

Beyond the Grave: The “Dies Irae” in Video Game Music

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Abstract

For those familiar with modern media, there are a number of short musical phrases that immediately trigger a particular emotional response. Think, for example, of the two-note theme that denotes the shark in *Jaws*, and see if you become just a little more tense or nervous.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Classical Music, Film/Movies/Cinema, Games/Gaming, Medieval Sounds, Sound Studies



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For those familiar with modern media, there are a number of short musical phrases that immediately trigger a particular emotional response. Think, for example, of the two-note theme that denotes the shark in *Jaws*, and see if you become just a little more tense or nervous. So too with the stabbing shriek of the violins from *Psycho*, or even the whirling four-note theme from *The Twilight Zone*. In each of these cases, the musical theme is short, memorable, and unalterably linked to one specific feeling: fear.

The first few notes of the “Dies Irae” chant, perhaps as recognizable as any of the other themes I mentioned already, are often used to provoke that same emotion.



<https://youtu.be/RMZPdSo2qUQ>

Often, but not always. The “Dies Irae” has been associated with death since its creation in the thirteenth century, due to its use in the Requiem Mass for the dead until the Second Vatican Council (1962–65). Its [text](#) describes the Last Judgment, when all humanity will be sent to heaven or hell. But from the Renaissance to today, the “Dies Irae” has also come to symbolize everything from the medieval church and Catholic ritual to the sinister, superstitious, or supernatural, even violence and battle—and any combination of the above.

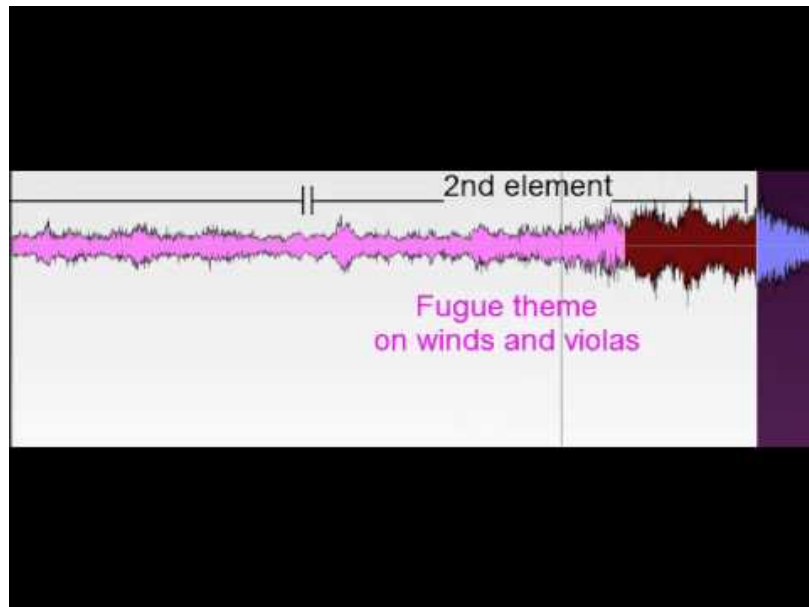
Because of its unique history not only within its original liturgical context but also within later musical genres, this chant has become largely divorced from its original purposes, at least in modern popular imagination. Instead, it now holds a multiplicity of meanings; composers manipulate these meanings by utilizing this chant in a new setting, and thus in turn continue to reinforce those meanings within modern media. Since its use within the Mass, concert music, and films has already been well documented, this blog post explores its presence in an as yet unexamined medium: video games.



By Willem Vrelant (Flemish, died 1481, active 1454 – 1481) 1481 – illuminator (Flemish) Details of artist on Google Art Project [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

Chant—monophonic music of the Western Christian tradition—is the largest surviving body of music from the medieval period. Although chant was not written down until the ninth century, it has been continuously sung for over two thousand years. Before the Reformation, chant permeated the musical landscape of Western Europe. But as [John Haines](#) points out, chant's meanings changed in the sixteenth century; to Protestants, chant was a sign of superstitious, even sinister, ritual, whereas to Catholics it was a flawed but holy tradition (112). Chant became ever more confined to the Catholic liturgy; although composers continued to use chant in new compositions, by the late nineteenth century the only chant guaranteed to be recognized by a secular audience was the “Dies Irae.”

Beginning in the late eighteenth century, the text was set in Requiems for the secular stage by composers such as Mozart, Verdi, and Britten. But due to both its evocative text and its memorable melody (often just the first sixteen, eight, or even four notes), the “Dies Irae” chant soon was incorporated into secular instrumental works, where it signified the past, the supernatural, the oppressive, the demonic, and death. No work is more responsible for this than Hector Berlioz’s *Symphonie Fantastique*, where the chant symbolizes the composer’s own death and the depravity of the demons and witches who dance at his funeral.



<https://youtu.be/RVUAR8Nk8xQ>

The history of this chant, together with its use in film, has been explored by scholars such as [Linda Schubert](#) and [John Haines](#). Because the “Dies Irae” was already a well-known symbol of the aforementioned characteristics, and because early silent film musicians borrowed musical ideas from previously composed works, the chant segued quickly into early film, where its symbolic possibilities were reinforced. Thus, even in newly composed soundtracks, composers utilized this chant as an aural shortcut to a host of emotional and psychological reactions, especially (as [James Deaville](#) and others discuss) within horror films. It appears in scenes depicting inner anguish, fear, the occult, evil, and imminent death in films from *It’s a Wonderful Life*, *The Seventh Seal*, and *The Shining* to Disney’s *The Lion King* and *Star Wars*, in musicals like *Sweeney Todd*, and in literary works such as Gaston Leroux’s *The Phantom of the Opera*, but it also symbolizes power and even heroism, such as in this [Nike shoe commercial](#).



<https://youtu.be/gjSWBIXeeeE>

The “Dies Irae” appears analogously in video game soundtracks, where it communicates the same symbolic meanings that it does in film scores and concert music. Its recognizability also lends itself to parody, as it did in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Yet, unlike in film music, the evolution of its use in game music speaks also to the evolution of game music technology.

In the earlier years of video games, technology could not create continuous soundtracks. The first such was in *Space Invaders* (1978), although it consisted only of four descending notes looped indefinitely. Additionally, while voice synthesis was used in game soundtracks as early as 1982, reproduction of musical voices was limited even into the 1990s. William Gibbons describes how early systems had [a limited number of channels](#) (40); as a result, Baroque-style counterpoint worked well texturally, and reproducing music from earlier composers such as Bach was not only permissible by copyright but also [demonstrated the capabilities of their systems](#) (201–204). As such, earlier games were less interested in a monophonic chant, although several (such as *Fatal Fury*) did use Mozart’s setting of the “Dies Irae.”

The “Dies Irae” chant is first used in game music in the late 1980s and early 1990s, by which point most systems had five or more channels, allowing for improved timbres and sound synthesis. The opening theme song to *F-19 Stealth Fighter* (1988–92, DOS/PC/Amiga/Atari) subtly references the first phrase of the chant. Composer Ken Lagace sets the first eight pitches evenly in the lower voice before moving them to a higher, rhythmicized register. The chant is accompanied by a consistent percussive element and several higher, chordal voices, which splinter off into fast arpeggios before restating the opening. There is as yet no action, nor is the plot either spiritual or supernatural, so the chant here actually works in a somewhat anomalous way. It heightens the player’s tension through its aural connotations of fear and death, thus setting the stage for the battles still to come in the game itself.



<https://youtu.be/EYPAKu2sP7w>

Indiana Jones and the Fate of Atlantis (1992, PC) is another early instance of the “Dies Irae,” which appears at the end, when Indiana and his companion Sophia confront the malevolent Doctor. The chant again increases tension but also indicates the presence of evil. Musically, the first two phrases of the chant appear in long, low tones, accompanied by several high, sustained, dissonant pitches. New voices enter, reminiscent of the opening phrase, before the chant returns in full in all registers. The system’s capability for thicker textures allowed the composers to stack the monophonic “Dies Irae” against itself, further emphasizing the threat of imminent danger in this final encounter.



<https://youtu.be/FuV9mUj31pk>

The last of the early case studies is *Zombies Ate My Neighbors* (1993, SNES/Genesis). These systems featured multiple channels capable of emulating a variety of acoustical settings. The game is a parody of 1950s horror films; the protagonists race through standard horror settings such as malls and castles to rescue their neighbors from demonic babies, vampires, zombies, and

other stock creatures. The soundtrack also mimics the musical tropes in such films: chant itself, especially the “Dies Irae,” but also timbres such as tremolo, stingers, extreme ranges, and dissonance. The track “Curse of the Tongue,” which plays upon encountering the final boss, Dr. Tongue’s Giant Head, emulates a Gothic pipe organ. The low organ drone sustains underneath the first sixteen notes of the chant, which sound in a shrieking, vibrato-heavy register. The voices then move in parallel fifths [as in medieval polyphony](#). The “Dies Irae” here brings to mind an entire film genre while also overtly characterizing the final battle against the otherworldly, sinister, evil Head. In this case, the chant works literally to signify the current battle and threat of death, but also parodically to indicate the absurdity of the situation.

<https://youtu.be/cgndcCmP7G0>

The development of video game audio technology allowed first for voice emulation, then voice reproduction. Vocal samples were used as early as the 1980s, but were often confined to theme songs. Yet even after voices were reproduced within soundtracks, it is the “Dies Irae” melody alone that is most frequently sampled, strikingly paralleling its earlier use in film and concert music. When the “Dies Irae” text is used, it is set to newly composed music or borrowed from the Mozart or Verdi Requiems. Moreover, as in earlier media, all that is needed as an aural mnemonic is the first phrase, even just the first four notes, of the chant melody.

For example, two games released for PC in 1999—*Heroes of Might & Magic III* and *Gabriel Knight 3: Blood of the Sacred, Blood of the Damned*—both use just the first portion of the “Dies Irae.” In “Burying the Manuscript” from *Gabriel Knight*, pizzicato violins first allude to the first four or five notes of the chant (1:25); the full first phrase is then presented in parallel motion in the brass. The remainder of this theme alludes to the first few notes, making the “Dies Irae” a constant presence here and underscoring the secrecy, even the occult nature, of the manuscript in this scene.



<https://youtu.be/M-2blhysGag>

Heroes III uses even less melodic material. In the Necropolis, composer Paul Romero uses the first four notes of the “Dies Irae” to underpin the entire theme. The bass plays the first four notes in a

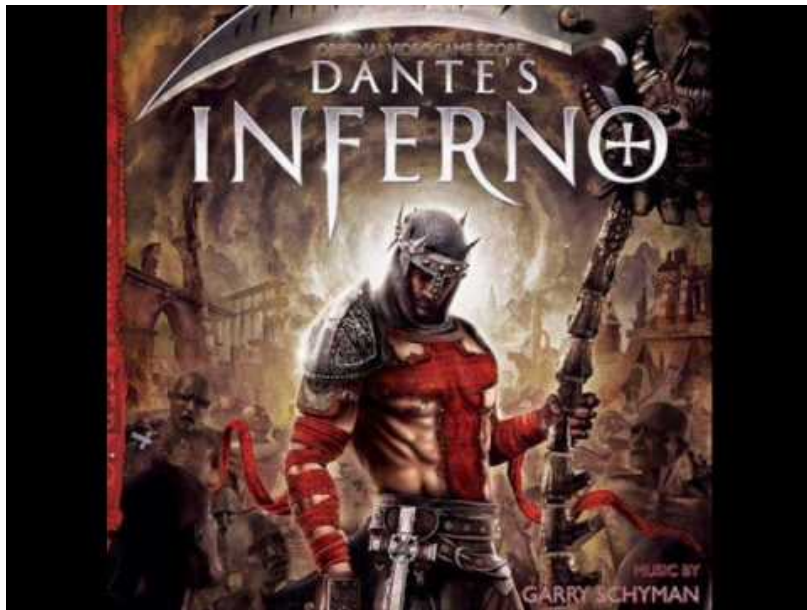
low register before segueing into newly composed material, but the contour of that phrase returns throughout the theme. The full chant phrases do not appear until the very end. The chant hints constantly at the overwhelming metaphor of death in this area, as well as to the presence of supernatural creatures such as vampires, zombies, and wraiths.



<https://youtu.be/9lQTbRY2xWY>

Unusual for many reasons, then, is the last case study: the game *Dante's Inferno* (2010, PS3/Xbox360). It is the sole example here to use voices, but the text appears to be newly composed. As John Haines noted, the presence of Latin or pseudo-Latin is in and of itself a trope of the diabolical or demonic, which adds further nuance to this scene (129). The familiar melody is presented by a choir of mixed voices, accompanied by a roar of low brass, ambient noise, and a descant voice singing on open vowels, all signifiers of horror or the medieval. Moreover, the “Dies Irae” is not reserved for a final battle, as in previous examples, nor does it characterize supernatural creatures. Rather, it is the first theme heard in the game, reinforcing not only the medieval setting and the constant presence of death but also the ultimate trajectory of Dante, and the gamer, into Hell.

While the “Dies Irae” has been well studied as an aural signifier within film and concert music, its use in video games has, before now, been largely ignored. As in earlier musical genres, this chant brings to games a host of culturally accepted, musically mediated meanings that allow composers to immediately flesh out a character or scene. In so doing, game composers acknowledge that sound is not just sound, but rather it is (to borrow a phrase from [Elizabeth Randell Upton](#)) “a complex interaction of experiences and expectations on the part of the audience.” These experiences are continuously shaped by new compositions, scores, and soundtracks, which in turn continuously shape the audience’s expectations for future works.



<https://youtu.be/rr4vSxWYxK0>

As such, game soundtracks, along with other kinds of media, continue to transform the “Dies Irae” out of its original context and into an ever-growing set of pop culture symbols. The chant now signifies everything from the medieval to the present day, from judgment, battle, and death to demons, witches, and the occult. Within games in particular, though, it acts as a “memento mori,” a reminder of the mortality that game characters, and thus game players, seek to avoid through play. As such, it may instill fear in a player, but also suspicion, alertness, tension, even excitement, spurring the player to react in whichever manner suits the individual game.

The iconic status of the opening phrases of the “Dies Irae” chant marks it as a particularly useful polyvalent symbol for composers. Yet the utilization of this well-known trope is not without its problems. As I discuss [in a forthcoming article](#), this chant, and indeed all plainchant, originates in a particular sacred, liturgical tradition. When a chant such as “Dies Irae” is used as a signifier of a general sense of spirituality, or of the medieval, or even of horror, then by default those characteristics are reified, if subtly, as Christian. Moreover, linking a chant such as the “Dies Irae” to the supernatural or the occult serves to perpetuate early modern stereotypes of Catholicism as nothing more than superstitious magic; see, for example, the purported origins of the phrase “[hocus pocus](#).” Such anachronistic uses further obfuscate chant’s continuous role within Catholic (and other) liturgy; it is both a historic and a very modern practice.

Given that the “Dies Irae” is certainly not the only musical means to the aforementioned symbolic ends, perhaps these concerns are not pressing. Still, as [Anita Sarkeesian](#) points out, we can enjoy modern media while simultaneously critiquing facets that are problematic. There is no clear-cut way, at this point, to overturn hundreds of years of accumulated symbolic meaning for a musical icon such as the “Dies Irae,” but it behooves us as participants in auditory culture to become better aware of the multiple, and occasionally challenging, meanings within what we hear.

[Other games that also use the “Dies Irae” chant include *Gauntlet Legends* (1999, N64/PS/Dreamcast), *Final Fantasy IX* (2000, PS), *EverQuest II* (2004, MMORPG), *Heroes of Might and Magic V* (2006, PC), *Sam & Max: Season 2* (2007–8, Wii/PC/PS3/Xbox 360), *Ace Combat: Assault Horizon*

(2011, PS3/Xbox 360), and *Diablo 3* (2012–4, PC/PS3/Xbox/PS4). My thanks go to [VGMdb](#) and [Overclocked Remix](#) for bringing several of these games to my attention, and to Ryan Thompson and Dana Plank for comments.]

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Featured Image: A mashup of the first lines of the Dies Irae and the Zombies Ate My Neighbors title screen. Remixed for purposes of critique.

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Dr. Karen Cook specializes in medieval and Renaissance music theory, history, and performance. She is currently working on a monograph on the development of rhythmic notation in the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. She also maintains active research interests in popular and contemporary music, especially with regard to music and identity in television, film, and video games. She frequently links her areas of specialization together through a focus on medievalism, writ broadly, in contemporary culture. As such, some of her recent and forthcoming publications include articles on fourteenth-century theoretical treatises, biographies of lesser-known late medieval theorists, and the use of plainchant in video games, a book chapter on medievalist music in Harry Potter video games, and a forthcoming co-authored Oxford Bibliography on medievalism and music.

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