important and impactful features of Rapture's sound world is the voices of its citizens, both dead and alive, that echo throughout its metallic halls. These voices influence and dictate every move the player makes, including battle decisions, and help fill the beautiful but eerie world of the underwater city with life. Take, for instance, this terrifying scene: you, as Jack, have just finished a particularly difficult task in order to gain access to a new area of Rapture. You step into the dimly lit space, and it immediately fills with fog. Unable to see anything but white, you begin to hear voices, quiet at first, but increasingly louder as they draw nearer. Without warning, you are hit, hard, on the back of the head, and it becomes immediately clear that you must fight your way out of the situation. Using only your hearing, you must survive the onslaught, battling your way through the deadly group of Splicers intent on your death. This scene is indicative of the ways *Bioshock*'s designers utilize voices to control both the player and the narrative throughout the game.

One particularly effective vocal feature of the game arrives in the form of "Audio Diaries" scattered throughout Rapture (Figure 5). Branded and sold as "Accu-Vox," these

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[63] Chion, Michel. *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*.

portable tape players can be replayed to hear the diaries of various characters, both plot crucial and not, in an effort to better understand what life was like in the underwater Objectivist city. While some recordings must be found to continue the game, most are not, offering a deeper look into the lives of Rapture's citizens. For example, many of the recordings come from Andrew Ryan himself, documenting his Randian ideals and hopes for the city and its people, as related earlier in this chapter. However, several come from Ryan's mistress Diane McClintock, who, through her diaries, documents not only the rise and decline of Rapture, but the disillusionment of its citizens as well. Her early diaries depict a woman in love, enamored by the strength, charisma, and vision for Rapture, a general sentiment held by the citizens of the town. After a brutal attack by Atlas and his rebels at a New Year's Eve party she was attending left her face horribly disfigured, Diane was promptly abandoned by Ryan, who no longer saw a use for her, leaving Diane heartbroken and vengeful. The rest of her diaries follow her investigation into Ryan's treatment of dissenters, her defection into Atlas's army, and, ultimately, her murder when she discovers Atlas's true identity. While seemingly crucial to understanding the backstory between Atlas and Ryan, and the civil war that destroyed Rapture, Diane's story is a completely optional side-quest: it is up to the player to find her audio diaries and piece the story together himself. The way these recordings are found, often out of order and amid the narratives of several other characters, develop a confused and increasingly horrific understanding of the descent of Rapture while simultaneously highlighting a crucial theme of the game: a pawn has no power.

Of course, much of the effectiveness of Rapture's voices comes from utilizing talented voice actors. As *Bioshock*'s designers quickly discovered, using the wrong voice

could completely destroy the believability of the narrative. In fact, one of the most crucial

characters of the game, Atlas, originally had a deep southern drawl, which, in the end,

proved fatal, as Levine describes in the interview with Geoff Keighley: "I was very

FIGURE 5: THE "ACCU-VOX" (SCREENSHOT BY AUTHOR)

happy with the original character, and I thought I'd really done something great, and then

you show it to people [in a playtest], and they just hated it. And they didn't trust him. If

they didn't trust him then we were screwed."[64] It was clear to the game's designers that

voice acting was that crucial element that would dictate how both the huge reveal and the

game's meta-narrative would be received, hinging completely on the ability to deceive

the player based solely on the quality of the character's voice. As Chion writes, "[T]he

presence of a human voice structures the sonic space that contains it."[65] Voice dictates

the direction of any scene, narrative, or location in which it is heard, and is often

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[64] Keighley, Geoff, Ken Levine, and Shawn Robertson. "*Bioshock: The Collection*-Director's Commentary: #5-Imagining *Bioshock* Community Theater."

[65] Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, 5.

responsible for engendering meaning into the space. *Bioshock*'s creators and design team understood this, which is why each character interaction of the game works so perfectly within the narrative and set of the story, as we will see below.

Some of the most striking--and unsettling--character interactions of the game occur during Jack's meetings with the Little Sisters. As one of the closest examples of free agency in the entire game,[66] the player's choice to engage with the Big Daddies and either rescue the Little Sisters or harvest them for more ADAM, Rapture's primary currency, presents a poignant moral dilemma. "I think it was important that it was a way to reflect the larger economic questions of a world like Rapture where the economy drives everything," Levine explains. "[W]e wanted you [the player] to understand that you were making a very diabolical pact, a moral, economic pact there."[67] By using the form of little girl, among society's most immediate images of innocence and helplessness, to represent the capital and wealth of a city so steeped in neoliberal, Randian ideology, *Bioshock* is making a clear statement of the dangers of economy without ethics. However, by then forcing this choice, to kill or save the Little Sister, on the player, whose sole ability to survive relies on that same capital, the writers are further driving players into perhaps unwanted, or possibly even unrecognized, contemplation of the moral and ethical realities of our choices and the choices of those around us. While on a strictly ludological level, a part of the dilemma of choosing whether to or not to engage with the children stems from the terror of the Big Daddy and the necessity of the fight

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[66] While the choice to engage with the Big Daddy and rescue or harvest the Little Sister is entirely up to the player, tonic and ability upgrades, necessary for completing the game, require ADAM to purchase, which is only found in the bodies of Little Sisters. Therefore, although which Big Daddy/how many Big Daddies engaged is entirely up to the player, there is still a degree of lack of agency attached to the interactions.

[67] Keighley, Geoff, Ken Levine, and Shawn Robertson. "*Bioshock: The Collection*-Director's Commentary: # 9-Imagining *Bioshock* Questions of Morality."

with him, most, of course, stems from the extraordinarily haunting sound and visual

design of the mutated Little Sister and the ethical and moral questions she drags along

with her.

The first interaction with the Little Sisters occurs early in the game. Jack has been

knocked down, unable to move, and is about to be murdered by two mask-wearing,

bloodied Splicers hoping to recover the tiny bit of ADAM Jack had just digested.

However, before they are able to complete their task, a low moaning sound echoes

throughout the space, and the Splicers flee, terrified of whatever is approaching that made

the sound. Unable to move or focus on anything but the space immediately in front of

him, the player is left anxiously wondering at who or what will appear next. The hulking

figure of the Big Daddy suddenly appears on screen, gigantic drill spinning menacingly,

but what appears next is even more frightening: two tiny feet approach the Jack's prone

figure, and, in a sickening multiphonic chorus supporting the high-pitched voice of a

young girl, the bulbous-headed Little Sister, with yellow lights gleaming where eyes

should be, exclaims, "Look, Mr. Bubbles! An angel!"

This voice haunts the rest of the game, echoing off metal walls as the tiny girl

screams "Kill him!" during the player's fights with the Daddies. It is also the main

feature during the decision to harvest or rescue the girls: if the player chooses to "save"

the Little Sister, the child screams "No!" several times in her layered voice before the

injected cure returns her to normal, sonically represented by a single-voiced, childish

"Thank you!" while the now clear-eyed little girl clasps her hands and bows in

appreciation; however, if the player chooses to "harvest" the Little Sister for ADAM, the

creature growls and moans at Jack, and the screen is covered in the girl's green blood as

he extracts the ADAM-producing slug from inside her stomach. Mixed with the perversion of the young Little Sisters, with their soulless, gleaming eyes and cold excitement at "angels" (their name for dead bodies filled with ADAM), the multi-layered voices of the Little Sisters remind the player of famous films featuring demonic possession, such as blockbuster horror film *The Exorcist*'s (1973) possessed child Regan, whose infamously obscene lines still terrorize, and inform, the horror genre and its fans today. As a whole, the interactions with the Little Sisters are a unique and potent moral and ethical sonic venture that immediately forces the gamer into reflection on neoliberalism, capitalism, and economic ethics and morality, and offer some of the most horrifying implications of agency and choice available in the entire game, showcasing once again the potency and power available to the video game medium alone.

Perhaps the player's only true ally in the game, scientist Brigid Tenenbaum represents a surprising change to the typical encounter in Rapture. Her long brown hair, kind brown eyes, and beautiful facial features are completely at odds with the horrific mutations that represent the majority of Rapture's denizens. Her voice itself is different as well: except for a single time while attempting to protect a Little Sister, Tenenbaum is soft-spoken, her voice highlighted by a sweetly intelligent German accent. Whether the player chooses to help the Little Sisters or not, Tenenbaum still assists him, offering guidance on your missions and sanctuary when you need it most. Even director Ken Levine describes her as the character in "noble"[68] opposition to Ryan.

Yet despite these juxtapositions her character offers to the terrors of *Bioshock*, Tenenbaum is still an agent of Rapture. It is revealed mid-game that she was the scientist

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[68] Keighley, Geoff, Ken Levine, and Shawn Robertson. "*Bioshock: The Collection*-Director's Commentary: #1-Imagining *Bioshock* Making Rapture Real."

who developed the Little Sister production, and after the discovery of Atlas's mental hypnosis, Tenenbaum becomes the player's action director, much like Atlas himself, a fact Atlas jabs at you during a later conversation ("Has Mother Goose [Tenenbaum] really got her hooks into you. You can knock Ryan all you want, but the old man was bingo on one point of fact: you won't even walk till somebody says 'go'!"). In the end, Tenenbaum remains worthy of your trust, but the implications of her aural and visual design—soft German accent from a beautiful, intelligent woman—say much about social anxieties surrounding class. Why should Jack trust this voice from this woman over the voice of a man with a rough Boston accent, especially given both are using you to further their own agendas? While it is completely necessary to finish the game that you do so, trusting Tenenbaum over Fontaine, with all the implications of class and social hegemony that accompany the decision, is clearly a tension the developers and directors wanted to force the player to confront. Tenenbaum represents one of the many ways *Bioshock* uses sound, and especially voice, to play with the gamer's assumptions and make subtle, yet significant, observations about our society and personal agency.

By far, however, the most potent and crucial narrative and character-developing interactions of the game are, of course, those between Jack and Andrew Ryan and Jack and Atlas/Fontaine. These conversations not only set the story of Rapture, but drive *Bioshock*'s narrative as a whole. Shockingly, the majority of these dialogues occur solely over radio—in fact, Jack only meets each character face-to-face once. As we will discover, the use of the radio as sole means of communication between these characters reveals a conscious, well-planned voice-acting decision to create deeply meaningful plot and character revelations.

Many of the most terrifying villains in the horror genre are those whose face we never see, or see at the end, but whose voice we often hear, such as Norman Bates' mother in *Psycho* (1960) or Mother in *Alien* (1979). Michel Chion calls this phenomena *acousmêtre*: "When the acousmatic presence is a voice, and especially when this voice has not yet been visualized—that is, when we cannot yet connect it to a face—we get a special being, a kind of talking and acting shadow to which we attach the name *acousmêtre*."[69] For Chion, these presences gain an almost god-like sense of power in its "not-yet-seen"[70] quality, as the protagonist (and audience) have no reference to the voice's possible attributes. Chion lists these powers as "the ability to be everywhere, to see all, to know all, and to have complete power,"[71] all hinged on this idea of the unknown. However, once the speaker is seen, unmasked, and identified, the voice loses these "virginal-acousmatic powers, and re-enters the realm of human beings." [72] This normally occurs at the end of a film, book, or video game, where often a main—or *the* main—purpose of the plot was to discover the source of the voice and, in discovery, destroy its potency.

Neither Andrew Ryan nor Atlas/Fontaine represent Chion's true *complete acousmêtre*, as both Ryan and Atlas are visualized by the identification image brought up when either speaks to Jack through the radio, as well as the myriad posters and videos featuring both found throughout Rapture. However, their true frames, the way their voices fit their bodies, is not discovered until, for Ryan, close to the end, and for Atlas,

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[69] Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, 21.

[70] Ibid, 23.

[71] Ibid, 24.

[72] Ibid, 23.

the final sequence. Therefore, both characters can be recognized as "visualized *acousmetre*" and are, therefore, still afforded the same powers and privileges recounted above, if to a slightly lesser effect than a *complete acousmêtre*. It is in this position that both characters acquire so much power over the protagonist, as well as the equally vulnerable gamer; without this solely sonic presence, neither character imposes the same threat as they do in their unseen form.

What remains most interesting in the aural dynamics of the two antagonists, however, lies in their narrative positions. Ryan is immediately placed in the role of villain, and much of the game is spent trying to locate, with intent to kill, Rapture's architect. Atlas, who, as mentioned above, begins the game with a lilting Irish accent and heartbreaking background story, acts as mentor, ally, and even possible friend to the main character, rapidly gaining the trust of both Jack and the player. Therefore, when Jack is finally able to confront Ryan face-to-face, during Ryan's crucial "de-acousmatization,"[73] Ryan's unmasking betrays no loss of power, as the player realizes that Ryan was never the threat to begin with. Instead, by showing Jack the true nature of Atlas and "Would you kindly?", and then using that same phrase to force the player to kill him, therefore dying on his own terms, Ryan *gains* power in his de-acousmatization, rather than losing it. In opposition, Atlas (or rather Fontaine), is shown, in the end, to actually be the monster the player had assumed of Ryan, and in his Spliced, irrational, monstrous form, loses the real horror his human acousmêtre form held. In the end, it is in the capacity of the acousmêtre that Ryan and Atlas struggle for power, and it is in this sonic space that much of *Bioshock*'s potent terror is realized.

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[73] Ibid, 23.

Rapture's voices are a crucial element of the *Bioshock* story. Without their sonic presence, Rapture lies a little flatter, a little less believable. These voices make Rapture, and its terror, a not-so-distant reality, giving a human credence to the game. However, as we will see in the next section, the music of *Bioshock*, both diegetic and non-diegetic, contribute to this feeling of possible reality in ways that simultaneously chill and enthrall. (Figure 6)

**FIGURE 6: ANDREW RYAN, ATLAS, TENENBAUM, FRANK FONTAINE
(SCREENSHOTS BY AUTHOR)**

How Rapture Sounds

The discussion surrounding the boundary—or lack thereof—between diegetic and non-diegetic sound or music in film has long been a focal point in scholarship surrounding movie soundtracks, and in such a visceral genre as horror, where, as Julia Heimerdinger writes in her article on the use of avant-garde music in horror, "[m]usic and sound specifically attack the nervous system both physically, with the aid of psychoacoustics, and, in a more abstract way, via culturally developed forms clueing the

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audience in on something,"[74] the discourse becomes almost imperative, as viewer

reactions can often come in the form of unwanted or unexpected bodily betrayals. For the

audience of a horror film, the difference between a diegetic sound and a non-diegetic

sound could potentially (and in most cases does) mean the difference between danger and

safety for the on-screen protagonist, and for the video game player, the sounds turn into a

personal threat. Therefore, understanding the murky divide between diegetic and non-

diegetic sound and music is a necessary component of surviving and completing a horror

game; as Robynn J. Stilwell writes in her analysis of this aural space, "When the

boundary between diegetic and nondiegetic is traversed, it does always *mean*."[75]

In his description of conventional horror musical tropes discussed in this thesis'

introduction, Donnelly describes how horror film music not only utilizes "narrative

employment" to set context and attempt to prescribe emotion, as evidenced in films such

as *Casablanca* (1942) and *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), but also "has an additional

psychological use, based on fundamental notions of presence/absence, perceived origin

and physical volume. So," he continues, "non-diegetic music appears to have a closer

relationship to the horror genre than any other area of cinema."[76] The idea of

presence/absence is particularly useful in discussing the power of the diegetic and non-

diegetic divide, and music's ability to slip between the two, as is described in an anecdote

by Stilwell:

> As late as 1944, Hitchcock famously still asked, 'But where is the orchestra?'
> about a proposed underscore for *Lifeboat*. Apocryphal or not, the question is

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[74] Heimerdinger, Julia. "Music and sound in the horror film and why some modern avant-garde music lends itself to it so well." *Beitrage zur Musik der Gegenwart*, 4-16.

[75] Stilwell, Robynn J. "The Fantastical Gap between Diegetic and Nondiegetic." *Beyond the Soundtrack: Representing Music in Cinema*, 186.

[76] Donnelly, K.J. *The Spectre of Sound: Music in Film and Television*, 90.

illuminating. It wasn't the *function* that concerned Hitchcock in *Lifeboat*, but the extra-diegetic location of the musicians. Perhaps the question never was the *absence* of the musicians, but the uncertainty of where they might be. Unidentifiable, unlocatable sound is disturbing because we (potential prey) are alerted to potential threat; it makes us uneasy; we look around for visual grounding.[77]

Non-diegetic music therefore has an added layer of purpose and understanding that can and often is used to trick and scare the audience or player of horror films and video games.

However, despite the deep relationship between the genre and non-diegetic music, Bioshock's non-diegetic soundtrack rarely utilizes the divide. While the award-winning score by composer Garry Schyman is both beautiful and terrifying, it rarely moves outside traditional horror tropes, such as quiet, hauntingly shrill arpeggios in the violins or low drones just barely audible but astoundingly suspenseful. In one scene straight out of a 1970s slasher, a room splashed with blood is filled suddenly with fog, and a low cluster chord played by the entire orchestra sounds as the screen fills with white. It grows to a dull roar as a voice comes on the radio describing a betrayal he suffered at the hands of Andrew Ryan, a betrayal he is now exacting from the character. When he ends his story, the soundtrack cuts out abruptly, and the player is briefly left alone in the fog, aurally and visually, until suddenly, accompanied by screaming atonal tremolos and glissandos, sharp staccato patterns, and a constant, low ostinato, splicers emerge from the white darkness, armed and intent on killing you. This scene, while extremely effective in inducing both panic and suspense, is so typical an aural trope that it almost seems out of place in a game so obviously self-conscious. However, in light of precisely that—the desire by the writers and design team to produce both an ode to and a critique of

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[77] Stilwell, 188.

traditional horror—that the use of conventional, albeit masterful, horror musical themes.

In so doing, they created a space traditionally given to non-diegetic music and instead

allowed the diegetic soundworld of Rapture to fill   it. It is for this reason that this

chapter is focusing primarily on the diegetic music of Rapture, in order to better

understand exactly the ways *Bioshock* is so capable at manipulating and scaring its

players.

  Almost immediately upon entering the world of Rapture, the player is confronted

by a sonic presence that remains with the character for the rest of the game: popular

American songs from the mid-twentieth century. Serving almost as a "sarcastic,

omniscient narrator,"[78] this particular form of diegetic music, heard through jukeboxes

and record players scattered throughout the city, functions in a direct relationship with

both Rapture and Jack/the player, creating a unique sound world that emphasizes the

capitalistic fantasies of Rapture's creator while directly commenting on the events that

have and will transpire.

  As musicologist William Gibbons describes in his article "Wrap Your Troubles in

Dreams: Popular Music, Narrative, and Dystopia in Bioshock," the use of popular music

in video games of the '80s and early 1990s was infrequent at best, largely due to popular

music's finite length and its inability to elicit the desired emotional response among

individual gaming experiences. The 2000s, however, witnessed an upsurge in the use of

popular music in games such as *Guitar Hero* and Rock Band, which use popular music as

the premise and play of the game, and, notably, games such as those in the *Grand Theft*

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[78] Gibbons, William. "Wrap Your Troubles in Dreams: Popular Music, Narrative, and Dystopia in Bioshock." *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research*.

Auto and *Fallout* series, both of which allow the player to choose a built-in radio station to listen to while playing the game.[79] Much like it does in *Bioshock*, the popular music used in these games gave an added layer of context and narrative that an original score could not have achieved. In her ethnographic work on *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, "Jacking the Dial: Radio Race and Place in 'Grand Theft Auto'," Kiri Miller describes the myriad reasons why most people chose the stations they did: some chose the station they felt most closely represented the protagonist, situation, locale, or mood, while others chose a station that, on the surface, seemed completely out of sync. As one player described, "Sometimes I like to use the country station on San Andreas while doing a drive-by because it's so surreal."[80]

However, unlike *Grand Theft Auto* and *Fallout*, neither Jack nor the player has the opportunity to "jack the dial" of the music of Rapture—this is the house that Andrew Ryan built, after all. Instead, the music heard throughout the city is purposeful, and often ironically comments upon the situation or locale. Sometimes the irony is found in the song's lyrics; for example, upon entering the terrifying Splicer-filled former shopping mall Fort Frolic, the player distinctly hears the sounds of Patti Page's famous "(How Much is) That Doggie in the Window?" The shocking difference between the hyper-cheerful strains "That Doggie in the Window?' and the blood-splattered tile of the once-beautiful shopping mall "highlights the naivete of the [Objectivist] utopian ideal and the grotesqueness of its dystopian inversion."[81] To be sure, the powerful emotional response

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[79] Ibid.

[80] Miller, Kiri. "Jacking the Dial: Radio, Race, and Place in "Grand Theft Auto."" *The Society for Ethnomusicology*, 425.

[81] Gibbons, 13.

garnered from using popular music to comment on horrific or terrifying themes and visuals has made it a popular effect in the horror genre: Patrick Bateman murders business rival Paul Allen with an ax while dancing to *Huey Louis and the News*'s hit 1986 single "Hip to be Square" in Mary Harron's film adaptation of *American Psycho* (2000); popular jazz standard "Jeepers Creepers" acts as theme for the monster in the 2000s franchise *Jeepers Creepers*; and, of course, Alex DeLarge infamously beats a famous writer and then rapes his wife while singing "Singin' in the Rain" in Stanley Kubrick's film adaptation of *A Clockwork Orange* (1971). Writing on Kubrick's frequent use of popular music, and specifically in his adaptation of *The Shining* (1980), musicologist Christine Lee Gengaro discusses the importance of the popular hit "Midnight, the Stars, and You" in the film, writing that "[t]he big band music is part of the nostalgic lure that pulls in [*The Shining*'s main character], perhaps attempting to absorb his soul…an idealized past where everything is genteel and beautiful. The past has an ugly underside, not available at first glance."[82] By place the terrifying visuals of horror and the beautiful strains of beloved popular music tracks side by side, horror titles such as *Bioshock* are able to create a stunning juxtaposition that serves to heighten the terror.

However, the songs used in *Bioshock* often also use their titles to comment on events, a practice harkening back to performance practices of silent films.[83] Gibbons describes a salient moment:

> Fairly near the beginning of *Bioshock*, players encounter their first seriously challenging "boss": Dr. Steinman, a plastic surgeon whose obsession with physical perfection has transformed him into a psychopath bent on becoming the

[82] Gengaro, Christine Lee. "Midnight, the Stars, and You: The Shining." *Listening to Stanley Kubrick: The Music in His Films*. Plymouth, UK: Scarecrow Press, Inc, 2013. 191.
[83] Gibbons, 19.

"Picasso of surgery," a goal every bit as horrifying as it sounds. After players "dispose" of the good doctor, the voice of Atlas—your Virgil-like guide through the hellish Rapture-offers his congratulations: "It's about time somebody took care of that bastard!" Just as Atlas finishes, Django Reinhardt's instrumental version of "It Had to be You" begins, playing quietly over what is apparently an intercom system.[84]

The diegetic songs of Rapture function as commentator, often working to highlight the absurd horror that plagues the city.

The use of well-known songs to comment on the narrative and emphasize ironic terror also continues throughout the sequels of *Bioshock* as well. The third and final installment of the series, *Bioshock: Infinite*, follows private detective Booker DeWitt in his quest to rescue (or kidnap, depending on the point of view) young Elizabeth from her jailer (or protector), Zachary Comstock, a man leading the steampunk-esque[85], hyper-religious city, Columbia, in the clouds above the United States. Running largely on a Christian-like form of religious extremism—down to the fanatic insistence on racial purity—Columbia requires all would-be citizens or visitors to be baptized before entering the city, therefore forcing the player to submit to his own baptism before beginning his quest. And all the while, a game-original remake of the popular 1907 hymn, "Will the Circle Be Unbroken?," plays softly and sweetly in the background.

Despite the beauty of the sequence—the room is lit with soft candles, and the hymn is gentle and welcoming—the forced nature of such a deeply personal religious experience is jarring and chilling; in fact, the scene was so uncomfortable, one man demanded a refund, describing how "[t]he player is forced to make a choice which

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[84] Ibid, 17.

[85] Steampunk is understood here as pertaining to the literary and cultural sub-genre of science fiction which features late-19th century, neo-Victorian aesthetics (clothing, social etiquette, architecture, etc.) blended with elements of steam technology, especially visible gears and cranks, to power gadgets and weapons.

amounts to extreme blasphemy in my religion (Christianity) in order to proceed any

further—and am therefor[e] forced (in good [conscience]) to quit playing and not able to

experience approx. 99% of the content in the game."[86] As a central theme of the game,

religious extremism is felt keenly throughout the game, most notably in the sonic

atmosphere. While the religion of the city is carefully not referred to as Christian, the

hymns heard, including "Will the Circle Be Unbroken?", "(Give Me That) Old-Time

Religion," and "Just a Closer Walk with Thee," are clearly Christian, using the reference

to remark upon the dangers of religious totalitarianism, while also highlighting the ways

music can be used as means of coercion and control. Writing during World War II,

psychologist R.L. Warren remarked upon the surprisingly similar ways that the Christian

church and the German Nazi party employed hymns and *Parteilieder*, respectively,

noting how "they make appeals on a social psychological level which are employed to a

certain degree by all social movements: The appeal to enemies to solidify the ingroup, the

appeal to dead heroes, the sanction of eternity, the employment of symbols, the

imminence of victory as a bolster to morale, the rallying around a leader, etc…" [87] The

hymns, though beautifully played, do not assuage any terrors or anxieties for the player as

an outsider, as their lyrics suggest they should, but instead heighten them through

disassociation and forced entry. This use of licensed religious songs is a simple, but

powerful, way to aurally highlight the ways societal issues, such as religious

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[86] Hernandez, Patricia. "Some Don't Like *BioShock*'s Forced Baptism. Enough to Ask For A Refund." *Kotaku*.

[87] Warren, R.L. "German Parteilieder and Christian hymns as instruments of social control." *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 96-100.

totalitarianism, can provoke fear and horror and does much to help stimulate the central theme of agency in the series.

However*, Bioshock*'s diegetic music is also used to designate areas as either safe or potentially dangerous for the player. For instance, one form of Splicer, religious fanatics known as Waders, are often heard singing the popular Christian children's song "Jesus Loves Me" to themselves when unaware of enemy presences, while the "Circus of Values" vending machines, which not only sell crucial necessities such as health packs and ammunition but also offer a brief pause from the game, even during battle, alert the player of its location with the store's brief theme song. This idea of music as a form of territorialization is an integral theme of philosopher Gilles Deleuze's and psychoanalyst Felix Guattari's seminal work *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizphrenia*. Within the study, the authors suggest that children's songs, or "refrains," act as a negotiation of boundaries, "a circle around that uncertain and fragile center, to organize a limited space."[88] For Deleuze and Guattari, by singing the refrain, children are both marking their personal territory and drawing strength from the center it provides. When any part of the refrain is disrupted, "[a] mistake in speed, rhythm, or harmony," the territory is breached and chaos asserts control and authority, "destroying both creator and creation."[89] This theory on territorialization and the refrain works well in relation to *Bioshock*, as it is easy to understand the diegetic music of Rapture—including the popular music floating throughout the space, which represents Andrew Ryan and his intent for Rapture—as a struggle for personal power within the tumultuous and terrifying city.

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[88] Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 311.

[89] Ibid, 311.

However, this idea then necessarily marks Jack (and the player) as outsider, or chaos, as his attempts to escape—to break free from the city's circle—frequently and purposefully disrupt the harmonic order of the space. Indeed, silence in Rapture represents the only true indicator of safety for the protagonist; even the vending machines fall quiet after their initial theme, leaving the player in complete, safe aural darkness. By designating Jack as antagonist of the space, the game's designers have firmly positioned him in direct opposition of the city and its factions, including Ryan and Fontaine, marking him as a redeemable and powerful agent in the narrative, offering the player one of the only instances of true authority throughout the game.

In all, the diegetic music of Rapture provides a myriad of avenues to explore in the player's search for the truth. More than mere songs, this music provides an in-depth look at the world Andrew Ryan created while simultaneously commentating on each area and the on-screen action of the narrative. In this capacity, it serves as an integral aspect of the game's overall environmental objective.

<u>Conclusion</u>

Horror is built on broken trust and power struggles: Father Karras desperately tries to reclaim the territory of Reagan's body from the demon Pazuzu in *The Exorcist*; systems engineer Isaac Clarke desperately tries to save his girlfriend who, unknown to him, is actually a demonic projection in the 2008 survival horror game *Dead Space*; Jill Johnson realizes her murderous stalker is calling from inside her house in *When a Stranger Calls*. As William Whittington writes, "It should come as no surprise that trust is also a major thematic concern of horror films, which constantly pose the question:

'Who do I trust?'"[90] Therefore, when a horror film or video game employs these narrative devices, it is neither an original idea nor a thematic revolution. So why discuss *Bioshock*?

Bioshock does not simply stick to the horror conventions of questions surrounding trust and agency; instead, *Bioshock* turns those conventions into the game itself. Set in the world of Rapture, ruled and ruined by the illusion of free will and dominated by Randian, neoliberalistic capitalism, trust and agency become real moments of crisis and deliberations, resolved only through morally difficult personal decisions necessary to progress to the next step of the game. And, even more distinctively, *Bioshock* uses the sound world of Rapture to achieve these goals, twisting voices to deceive the player and manipulating spatial perception through music. The player learns that while the visuals of the city and onscreen displays are important to pay attention to, for obvious reasons, the sonic aspects of a location—the music, the voices, the sounds—are what will ultimately keep him alive. Therefore, *Bioshock*'s ability to use sound to pointedly discuss agency and power in horror separates the game from traditional horror tropes while simultaneously highlighting the uniquely immense power video games hold over their players and the choices their players make. By directly confronting these issues, by making the confrontation the purpose of the game, and by using mostly sound and music to do it, *Bioshock* has opened new avenues for the horror game genre, and in so doing, has become a standard for how to portray and convey horror in the video game world.

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[90] Whittington, William. "Horror Sound Design." *A Companion to the Horror Film*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc (2014). 169.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

This past January (2017), Capcom finally released one of their most anticipated and talked about titles, *Resident Evil 7: Biohazard*. Shaking off the action-adventure-shoot-em-up feel of the previous two entries in the series, *Biohazard* returned to its survival horror roots, offering everything from a backwater Louisiana plantation to escape (a nod to the original title), a semi-functional hillbilly family of zombies reminiscent of the locals in John Boorman's *Deliverance* (1972), a demon-like little girl who appeared suddenly in dark spaces and insisted on calling the protagonist "Daddy," and all the blood, mutilated flesh, and molding monsters a player can handle. The story followed thirty-something Ethan in search of his missing wife, whose lack of much physical strength or health and uncanny ability to run out of bullets made the gameplay heavily revolve around evasion, stealth, and calculated strategy in fights. Immediately recognizing it as too scary for me to ever play, I resigned myself to watching others play on YouTube, indulging in the ability to cover my eyes when the action got too intense.

Yet what struck me most, even after watching a particularly gruesome boss battle with Mother, who had somehow transformed into a humanoid spider straight out of the darkest Kristevan nightmares (Figure 7), was how eerily suggestive the music was. Although at times jarring, jumping at the player with a jumbled mess of screeching strings, randomly patterned percussion, and sudden cluster chords from the piano, most of the time the house was either unnervingly quiet, with echoes of Ethan's footprints bouncing off walls, or just barely accompanied by low, ominous tremolos and quiet, chime-like sounds. The music crept alongside Ethan, acting almost as an aural gauge for

the protagonist's health and psyche, and at times bleeding into reality as the viewer's own pulse slowed and quickened with the beat and volume of the soundtrack.

It is precisely this ability—the ability to entrain bodily response, direct audience attention, and manipulate perception—that makes the music of the horror genre, and video games in particular, so powerful and so fascinating. While certainly not comprehensive, the two case studies of this thesis have attempted to capture just a few of the myriad devices, effects, and sounds game composers have utilized throughout the genre's history. As we rehash some of the topics and questions each considered, I hope to be able to shine light on some answers while also opening new routes for discussion.

Figure 7: Mother

"I'm coming to get you!" (Screenshot by *Gameranx.com*)

The first case study, centered on the twin worlds of *Silent Hill*, asked the reader to confront the possibility of sound as abject. Rooted heavily in Julia Kristeva's theory on the subject from her landmark *Powers of Horror,* the chapter defined abjection as the object of idea that participates in the act of perversion, of breaking down barriers between social decorum and expectations and existing purposely "outside" socially constructed

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barriers. It explored ideas such as Plato's *chora*, religious taboos, and issues surrounding

gendered stereotypes. The case study asked the reader to imagine the silence of Silent

Hill as a chora-like receptacle, containing the abject within itself. While the chapter

acknowledged the monsters and demons of Silent Hill's Otherworld, which sometimes

broke the barrier of silence and spilled into the fog-drenched normal world, as the most

obvious examples of the abject, the monsters were always accompanied by sound: in the

real-world Silent Hill, the scream of the radio alerted the player to enemy presence while

in the Otherworld, demented and reveling in its abject nature, the soundtrack clangs

incessantly, a clear participant in the world's abjected nature. In all, this chapter asked the

reader to contemplate the very real boundaries our society places on its members and how

sound can act as accomplice in the eventual breakdown of those expectations.

The second case study, focusing on 2KGames' *Bioshock,* discussed how the

diegetic aural space of a realm can contribute to and in itself create an atmosphere of

horror. In *Bioshock*, the horror was directly related to the sonic landscape's ability to

subvert the player's power and agency within the living city of Rapture. Building on

Michel Chion's theory on the voice, the first section discussed the idea of player trust and

expectation. It described the struggles with casting the right voice actor for Atlas, the

protagonist's initial "friend" and eventual betrayer, and discussed the idea of the

acousmêtre and the power it holds in its facelessness. The section asked readers to

confront our own assumptions of the voice, such as how different voices carry different

expectations within ourselves, and how those expectations can eventually lead to

manipulation of ourselves and therefore a loss of power. The second section considered

the diegetic music of Rapture as a part of the city's self, an organism commenting upon

its own state of affairs, sometimes ironically. However, it also imagined these aural spaces, where the "Splicers" and "Big Daddies" of the city felt safe, as places of power, which, as described in Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*, therefore placed the player into the position of transgressor into these spaces. His fight for safety and agency within Rapture necessarily disturbed the agency of the monsters around him, all within the aural space of the city. In all, this chapter confronted our associations and assumptions surrounding sound, including and especially voice, and asked us to contemplate both how these assumptions affected our own power within a space and how these aural manipulations can be used to create an atmosphere of terror and fear.

At first glance, these games do not appear to complement each other, working in decisively different directions in regards to plot, atmosphere, and goal. However, this is exactly the point of this thesis. As described in the introduction, the brilliance of sound in horror is its ability to break audience expectations and use sound in ways that could not work in other genres. These two games, with their completely different approaches to sound design, show the variety of possibilities for sound in horror, and highlight the many different ways an atmosphere of fear can be created.

By focusing on these two games, this thesis tries to show how sound and music in horror video games act as technologies of horror, as powerful tools used to create the exact mood and atmosphere of a game. Without the sound design, voice acting, and music, these games become incomplete, their message disturbed and their intent denied. As such, they are an agential force that deserve much more recognition than has been given in the past.

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