

Genre in the Age of Convergence: Mario Paint Composer

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Abstract

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Keywords

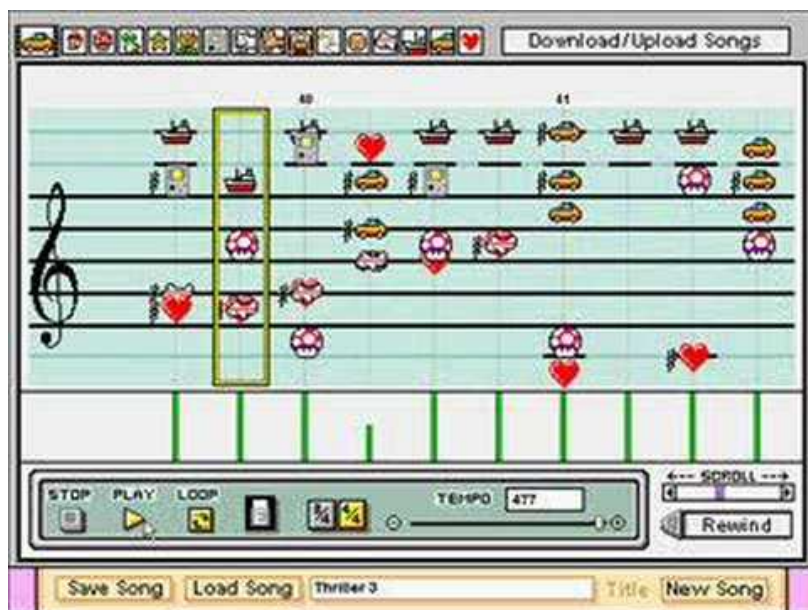
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<https://youtu.be/6gc-1Dq3uQQ>

It's no secret that over the course of the twentieth century, aesthetic productions have drawn increasingly on recycled and re-appropriated materials. Perhaps, for this reason, the above video – a rendition of Michael Jackson's *Thriller* on the newly minted *Mario Paint Composer* – sounds absolutely mundane. Nothing new, just another curiosity born out of the collective consciousness we cannily refer to as the Internets, which we understand jokingly as a [series of tubes](#), notably Youtubes. Laffs aside, this phenomena complicates many traditional modes of interpretation. How do we hear the music of a convergence era when within it lies a devious set of connotations, each serving to reorient the listener to its own particular theme? What tactics do listeners take when interpreting this semiotic collision of sound, icon and song? These questions complicate the topic of genre, where a social consensus traditionally guides the collective organization of a medium. What social and sonic forms shape our understanding of *Thriller* as it was reproduced by *Mario Paint Composer* on Youtube in 2008?



Before delving too deeply into a discussion of genre, it is important to situate the phenomena of convergence in a pre-digital context. Although the user-centric nature of web 2.0 has certainly helped to accelerate this process, one needs to look no further than Dick Hebdige's "The Meaning of Mod," in the anthology [Resistance Through Rituals](#), to sense an earlier precedent to the mash-

up culture we observe today. Drawn to the adventure of a dangerous soHo night-life culture, “The mod dealt his blows by inverting and distorting the images (of neatness, of short hair) so cherished by his employers and parents, to create a style, which while being overtly close to the straight world was nonetheless incomprehensible to it.” Although Hebdige is writing in 1974, long before computers would become mainstream, he makes a worthy point here about the appropriation of fashion. Constructing it as an act of distortion, Hebdige argues that early 1960s mods (understood here as a working class youth movement), through their stylistic appropriations were able to undermine the fabric of British society. By acting as criminals, but lauding the style of white collar workers – suits, short hair – mods help to show that semiotic convergence is not something new, instead it can be read as a stance of resistance.

In the case of *Thriller*, resistance is too strong a word. I prefer distortion, it is value neutral, although it can easily be understood in the context of resistance. *Thriller* on *Mario Paint Composer* distorts *Thriller* by Michael Jackson. By simplifying the song to a series of 16-bit samples, the song’s transcriber [geoffnet1](#), translates it all to the symbolic language of *Mario Paint* – where mushrooms sound like drums, hearts are bass notes, ships are cymbals, flowers are horns, cars are synth pads and game-boys sound like blips. *geoffnet1*’s *Thriller* is a distortion of the *Mario Paint Composer* sound as well; originally a part of the 1992 Super Nintendo cartridge, *Mario Paint, Mario Paint Composer* is now a fan-modded update of its original form. Unlike the original *Mario Paint Composer* has been designed with functionality taking a precedent over accessibility. Originally marketed as an intuitive music scripting software, the following limitations were part and parcel of the platform (These restrictions have been copied from [Tombobbuilder’s page](#), a musician who works with the limits of *Mario Paint Composer* as it was originally distributed.):

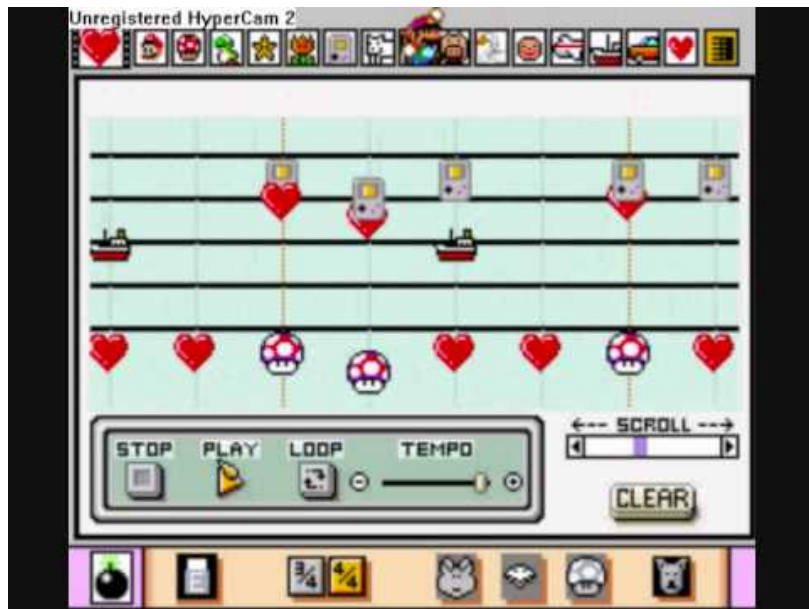
1. Only 24 measures are available.
2. No more than three notes at a time.
3. You can not double notes on the same line or space.
4. Tempo is restricted.
5. There is no fluctuation in dynamics (volume).
6. No sharps or flats are available.
7. Can only compose using the “white keys” from the piano.
8. Only two of each letter name are available (except A, where there is only one).
9. C major and A natural minor are the only keys to compose in.

Of these restrictions, *Thriller* only conforms to the third: “You can not double notes on the same line or space,” in this regard it distorts what most people understand as the *Mario Paint* sound as well. By no means am I calling this work inauthentic, instead I am calling attention to the stability of sonic tropes in our cultural memory. The sound of *Mario Paint* is not remembered for the limitations described above, instead, there is a stable and distinct sonic fingerprint which is derived from the alchemy of icon, sound and song through which genre can be constructed and maintained.

Thriller is [8-bit music](#), even though there is nothing 8-bit about it. Similar to the way in which mods subverted the British status-quo, *Thriller* puts the idea of genre into crisis. This is not a crisis that works to undermine the existence of genre as a phenomenon, it is instead a crisis of

interpretation, where the traditional means through which a genre can be identified are called into question. No longer can the easy answers be found at [Allmusic](#) or [Wikipedia](#), some sounds have become more epistemically elusive. Ultimately, this is a good thing, as it encourages listeners to take a critical ear to what they are listening to – and how they come to understand it.

AT



<https://youtu.be/U3Ci7qVsa7k>

