

Papa Sangre and the Construction of Immersion in Audio Games

Enongo Lumumba-Kasongo

Blog post published October 28, 2013 in *Sounding Out!*

<https://doi.org/10.59350/9hks0-ay472>

Abstract

Editor's Note: Welcome to *Sounding Out!*'s fall forum titled **"Sound and Play,"** where we ask how sound studies, as a discipline, can help us to think through several canonical perspectives on play. While Johan Huizinga had once argued that play is the primeval foundation from which all culture has sprung, it is important to ask where sound fits into this construction of culture;

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Article, Blindness, Disability Studies, Games/Gaming, Listening

Recommended citation

Lumumba-Kasongo, E. (2013, October 28). Papa Sangre and the Construction of Immersion in Audio Games. *Sounding Out!*. <https://doi.org/10.59350/9hks0-ay472>

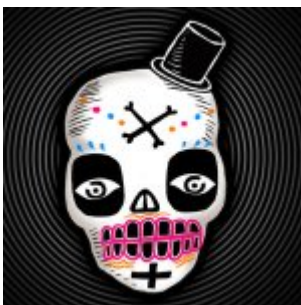
Copyright

Copyright © Enongo Lumumba-Kasongo 2013. Distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.



Editor's Note: Welcome to *Sounding Out!*'s fall forum titled **"Sound and Play,"** where we ask how sound studies, as a discipline, can help us to think through several canonical perspectives on play. While Johan Huizinga had once argued that play is the primeval foundation from which all culture has sprung, it is important to ask where sound fits into this construction of culture; does it too have the potential to liberate or re-entrench our social worlds? SO!'s new regular contributor Enongo Lumumba-Kasongo notes how audio games, like *Papa Sangre*, often use sound as a gimmick to engage players, and considers the politics of this feat. For whom are audio games immersive, and how does the experience serve to further marginalize certain people or disadvantaged groups?—AT

Immersion is a problem at the heart of sound studies. As Frances Dyson (2009) suggests in [Sounding New Media](#), "Sound is the immersive medium par excellence. Three dimensional, interactive and synesthetic, perceived in the here and now of an embodied space, sound returns to the listener the very same qualities that media mediates...Sound surrounds" (4). Alternately, in the context of games studies (a field that is increasingly engaged with sound studies), issues of sound and immersion have most recently been addressed in terms of instrumental potentialities, historical developments, and technical constraints. Some notable examples include Sander Huiberts' (2010) M.A. thesis entitled ["Captivating Sound: The Role of Audio Immersion for Computer Games,"](#) in which he details technical and philosophical frames of immersion as they relate to the audio of a variety of computer games, and an article by Aaron Oldenburg (2013) entitled ["Sonic Mechanics: Audio as Gameplay,"](#) in which he situates the immersive aspects of audio-gameplay within contemporaneous experimental art movements. This research provokes the question: How do those who develop these games construct the idea of immersion through game design and what does this mean for users who challenge this construct? Specifically I would like to challenge Dyson's claim that sound really is "the immersive medium par excellence" by considering how the concept of immersion in audio-based gameplay can be tied to privileged notions of character and game development.



In order to investigate this problem, I decided to play an audio game and document my daily experiences on a [WordPress blog](#). Based on its simulation of 3D audio *Papa*

Sangre was the first game that came to mind. I also selected the game because of its accessibility; unlike the audio game *Deep Sea*, which is celebrated for its immersive capacities but is only playable by request at *The Museum of Art and Digital Entertainment*, *Papa Sangre* is purchasable as an app for \$2.99 and can be played on an iPhone, iPad or iPod. *Papa Sangre* helps us to consider new possibilities for what is meant by virtual space and it serves as a useful tool for pushing back against essentialisms of “immersion” when talking sound and virtual space.

Papa Sangre is comprised of 25 levels, the completion of which leads player incrementally closer towards the palace of Papa Sangre, a man who has kidnapped a close friend of the protagonist. The game boasts *real time binaural audio*, meaning that the game’s diegetic sounds (sounds that the character in the game world can “hear”) pan across the player’s headphones in relation to the movement of the game’s protagonist. The objective of each level is to locate and collect musical notes that are scattered through the game’s many topographies while avoiding any number of enemies and obstacles, of course.



<https://youtu.be/m9IN0A4GZrE>

A commercial success, *Papa Sangre* has been named “Game of the Week” by Apple, received a [9/10 rating from IGN](#), a [top review from 148apps](#), and many positive [reviews from fans](#). Gamezebo concludes an [extremely positive review](#) of *Papa Sangre* by calling it “a completely unique experience. It’s tense and horrifying and never lets you relax. By focusing on one aspect of the game so thoroughly, the developers have managed to create something that does one thing really, really well...Just make sure to play with the lights on.” This commercial attention has yielded academic feedback as well. In a paper entitled “[Towards an analysis of Papa Sangre, an audio-only game for the iPhone/iPad](#),” Andrew Hugill (2012) celebrates games like *Papa Sangre* for providing “an excellent opportunity for the development of a new framework for electroacoustic music analysis.” Despite such attention—and perhaps because of it—I argue that *Papa Sangre* deserves a critical second listen.

Between February and April of 2012, I played *Papa Sangre* several times a day and detailed the auditory environments of the game in my blog posts. However, by the time I reached the final level, I still wasn't sure how to answer my initial question. Had *Papa Sangre* really engendered a novel experience or it could simply be thought of as a video game with no video? I noted in [my final post](#):

I am realizing that what makes the audio gaming experience seem so different from the experience of playing video games is the perception that the virtual space, the game itself, only exists through me. The “space” filled by the levels and characters within the game only exists between my ears after it is projected through the headphones and then I extend this world through my limbs to my extremities, which feeds back into the game through the touch screen interface, moving in a loop like an electric current...Headphones are truly a necessity in order to beat the game, and in putting them on, the user becomes the engine through which the game comes to life...When I play video games, even the ones that utilize a first-person perspective, I feel like the game space exists outside of me, or rather ahead of me, and it is through the controller that I am able to project my limbs forward into the game world, which in turn structures how I orient my body. Video game spaces of course, do not exist outside of me, as I need my eyes and ears to interpret the light waves and sound waves that travel back from the screen, but I suppose what matters here is not what is actually happening, but how what is happening is perceived by the user. Audio games have the potential to engender completely different gaming experiences because they make the user feel like he or she is the platform through which the game-space is actualized.

Upon further reflection, however, I recognize that *Papa Sangre* creates an environment designed to be immersive only to certain kinds of users. A close reading of *Papa Sangre* reveals bias against both female and disabled players.

Take *Papa Sangre*'s problematic relationship with blindness. The protagonist is not a visually impaired individual operating in a horrifying new world, but rather a sighted individual who is thrust into a world that is horrifying by virtue of its darkness. The first level of the game is simply entitled “In the Dark.” When the female guide [first appears to the protagonist](#) in that same level, she states:

*Here you are in the land of the dead, the realm ruled by Papa Sangre...In this underworld it is pitch dark. You cannot see a thing; you can't even see me, a fluttery watery thing here to help you. But you can listen and move...You must learn how to **see with your ears**. You will need these powers to save the soul in peril and **make your way to the light**.*



<https://youtu.be/S9vFKrgGDvc>

Note the conversation between 3:19 and 3:56.

The game envisions an audience who find blindness to be necessarily terrifying. By equating an inability to see with death and fear, developers are intensifying popular horror genre tropes that diminish the lived experiences of those with visual impairments and unquestioningly present blindness as a problem to overcome. Rather than challenging the relationship between blindness and vulnerability that horror-game developers fetishize, *Papa Sangre* misses the opportunity to present a visually impaired protagonist who is not crippled by his or her disability.



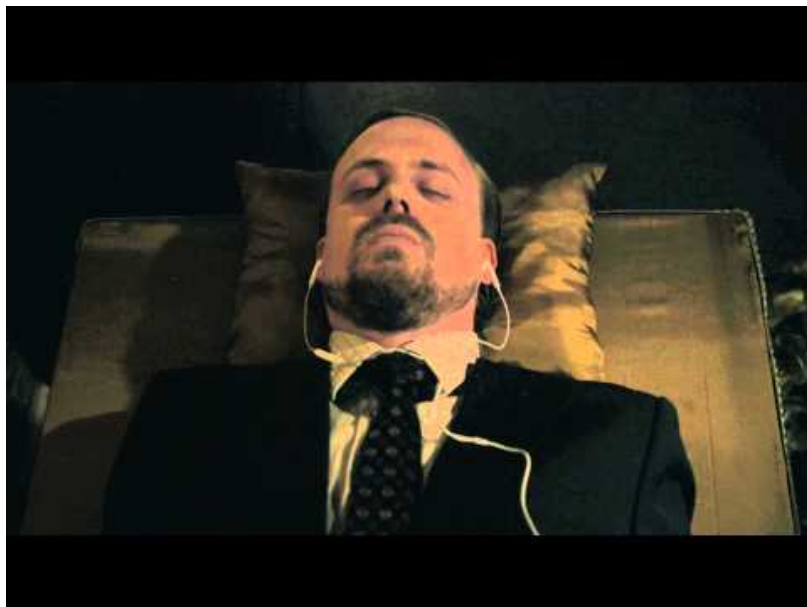
Disconcertingly, audio games have been tied to game accessibility efforts by developers and players alike for many years. In a 2008 interview [Kenji Eno](#), founder of [WARP](#) (a company that specialized in audio games in the late 90s), claimed his interactions with visually impaired gamers yielded a desire to produce audio games. Similarly forums like [audiogames.net](#) showcase users and developers interested in games that cater to gamers with impaired vision.

In terms of its actual game-play, *PapaSangre* is navigable without visual cues. After playing the game for just two weeks I was able to explore each level with my eyes closed. Still, the ease with which gamers can play the game without looking at the screen does not negate the tension caused by recycled depictions of disability that are in many ways built into storyline's foundation.



The game also fails to engage gender in any complexity. Although the main character's appearance is never shown, the protagonist is aurally gendered male. Most notable are the deep grunting noises made when he falls to the ground. For me, this acted as a barrier to imagining a fully embodied virtual experience. Those deep grunts revealed many assumptions the designers must have considered about the imagined and perhaps intended audience of the game. While lack of diversity is certainly an issue at the heart of all entertainment media, *Papa Sangre's* oversight directly contradicts the message of the game, wherein the putative goal is to experience an environment that enhances one's sense of self within the virtual space.

On October 31st, 2013, Somethin' Else will release *Papa Sangre II*. A quick look at the trailer suggests that the developers' have not changed the formula. The 46-second clip warns that the game is "powered by your fear" after noting, "This Halloween, you are dead."



<https://youtu.be/zSeMhiz4460>

It appears that an inability to see is still deeply connected with notions of fear and death in the game's sequel. This does not have to be the case. Why not design a game where impairment is not framed as a hindrance or source of fear? Why not build a game with the option to choose between

different sounding voice actors and actresses? Despite its popularity, however, *Papa Sangre* is by no means representative of general trends across the spectrum of audio-based game design. Oldenburg (2013) points out that over the past decade many independent game developers have been designing experimental “blind games” that eschew themes and representations found in popular video games in favor of the abstract relationships between diegetic sound and in-game movement.

Whether or not they eventually consider the social politics of gaming, *Papa Sangre*’s developers already send a clear message to all gamers by hardwiring disability and gender into both versions of the game while promoting a limited image of “immersion.” Hopefully as game designers [Somethin’ Else](#) grow in popularity and prestige, future developers that use the “[Papa Engine](#)” will be more cognizant of the privilege and discrimination embedded in the sonic cues of its framework. Until then, if you are not a sighted male gamer, you must prepare yourself to be immersed in constant aural cues that this experience, like so many others, was not designed with you in mind.

—

Enongo Lumumba-Kasongo is a PhD student in the Department of Science and Technology Studies at Cornell University. Since completing a senior thesis on digital music software, tacit knowledge, and gender under the guidance of Trevor Pinch, she has become interested in pursuing research in the emergent field of sound studies. She hopes to combine her passion for music with her academic interests in technological systems, bodies, politics and practices that construct and are constructed by sound. More specifically she would like to examine the politics surrounding low-income community studios, as well as the uses of sound in (or as) electronic games. In her free time she produces hip hop beats and raps under the moniker Sammus (based on the video game character, Samus Aran, from the popular Metroid franchise).

—



REWIND! ...If you liked this post, you may also dig:

[Goalball: Sport, Silence, and Spectatorship](#)— Melissa Helquist

[Playing with Bits, Pieces, and Lightning Bolts: An Interview With Sound Artist Andrea Parkins](#)— Maile Colbert

[Video Gaming and the Sonic Feedback of Surveillance: Bastion and the Stanley Parable](#)— Aaron Trammell