

The Dark Side of Game Audio: The Sounds of Mimetic Control and Affective Conditioning

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Abstract

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Keywords

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It's an all too familiar movie trope. A bug hidden in a flower jar. A figure in shadows crouched listening at a door. The tape recording that no one knew existed, revealed at the most decisive of moments. Even the abrupt disconnection of a phone call manages to arouse the suspicion that we are never as alone as we may think. And although surveillance derives its meaning the latin "*vigilare*" (to watch) and French "*sur-*" (over), its deep connotations of listening have all but obliterated that distinction.

This month, *SO!* Multimedia Editor [Aaron Trammell](#) curates a forum on Sound and Surveillance, featuring the work of [Robin James](#) and [Kathleen Battles](#). And so it begins, with Aaron asking. . ."Want to Play a Game?" –JS

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It's eleven o'clock on a Sunday night and I'm in the back room of a comic book store in Scotch Plains, NJ. Game night is wrapping up. Just as I'm about to leave, someone suggests that we play [Pit](#), a classic game about trading stocks in the early 20th century. Because the game is short, I decide to give it a go and pull a chair up to the table. In *Pit*, players are given a hand of nine cards of various farm-related suits and frantically trade cards with other players until their entire hand matches the same suit. As play proceeds, players hold up a set of similar cards they are willing to trade and shout, "one, one, one!," "two, two, two!," "three, three, three!," until another player is willing to trade them an equivalent amount of cards in a different suit. The game only gets louder as the shouting escalates and builds to a cacophony.

As I drove home that night, I came to the uncomfortable realization that maybe the game was playing me. I and the rest of the players had adopted similar dispositions over the course of the play. As we fervently shouted to one another trying to trade between sets of indistinguishable commodities, we took on similar, intense, and excited mannerisms. Players who would not scream, who would not participate in the reproduction of the game's sonic environment, simply lost the game, faded out. As for the rest of us, we became like one another, cookie-cutter reproductions of enthusiastic, stressed, and aggravated stock traders, getting louder as we cornered the market on various goods.



<https://youtu.be/iyJ4JmZoAVY>

We were caught in a cybernetic-loop, one that encouraged us to take on the characteristics of stock traders. And, for that brief period of time, we succumbed to systems of control with far reaching implications. [As I've argued before](#), games are cybernetic mechanisms that facilitate particular modes of feedback between players and the game state. Sound is one of the channels through which this feedback is processed. In a game like *Pit*, players both listen to other players for cues regarding their best move and shout numbers to the table representing potential trades. In other games, such as *Monopoly*, players must announce when they wish to buy properties. Although it is no secret that understanding sound is essential to good game design, it is less clear how sound defines the contours of power relationships in these games. This essay offers two games, [Mafia](#), and [Escape: The Curse of the Temple](#) as case studies for the ways in which sound is used in the most basic of games, board games. By fostering environments that encourage both mimetic control and affective conditioning game sound draws players into the devious logic of cybernetic systems.

Understanding the various ways that sound is implemented in games is essential to understanding the ways that game sound operates as both a form of mimetic control and affective conditioning. Mimetic control is, at its most simple, the power of imitation. It is the degree to which we become alike when we play games. Mostly, it happens because the rules invoke a variety of protocols which encourage players to interact according to a particular standard of communication. The mood set by game sound is the power of affective conditioning. Because we decide what we interact with on account of our moods, moments of affective conditioning prime players to feel things (such as pleasure), which can encourage players to interact in compulsive, excited, subdued, or frenetic ways with game systems.



<https://youtu.be/75BMDrtpVtA>

A game where sound plays a central and important role is *Mafia* (which has a number of other variants like *Werewolf* and *The Resistance*). In *Mafia*, some players take the secret role of mafia members who choose players to “kill” at night, while the eyes of the others are closed. Because mafia-team players shuffle around during the game and point to others in order to indicate which players to eliminate while the eyes of the other players are closed, the rules of the game suggest that players tap on things, whistle, chirp, and make other ambient noises while everyone’s eyes are closed. This allows for the mafia-team players to conduct their business secretly, as their motions are well below the din created by the other players. Once players open their eyes, they must work together to deduce which players are part of the mafia, and then vote on who to eliminate from the game. Here players are, in a sense, controlled by the game to provide a soundtrack. What’s more, the eeriness of the sounds produced by the players only accentuate the paranoia players feel when taking part in what’s essentially a lynch-mob.

The ambient sounds produced by players of *Mafia* have overtones of mimetic control. Protocols governing the use of game audio as a form of communication between bodies and other bodies, or bodies and machines, require that we communicate in particular ways at set intervals. Different than the brutal and martial forms of discipline that drove disciplinary apparatuses like Bentham’s panopticon, the form of control exerted through interactive game audio relies on precisely the opposite premise. What is often termed “The Magic Circle of Play” is suspect here as it promises players a space that is safe and fundamentally separate from events in the outside world. Within this space somewhat hypnotic behavior-patterns take place under the auspices of being just fun, or mere play. Players who refuse to play by the rules are often exiled from this space, as they refuse to enter into this contract of soft social norms with others.



Not all panopticons are in prisons. "Singing Ringing Tree at Sunset," Dave Leeming CC BY.

Escape: The Curse of the Temple relies on sound to set a game mood that governs the ways that players interact with each other. In *Escape*, players have ten minutes (of real time) where they must work together to navigate a maze of cardboard tiles. Over the course of the game there are two moments when players must return to the tile that they started the game on, and these are announced by a CD playing in the background of the room. When this occurs, a gong rings on the CD and rhythms of percussion mount in intensity until players hear a door slam. At this point, if players haven't returned to their starting tile, they are limited in the actions they can take for the rest of the game. In the moments of calm before players make a mad dash for the entrance, the soundtrack waxes ambient. It offers the sounds of howling-winds, rattling chimes, and yawning corridors.

The game is spooky, overall. The combination of haunting ambient sounds and moments where gameplay is rushed and timed, makes for an adrenaline-fueled experience contained and produced by the game's ambient soundtrack. The game's most interesting moments come from points where one player is trapped and players must decide whether they should help their friend or help themselves. The tense, haunting, soundtrack evokes feelings of high-stakes immersion. The game is fun because it produces a tight, stressful, and highly interactive experience. It conditions its players through the clever use of its soundtrack to feel the game in an embodied and visceral way. [Like the ways that horror movies have used ambient sounds to a great effect in producing tension in audiences \(pp.26-27\)](#), *Escape: The Curse of the Temple* encourages players to immerse themselves in the game world by playing upon the tried and true affective techniques that films have used for years. Immersed players feel an increased sense of engagement with the game and because of this they are willingly primed to engage in the mimetic interactive behaviors that engage them within the game's cybernetic logic.



<https://youtu.be/8Uk5MmLv6qg>

These two forms of power, mimetic control and affective conditioning, often overlap and coalesce in games. Sometimes, they meet in the middle during games that offer a more or less adaptive form of sound, like *Mafia*. Players work together and mimic each other when reproducing the ambient forms of quiet that constitute the atmosphere of terror that permeates the game space. Even the roar of bids which occurs in *Pit* constitutes a form of affective conditioning that encourages players to buy, buy, buy as fast as possible. Effectively simulating the pressure of The Stock Exchange.

Although there is now a growing discipline around the production of game audio, there is relatively little discourse that attempts to understand how the implementation of sound in games functions as a mode of social control. By looking at the ways that sound is implemented in board and card games, we can gain insight of the ways in which it is implemented in larger technical systems (such as computer games), larger aesthetic systems (such as performance art), economic systems (like casinos and the stock market), and even social systems (like parties). Furthermore, it is easy to describe more clearly the ways in which game audio functions as a form of soft power through techniques of mimetic control and affective conditioning. It is only by understanding how these techniques affect our bodies that we can begin to recognize our interactions with large-scale cybernetic systems that have effects reaching beyond the game itself.

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Aaron Trammell is co-founder and Multimedia Editor of Sounding Out! He is also a Media Studies PhD candidate at Rutgers University. His dissertation explores the fanzines and politics of underground wargame communities in Cold War America. You can learn more about his work at aarontrammell.com.

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