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Playable Sound

Hauntology in Bioshock, a Video Game for a Lost Future

Marilena GEORGANTZI¹,
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Abstract. The medium of VideoGames, recognised as a hyper-sensory event and a new “form of literacy” according to Zimmerman, allows for the creation of atmospheres which exceed the sum of the parts, meaning audio, graphics, mechanics, etc. This paper focuses on the immersive, Dionysian aspect of sound which can create a nostalgic atmosphere for a lost future. Bioshock, displaying all sorts of atmospheric qualities, is a multi-awarded, first-person shooter game with RPG, horror and stealth game references. Its soundtrack will be analysed through the spectrum of hauntology, a term coined by Derrida, aiming to show how audio can be used to evoke extra-musical memories and contribute to the creation of a rich synthetic reality resulting in the longing of an unrealised utopia.

Keywords. Soundtrack, Video Game, Hauntology, Memory, Referential Listening

Introduction

Bioshock’s (BioShock 2007) story takes place in a decayed art-deco underwater city built in the 60s while the political ideas of Ayn Rand, George Orwell and Aldous Huxley form an interesting spine around which flourish the concepts of severe individualism, biopolitics and mind control. The city, named Rapture, houses a group of people who aspire to share the same ideology. This video game, having an extremely rich narrative with important plot twists explores a possible future which raises a series of political, technological, moral and social questions. The player, a plane crash survivor who finds seemingly accidentally shelter in the city, fights his way through the remnants of the city guided by a mysterious voice and explores the *fabula* behind this destruction through audio diaries of previous citizens. However, unknown creatures and voices from the past are not limited in these narrative devices. Even though there is an extended body of literature on Bioshock examining its relation to popular music (William Gibbons, 2011), to the concept of uncanniness (Robert Yeates, 2015) and to nostalgia (Andra Ivănescu, 2019), the intent of this paper is to accentuate that Bioshock’s soundtrack, following the principles of hauntology, results in the player’s immersion into an eerie and nostalgic atmosphere without indulging into mere anachronisms. Hauntology, a linguistic blend of haunting and ontology, derives from *Spectres of Marx* by Jacques Derrida (1994). However, Mark Fisher along with Simon Reynolds and Adam Harper brought back the concept in order to analyse a music genre which emerged after 2005, especially in the United Kingdom. The aforementioned genre displays a “ghostliness” as an aesthetic effect but most of all it reveals a grief for “a cultural impasse” (Mark Fisher, 2012, 1). Bioshock’s soundtrack offers an opportunity to emphasize on its hauntological aspect and its atmospheric capabilities since its quality

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has been greatly acknowledged (winner of “Best Use of Sound” from IGN in 2007).

Audio Atmospheres, the Sound of the City of Rapture

Atmospheres as much as an abstract idea as they seem; they influence us emotionally instantly before we are able to decipher them while we surrender in a multisensory experience (Böhme et al., 2014, 32). Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1964, 48) underlines this experience by saying that he perceives and senses at the same time in his whole being the overall scene and not its separate elements.

However, atmospheres are often studied as an experience connected to a material world while other media have shown the potential of creating atmospheric immaterial worlds. Questions like what is the atmosphere we sense in a room or how does a city’s atmosphere affect us limit the concept of atmosphere in a physical presence. Brennan supports the idea that our skin is an interface between us and our environment (Teresa Brennan, 2004) which anymore is not limited to physical entities. Atmospheres evolve constantly through time and can be sensed in many ways which involve abilities of seeing, orientating, moving, tasting, smelling, hearing etc. It is this paper’s intention to highlight the involvement of hearing in the perception of atmospheres in contrast to the modernity’s prioritisation of vision. Sound surrounds us, allows for the creation of immaterial spaces to be experienced and can deliver strong emotions. In addition, it has no limits and can travel no matter the obstacles since it has an innate property of diffusing. According to Elisabeth Bronfen, “As our sight diminishes, other senses - notably our faculties of hearing and of the imagination - come to be increased” (2008, 51).

Video games constitute a Dionysian condition, characteristic of the electronic era where the player is in the centre of the information, being at the same time inside and outside of the storyworld. The player is an observer and a participant, especially in a First-person shooter game like *Bioshock*, while the story unfolds as the immersion deepens in the “fictional” space (Michael Nitsche, 2008, 15).

*Bioshock*³ is an example of a thorough-detailed storyworld with a greatly authored atmosphere. A key theme (and a citizen’s obsession) is gene modification and super powers. Unexpected socioeconomic segregation gradually grew underlined by the controlled access to a number of genetic modification substances. It was not long till social rivalry would arise and with that the start of the ending of Rapture. Movement in the decayed city, anymore inhabited by few mutated residents, is guided by the narrator’s instructions, the voice of Atlas who is the man who called for the revolution against Andrew Ryan, the founder of the city. However, this audio layer is not the only one that contributes to the creation of an atmosphere. Nostalgic well known recordings of other decades are interspersed with music composed⁴ especially for the game. Ivănescu emphasises on the popularity of the tracks saying that this selection builds a strong connection to the past (Andra Ivănescu, 2019, 124). Its original symphonic score, characterised by a main theme, underlines the solidity and coherence of *Bioshock*’s storyworld. Showcasing aleatoric, dark ambient and music concrete styles it creates from evocative, scary and mystery to devastation moments. In addition, the score utilises a number of samples of real-world sounds, used in a different context which detaches them from their initial meaning. The juxtaposition of the

3. It received the “Best Game” award in 2007 by the British Academy of Film and Television Arts, to name one of the multiple awards.

4. Original Score by Garry Schyman and 30 licensed tracks constitute the soundtrack of *Bioshock 1*.

score to licensed popular jazz & blues tracks from the 30s, 40s & 50s (Django Reinhardt, Billie Holiday, etc.) is elevating the audio experience creating a rich sensory experience.

The period songs are heard through radios, phonographs and jukeboxes and while their lyrics and their overall musical tone is optimistic and happy they contrast the actual action in an ironic way as Gibbons shows in his research on the topic (William Gibbons, 2011). He focuses on the lyrics of the songs, highlighting the way they operate in a narrative way, associating the on-screen action with their content. Gibbons considers the track selection as a sarcastic comment on the story which allows for further reflection. The score constitutes an extra-diegetic sound, while the period tracks turn from being initially acousmatic (Michel Chion, 1994, 32), meaning that their source is unseen, into diegetic. Their source can be first off screen making the player to look for it. The player adopts the role of a referential listener whose, according to Leonard Meyer (1956), emotions are influenced by music in the sense of the context that the music is referring to. This listening mode is in contrast to the absolutist position which states that music perception relates only to itself, a closed loop depending on its composition. In addition, an expressionist approach highlights that a series of emotions can arise due to musical organisation while it does not assert that these feelings are connected to concepts outside the musical spectrum. The author supports that throughout the gaming experience of Bioshock, the player perceives the soundtrack as a referential listener and his or her mind evokes extra-musical images, contextualising the music while linking it to cultural references of emotional content.

Immersive Nostalgia, Haunted by the Lost Utopia

According to Greg Kasavin (2012) the concept of atmospheres in video games aims to create an immersive and uninterrupted gaming experience while leaving a positive lasting impression to the player. From a design perspective, Kengo Kuma (1997) reflects on the importance for the designer to adopt a gardener's point-of-view, who inserts in the field of intervention. From the above, it becomes apparent that the concepts of immersion and atmosphere are interrelated. However, the concept of atmosphere includes the need of immersion while an immersive state is not necessarily atmospherical. Bioshock is carefully crafted in order to maintain the player's engagement while almost ironically the protagonist is literally immersed in this undersea story. Sound, as an "event" (David Toop, 2010, 45) which constantly evolves through time, being a ghost on its own, aims to immerse the player into a state of "reflective nostalgia," a will to return to a past without processing its real aspects, which evolves to a "restorative" one, where a fruitful contemplation on it occurs (Boym Svetlana, 2001, 13). Layers of sound, including the symphonic score, the licensed tracks, sounds of dripping water and travelling whales, allow for the appearance of ghosts as "mark of the absence of a presence, an always-already absent present" (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak 1976, xxxvi). The choice of devices for the emission of on screen sound is consistent with the storyworld, considering that action takes place in the 60s, maintaining the presence of the player. Music from phonographs, radios and jukeboxes as well as narration from audio diaries constitute disembodied voices representing ghostly existences. These technologically obsolete devices are "spectralised bodies," meaning vessels of ghosts. The haunting voices, which do not belong neither to the past nor to the present, animate the "bodies," while they are blended with other sound layers, resulting in the hauntological aesthetic effect. The dilapidated surroundings reflect the source music, which is heard in fluctuating volumes because of the protagonist's movement, evolving into a destroyed musical instrument which reveals that the whole city has turned into a "haunted house" (Sigmund Freud, 2003).

Hopes of the past are evoked repeatedly through the period track choices which reminds us of a mid-century America, the land of opportunity and the American dream. The art deco city, symbolising an era of wealth and self-promoting, half destroyed and anymore given back to the ocean, is turning gradually into a dystopia haunted by the vision of a neo-liberal utopia. Yeates (2015, 70) attributes Rapture “a lost innocence” in the name of greed for technological advancement and refers to it “as a melancholy, (a) haunted environment” reminiscent of American film noir movies. There is a continuous contrast between a past which envisioned a better future and a present which is characterised by a nostalgia for the ability of envisioning. As Mark Fisher (2012, 19) notes, capitalism can be thought of contracting and homogenising time and space through teletechnologies as well as through the city’s development via “Non-Places” (Marc Auge, 2009), creating non-places and non-time. Even though the idea of founding Rapture is an ode to objectivism, a theory deeply connected to capitalism, hauntology here reveals that “a place is stained by time” (Mark Fisher, 2012, 19). The story is deeply connected to the era that it takes place and the fictitious world offered in Bioshock is retrofuturistic in the sense that it showcases an alternate possible future of a particular historical and stylistic period. However, Jacques Derrida in the movie *Ghost Dance* (Ken McMullen, 1983) says that “to be haunted by a ghost is to remember something you’ve never lived through. For memory is the past that has never taken the form of the present” which is a comment on the ability to imagine a different world. However, Bioshock is not only about the vision of a utopia but mostly about the nostalgia for this virtuality contradicting the current absence of any vision. Different time layers, like the time that the video game takes place, the *epoque* brought by the selected tracks as well as the actual time that the video game is experienced by the player, are superimposed. There is a past inside a present as the actuality of the game within the present as the time-space of the player to extend the words of Adam Harper (2009). Irony is employed here again, since the “idealised” layer of sound, the period tracks which represent the ideal future, is “obfuscated” by its reproduction and the rest of game sounds giving it “a satirical doubt” (Adam Harper, 2009).

Conclusion

While a successful video game is not necessarily atmospheric, building an atmosphere for a virtual story world enhances the game’s power over the player. Atmospheres can spread and cannot be limited in space while it is unclear if the emitted moods characterise the objects or the subjects (Gernot Böhme, 1993, 119). Emanating sound forms space and its existence proves to be crucial when designing an impactful atmosphere. In this case, its hauntological aspect offers the possibility for the player to sense a failing utopia. Bioshock makes a comment outside the game’s world while feeding the player’s self-reflection. The soundtrack, reviving partially a previous era, evolves from feeding a restorative nostalgia to growing a critical thinking on the lost world, once idealised. The familiar as well as obsolescent technology featured in the story world reminds the player of the continuously evolving technology in everyday life and especially in the gaming field. However, the choice of familiar technologies can be considered a common practice in order to distance oneself from an alienating progress. In Rapture, radios and phonographs being the source of the diegetic music bring out this retro soothing feeling beneficial when facing an unknown future. The ephemerality of atmospheres and the audible aspect of them reinforce the meaning of these words by Derrida, who argues that being in this world after the end of history is at most existence in a world of spectres with intertwined marks of the past that will not depart (Olga Drenda, 2013, 50). In the end, what the player mourns for is not the failed future but “the disappearance of this effective virtuality” (Mark Fisher, 2012, 16).

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