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Vocal disruptions in the aural game world – The female entertainer in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, *Transistor*, and *Divinity: Original Sin II*

KEYWORDS

ludomusicology, voices, gender, identity, performance, storytelling

ABSTRACT

*The concept of the voice as disruption is not a new one. Disruptions to discourses, relationships, and lifestyles can be caused by the insertion of the voice. In video games, voices can be disruptive to player progressions, gameplay, and character relationships through dialogue and performances. The female entertainer frequently disrupts the aural space of a game through her uniqueness as a performer at the forefront of the diegetic space, using song to tell her own story. The video games *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015), *Transistor* (2014), and *Divinity Original Sin II* (2017) use diegetic female entertainer voices to disrupt the video game's continuity. These case studies consider performance as disruption to gameplay which is significant for the growth of the story and its characters, alongside the player's understanding of the game's musical meanings.*

The female entertainer is an uncommon musical component seen and heard in some video games. While not constrained by genre, the female entertainer is seen mostly in role-playing games as a disruptive focus to a game's soundscape and storytelling. When discussing the 'musical wallpaper' of a moving image, Ben Winters outlines that music can narrate by creating disruptions within a non-musical world (2012: 41). The female entertainer contributes her voice and personal story to the peripheral of an otherwise non-musical moving image. This inclusion of performance acts as a disruption as it prioritizes the character's development above the plot. When focusing on video games, this disruption would be a part of the aural game world which considers the player's 'zone of normality' when hearing game sound and music. When playing through a game for the first time, sounds and music are new and unfamiliar to the player but are consistent within the soundscape. The inconsistent use of the voice within a soundscape thus frames any diegetic performer as disruption to both the continuity of story and sound, although an inconsistent soundscape is not always detrimental to player enjoyment.

I define here the aural game world as something different to the soundscape. The soundscape incorporates reactive and interactive game sound, musical identifiers of the story, characters, and environments, interface sounds, and the voice within the diegetic and non-diegetic spaces. The aural game world considers only diegetic sounds and music, essential to story or character developments, including player voices. In popular culture, it is common for players to stream or record walkthroughs of gameplay for audiences. These audiences witness the reactions and conversations of the player whilst the game is in play, introducing player voices

to the audience's game experience. Alongside this, the noise of external interfaces such as screens, consoles, personal computers, and speakers cause disruptions to the soundscape of the game, becoming a part of the player's aural world. These sounds that work outside of the video game's diegesis can be considered as a component of inevitable gameplay which can be unwanted but tuned out. For the focus of this paper, the aural game world deals with the diegetic voices of in-game characters and, although player voices are acknowledged here, works solely within the game's diegesis.

Voice as a component of the aural game world can be disruptive to the player's experience either indirectly due to poor implication and sound design, or directly as a part of the game's aural continuity. Alternatively, voices can act as transporters for the player into the game world, acting to enhance player to character or player to environment relationships. Dialogue and vocal performances can be assigned to character models as a part of the aural game world, providing a sense of realism for transported players. Voice can also exist in the non-diegetic space as a voice-over, the "I-Voice," or as an emotional storyteller through the sung voice. It is not just the diegetic and non-diegetic space where the voice is taken into account. Robynn Stilwell's fundamental restructuring of the diegetic and non-diegetic space, to include the fantastical gap, summarizes the engagement between the player and character when witnessing performances and other 'transdiegetic' (Jørgensen 2007: 36) interactive game sound. The offering of a definition of sound between the diegetic and non-diegetic, and the ever changing view and audition point of the audience and player, is summarized by Annette Davison as 'potential to enable far more specific conceptualization of the border crossings that characterize so much film music, but which have thus far been little discussed' (2008: 113). The interest in the female entertainer comes from this ability of the voice to upset the coherence of the aural game world which the player thinks is the norm. In a medium where players can reimagine themselves within the game world, Davison's suggestions of sound crossing diegetic borders is what gives the study of the incongruous female entertainer voice its unique insight into the transportation of the player to the game world.

VOICE AS DISRUPTION

The line between an immersive and disruptive voice can be as fine as the wrong kind of vocal accent for a character, or bad acting. The discussion of immersion and flow is not the focus here, but a disruption to the immersive process can occur when voices do not fit a cinematic or gameworld aesthetic. Immersion is considered by various scholars (See Collins 2013; Donnelly, Gibbons and Lerner 2014; Phillips 2014; Kamp, Summers and Sweeney 2016; Summers 2016) each with differing terminologies and considerations of immersion from a total absorption of the player's mental state into the gameworld, a varied involvement with gameplay, visual, or aural aesthetics, to a lapse of time judgement when playing. Disruptive voices can be useful for the player, rather than breaking immersion, as they offer a humanistic quality to otherwise voiceless character models, or a relief within games where voices are limited. The horror genre uses trans-media approaches to cause panic in its audiences through the use of use long vocal silences (with the exception of character breath) which hyper-realize non-vocal sounds, possibly associated with the supernatural; these tropes can be seen in *The Grudge* (Shimizu 2004), television series *The Haunting of Hill House* (Flanagan 2018), and video games such as *Layers of Fear* (Bloober Team 2016), and

Resident Evil 7: Biohazard (Capcom 2017). Characters within the horror genre are often isolated, and the inclusion of voices become the human amongst the unhuman and act almost as a safety feature or zone.

As voices are used for aesthetical and emotional highlights in the moving image, the distinction between vocalizations and voice needs to be considered. Vocality is outlined by Leslie C. Dunn and Nancy Jones as a term which incorporates all manifestations of the voice, including performance, imbued with cultural meaning rather than assigning meaning solely to language (Dunn and Jones 1994: 1). Voice conforms to language and focuses towards performance and song, dialogue, voice-overs, and other voices imbued with meaning and language. Roland Barthes's seminal text 'The Grain of the Voice' provides defining characteristics of voice and vocality as the grain is explained by Barthes as the body's materiality, a performativity of vocal song created through the body (1977: pp. 181–182). Through Julia Kristeva's writing, Barthes explains the complexity of a performer's vocal grain by identifying the multiplicity of the voice and defining two of its key aspects, 'pheno-song' and 'geno-song'. Barthes associates bodily performativity with the 'pheno-song' which considers language within performance as 'at the service of communication, of representation, of expression.' Whereas 'pheno-song' relates to language, communication, and expression, the 'geno-song' works outside of the constraint of language and acts as the performer's 'diction of language' (Barthes 1977: pp. 270-271). Freya Jarman-Ivens also categorizes the voice in two manners, as the material and immaterial form. Whereas the immaterial voice is potentially abstract, the material voice 'can be a mediator between body and language; it gives language meaning, in its inflections, its speed, its accent, its bodiliness, but it is also an object apart from language (Jarman-Ivens 2011: 4). Whereas Jarman-Ivens argues that the voice can still be apart from language, I align voice alongside language and semantic content (pheno-song) and align vocality alongside Dunn and Jones' argument that it is not solely assigned to language and meaning, but more to all vocal manifestations (geno-song).

The distinction between vocality and voice is key to understanding disruptions specific to interactive video game audio as voices can overpower the music and interactive game sound of the aural world. Disruptive voices do not lack usefulness as vocalizations not controlled by language such as heavy breathing, combat grunts and growls, crying, and non-sensical languages are used as interactive tools for the player. The inclusion of heavy breathing to signify stamina drain, the grunts and cries to symbolize a player-character's depletion of health, and the sign of physical pain considers player interaction and sound as a quality of life to their gameplay. *Crypt of the NecroDancer* (Brace Yourself Games 2015) uses the MIDI voice of the shopkeeper to lure the player towards the safety of the shop environment, even from off-screen, where the player can buy tool upgrades and be safe from enemies.¹ Although the myriad vocal techniques now used in video games are akin to voice acting in film and television animation, the interactive developments that surround the voice is unique to video games.

Historically in video game sound there were literal disruptions from synthesized voices to the ongoing game sound, because of the engineered use of the sound chip. Kenneth McAlpine

¹ That is unless the player attacks the shopkeeper, on purpose or accidentally, and they retaliate towards the player-character.

explains that ‘note stealing’ was important when working with limited memory (specifically here with the Nintendo Entertainment System console), as composers needed to prioritize the reactive game sound or the musical cue, and thus needed to create music which could drop in and out of play (McAlpine 2019: 122). This lack of memory was not limited to reactive sound, or music, and extended to voices if introduced in the game. Voices were not included in earlier games due to memory constraints alongside the added cost, and challenge, of creating synthesized vocalizations with appropriate vocal inflections (see Cheng 2014: pp. 58–60). In this way, the disruption of the voice in video games can bear similarities to that of the transition between silent film and sound film, synchronized voices, and the embodied voice. The bleeps and bloops of a chip were interpreted as a voice, requiring player creativity and imagination in order to hear sounds become words, a deciphering tool now inherent in most gamers when playing modern games with retro aesthetics, like *Crypt of the NecroDancer*.

When voice was introduced to video games, the player lost this creativity and the addition of bad voice acting, or a miss-fit between body and voice, was now an issue. This transition to voice was not dissimilar to the transition between silent and talkie cinema, as in classic Hollywood cinema ‘the unity of body and voice was a desirable thing, but only when there was a “match” between the social meanings of the voice and those of the image’ (Taylor 2009: 2). This match, or synchronization, between the on-screen voice and associated character can be disruptive in video games, and other animated media, as the voice must be disembodied from the voice actor and re-embodied to the on-screen character. If character movement, such as mouth and bodily movements, do not synchronize with the voice and vocalizations made, the voice can become disruptive to audience and player engagement; substandard performances can be problematic in that they fail to provide a character with a “realistic” voice.

The rise of the nostalgic player and the nostalgia video game may not be a direct influence of voice acting disruptions but are nonetheless now a modern video game genre. Nostalgia itself is rife amongst gamers, the quickly obsolete console and computer technology of the past, and the games which ran alongside the technology, is remembered fondly. There is now an influx of remakes and remasters of 1990s and early 2000s video games, such as *Crash Bandicoot N. Sane Trilogy* (Vicarious Visions 2017), *Spyro Reignited Trilogy* (Toys for Bob 2018), and *Final Fantasy VII Remake* (Square Enix 2020). Synthesized voices are now used to identify characters in video games that use nostalgic pixel and retro aesthetics. These synthesized voices take up less memory than recorded voice acting, and can now show greater levels of vocalizations, such as intonation, than before. The cult video game *Undertale* (Toby Fox 2015) uses disruption to the point of forcibly closing the game on the player during an end boss sequence, identifying the game “deleting” player save states. Before this, voice is used by the character Alphys to disrupt the player’s gameplay by continuously ringing the player-character’s cell to ask them questions; the player can stop gameplay to call the characters in return and hear their synthesized voices. The style of voice is not its disruptive qualities, however.

Moving from the unrealistic, imaginative voices, to the realistic yet unhuman voice shows that it is the context and placement of the voice which can be, now, disruptive to lifestyle alongside the moving image. The virtual assistants of Google, Amazon, Android, Apple, and further industries were uncovered by Andra Ivănescu at the 2019 Ludomusicology

conference, discussing the voices of the virtual assistants and their machine and monstrous qualities in her paper ‘Inhuman music and the monstrous-feminine.’ Those who use modern day virtual assistants can be disrupted by a female voice in personal spaces. Ivănescu (2019) identified a similarity of the assistant to the monstrous assistant GLaDOS in the puzzle-game *Portal* (Valve Corporation 2007) who becomes the antagonist of the game. GLaDOS uses her voice to verbally and physically provoke and discourage the player-character by disrupting their movement, and mental capacity for GLaDOS’ voice, to stop them from reaching their cake shaped goal, and their real goal of escaping the laboratory environment.

THE FEMALE ENTERTAINER

As realistic voices and vocalizations have become aural game world disruptions, the embodied female entertainer has developed in the diegetic space of video games within various genres; Zia ‘Build That Wall’ *Bastion* (Supergiant Games 2011); unnamed non-playable characters ‘Nora u Norawea’ *Horizon: Zero Dawn* (Guerrilla Games 2017); Ellie ‘Through the Valley’ *The Last of Us Part II* trailer (Naughty Dog 2020), see Figure 1. *Final Fantasy VI* (Square 1994) saw one of its playable characters, Celes, perform an aria in the opera ‘Maria and Draco’ as a decoy for a kidnapping plot. Although reluctant, Celes takes on the role of Maria and finds her synthesized voice, a trigger to unlocking her musical theme and aural world identity, after perfectly performing the aria for the first-time.²



Figure 1: Ellie performing 'Through the Valley' in the diegetic space (Courtesy of PlayStation 2016).

The agency of the female entertainer sits within the diegetic space as their disembodied, non-diegetic, counterparts use their voices in environmental settings and to identify characters on-screen, rather than themselves. The well-known ladder sequence from *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater* (Konami Computer Entertainment Japan 2004) uses a female voiceover to perform the cue ‘Snake Eater’ as the player-character climbs a ladder for the entirety of the cue. The female voice exists in the non-diegetic space, her voice-over is heard above the

² The player must remember the lyrics of the aria, which they can memorize in the dressing room, and choose the correct stanza for Celes otherwise they forfeit their progress in the aria and must start again.

sound of wind in the tunnel environment and the repetitive low frequencies of the player-character (Snake) climbing the ladder. The female voice is used to pace the story, to provide a reflective moment for Snake, but also to parody the female performances of James Bond film openings, highlighting the character's misogynistic use of women; the cue is taken from the opening cinematic of the game which parodies the Bond openings further by using similar imagery and a swing band to accompany the female voice. The solo voice and ladder sequence appears just before the final boss, with the voice appearing as Michel Chion's disembodied all-knowing I-voice (1999: 49). The disembodied role of the non-diegetic voice, and voice-over, places the female voice as Snake's narrator. This voice was termed by Jesse Kinne (2019) as the 'destiny topos' for on-screen characters in fantasy media. Whilst the non-diegetic female voice may be resigned to the identification of a character or their destiny, and thus remains bodiless, the diegetic female entertainer's role brings them out of the peripheral. Celes triggers her musical theme through performance even though she does not sing of her own identifiers. Instead, Celes' agreement to take the role of Maria for the sake of the other playable-characters, and the triggering of her theme, provides Celes and the player with a sense of ownership of the aria.

The diegetic female entertainer can portray the game world through their own point of view and aural continuity. With point of view naturally being a masculine trait, seen in James Bond films and the *Metal Gear Solid 3* parody, and the peripheral female voice as their personal identifier, Stilwell challenges the psychoanalysis of sight as control, the male gaze, and the relationship between sound and the feminine;

From biological womb sounds to the mother's voice (replete with music, nonsensical baby-talk and lullabies), to film sound, feminine sound is elided similarly to the way Mulvey describes the collapse of the male gaze. (2001: 172)

Stilwell further explains the distinction between cinema's use of point of view as masculine and the point of audition aligning with the audio viewpoint of the feminine (2001: 174). Point of audition itself plays a role in the female entertainer's character. As Anahid Kassabian highlights, point of audition is the act of spatial involvement, submitting the audience to the medium's space, and as a point of hearing through a specified character (2013: 39). Point of audition in video games comes from the player-character or avatar almost constantly. The possible exceptions to this are the interactive game sounds, which are unknown as to whether they are heard by the character themselves as part of their aural world. Performances, therefore, are heard from the player-character's point of audition, as the player has possession of the character's body and witnesses their point of view and audition.³

Voice in the non-diegetic space of video games tends to privilege female vocalizations over that of male vocalizations. The practicality of using higher frequencies over the lower tones of melee combat and male dialogue can be proposed as one reason for this. Still, the female entertainer is more than the frequencies of her voice, the diegetic female performer has more potential for agency than the non-diegetic voice, for she is on stage and screen. The female on-screen voices are embodied and thus her voice becomes meaningful to a character body, as opposed to only musical context. In classic Hollywood productions, the female performer

³ Third-person view sees the player as a spectral being which witnesses the character from over their shoulder, but the player is still engaged with their character and thus still sees the game world from a character perspective.

and her acting style was aligned with the expectations of her character, defined by Kristen Pullen as ‘naturalism’ which is the relationship between the performer and character to form realistic emotions (2014: 4). Pullen speaks of the rise of on-screen personas from the naturalist paradigm in performance and the erosion of actor agency. This occurs when actresses labor to develop nuanced, consistent, believable characters and personae through their voice, gesture, stance, and action (Pullen 2014: 4). Issues of the feminine, or accurate, body type, is outlined in Pullen’s discussion of the athlete and actress Esther Williams, MGM’s “aquamusicals,” and the concern over her trademark ability to sing and perform at the same time with an athletic yet feminine body (2014: pp. 62–63). The femme fatale trope in classic cinema was disruptive to the naturalist acting style as cinematography focused on their body and risqué jazz performances, their voice then implicated with issues of body. Catherine Haworth outlines the musical performance of the song ‘Paradise’ by the femme fatale character, Susan, in *A Woman’s Secret* (Nicholas Ray 1949). Susan disrupts her own characteristics with performance, moving from an innocent persona to the femme fatale position, as her body and deviant transformation is focused on during her jazz performance (Haworth 2012: 115). The dominance of the femme fatale is shown through a focus on body, sex, and its alignment with jazz and other non-white genres of music; the female performer’s body ‘can be used to demonstrate the fatal woman’s celebration of her supposedly deviant identity, and her pleasurable breaking free of conformist 1940s roles for women’ (Haworth 2012: 116). The position of the female performer in classic Hollywood cinema sits between a lack of agency because of her body to a sexual agency because of her performance, which is, of course, also corporeal.

Voices can still exist in a film or game world without a body through the voice-over and voice-off. Sarah Kozloff explains the voice-off as the temporary speech of a character that emanates from off-screen, but a camera pan would bring the body on-screen (1988: 2). Whereas the voice-off gives the body the possibility of being on-screen, the voice-over acts as a narrator within an extension of the film or game world and will not suddenly be brought on-screen by a camera pan. As the female entertainer has an on-screen body, their further disembodied role as storyteller clashes with the male dominated space of the voice-over or voice-off, especially ‘the deep, robust, and authoritative all-American male sounds of the typical movie trailer’ (Haworth 2012: 129). Britta Sjogren rethinks the male-centric view of the voice and performance in this era, calling for femininity in film to be viewed as a positive outcome, rather than a damaging or problematic component of classic cinema (2006: pp. 1–2). Although it is un-challenged that the female voice-off was of a different, and more submissive, nature to that of the male voice-off;

Such voices, as those in *Rebecca*, *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, and *Secret beyond the Door*, are often coded as a partaking in memory or imagination, “seeing” through an “internal (blind) vision,” whereas the male voice-off more frequently comments in such a way as to suggest that it literally watches the image over the shoulder of the spectator. (Sjogren 2006: 22)

The differences between male and female voice-overs and voice-offs draw a parallel between film and video games; the over-the-shoulder voice-off spectator role is often given to male voices, such as in *Bastion*, *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Cafe 2013), *The Talos Principle* (Croteam 2014). As the male voice is a distinct character within these games, the female

voice-off is rarely semantically narrating the character actions, rather vocalizing emotional states or overarching stories of on-screen characters.

The increase in female player-characters within video games has seen a shift away from male domination. The well-handled female protagonist in *Horizon: Zero Dawn*, the player-character Aloy, narrates her own journey alongside the greater story as Aloy journeys mostly alone during quests. Aloy is not a female entertainer, but the lack of her diegetic voice-over, narrating her own journey in the game world when exploring the open environment, would have left the player without direction for extended periods of time. Chion notes that whether embodied or disembodied, the placement of the voice-over may remove closeness whilst enveloping the audience as a whole;

As long as the film's voice speaks to us from this removed position of the picture-presenter, whether the narrator is physically present or recorded on the audio track, it does not differ essentially from the good old voice of the magic lantern show, the voice of the mother or father talking to the child they hold on their knees and who hears them overhead, their voices enveloping him like a big veil. The cinema might recall this strong and close presence of the parental voice, but perhaps on the other hand it causes us to lose opportunities for like, closeness and the possibility of two-way communication. (1999: 50)

This voice as an envelopment is the goal of the female entertainer in games, drawing the player towards their voices. Their positioning in the aural game world is forefront, surrounding the player and audience in their stories. The performers of the three video games *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt Red 2015), *Transistor* (Supergiant Games 2014), and *Divinity: Original Sin 2* (Larian Studios 2017) show similar tropes to the female performers in classic cinema, although their agency and handling break this norm.

THE WITCHER 3: WILD HUNT: DISRUPTIVE STORYTELLING

The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt (*The Witcher*) is a role-playing game where the player controls a single player-character, Geralt of Rivia (Geralt). *The Witcher* uses voice as a worldbuilding tool for the game's environment and characters on screen. Accent is tailored to diegetic dialogue within various environments to symbolize diverse people. In the English translation of the game, numerous British accents are used, ranging from west country to stereotypical northern accents as the player traverses different terrains. The female voice and song are carefully considered between the diegetic and non-diegetic, as voice acts both as a signifier of danger and story continuity. The game uses the female voices of the Polish folk band Percival within the non-diegetic soundscapes of city and rural environments. Non-diegetic voices are most common during combat; the twinned cues 'Silver for Monsters...' and '...Steel for Humans' respectively play to symbolize monster or human enemy types. 'Silver for Monsters...' uses vocal manifestations such as growling, warbling, and a focus on syllabic sounds to symbolize monster enemies and unpopulated environments. On the other hand, '...Steel for Humans' uses Polish lyrics to portray the fate of a man named Lazarus, who is attempting to find a bride, when human enemies are present within city environments. These lyrics are similar to the player-character's opening main quest of finding his previous lover Yennefer. The harsh female voices of the non-diegetic space are used as voice-offs to narrate

Geralt's overarching personal goals, symbolizing his outcast rank as a witcher, and his identification with a white wolf through his physical appearance; witchers undergo genetic modifications which make them physically stronger and adept in spells and mental control, thus inhabitants are wary and suspicious towards witchers. Polish non-diegetic voices and language are consistent outside of cities in the aural game world, whilst cues containing English lyrics occur within cities such as Oxenfurt (a city with a resemblance to Oxford). This use of English language disrupts the rural voices in symbolizing Geralt, further highlighting his position as an outcast in society. Only the Celtic influences, seen in the visual fashions, terrain, and voices of the Skellige archipelago (a group of islands with a resemblance to Ireland and Scotland) see the movement away from the Polish language in rural environments to show the dominance of the Celtic resembling clans in this area.

One key difference between the voices, alongside language, in the game is the movement between several non-diegetic female vocalists to the diegetic solo entertainer voice. Voice as disruption in *The Witcher*'s diegetic aural world occurs in the deluge of unstructured dialogue directed at the player-character from non-playable characters, whilst exploring the environment. The female performer Priscilla is a known entertainer in the game world, see figure 2. Her disruption occurs in both the game's storytelling and sound, firstly by disrupting the main questline, as Geralt must find Priscilla in order to proceed in looking for his friend Dandelion. During the quest, the player is instructed to meet with another character called Zoltan at the Kingfisher Inn after sunset. If the player arrives before the designated time, they can explore the tavern. Non-vocal performances take charge of the aural world by performing set tavern pieces, also heard when playing the in-game card game *Gwent*, such as 'Another Round for Everyone' and 'The Nightingale'. Alongside this dialogue, other background voices and vocalizations such as conversations, coughing, general tavern noises such as eating and drinking, and jeers at Geralt can be heard. Non-playable characters respond to Geralt's witcher status in the tavern by acting in a derogatory manner towards the player. As the player explores the tavern, they can hear jests aimed towards them such as "you shouldn't have come to the city, you would have been better off staying in the trees". There is a clear emphasis from environments which do not include Geralt's musical signifiers, the harsh non-diegetic female voices, for Geralt to leave.



Figure 2: Priscilla's poster as entertainer.



Figure 3: Priscilla and lute during performance.

Wolven Storm

$\text{♩} = 76$

Soprano Solo

Lute

7

S. Solo

Lute

10

S. Solo

Lute

ten - der ca - ress To bind our for - tunes damn what the stars own

These scars long have yearned for your

Figure 4: Opening twelve bars of 'Wolven Storm'. Transcription by Author.

As Priscilla takes the stage and begins to tune her lute, the tavern goes quiet and becomes her personal performance space. Priscilla's song, 'Wolven Storm', see figure 3, is peripheral to the story and acts as a specially contained musical disruption in a non-musical game.

'Wolven Storm' attempts a recreation of a troubairitz performance as Priscilla sings a solo ballad whilst accompanying herself on the lute. The lute focuses on quaver rhythms which reinforce the vocal melody within the verses as the laidback tempo allows for each word and phrase to be emphasized by Priscilla, see figure 4. James Cook identifies Priscilla's performance as a unique part of the soundscape;

Perhaps the most significant diegetic moment, however, is the song by the Trobaritz Priscilla. The audio and visuals are surprisingly well matched, and the tuning of the lute adds emphasis to the fact of live performance. As a video cut-scene, this is one of few moments in the game where the player has no ability to affect their environs and must simply watch and listen. (Cook 2016)

As outlined by Cook, Priscilla's presence is disruptive as the player loses gameplay function and must listen to the previous relationship between Geralt and Yennefer, provided by the voice. The chorus considers the song's main story through the descriptive lyrics of Yennefer;

*You flee, my dream come the morning
Your scent - berries tart, lilac sweet
To dream of raven locks entwisted, stormy
Of violet eyes, glistening as you weep*

Priscilla does not cause disruption by performing her own personal goals, but surprisingly identifies Geralt's past relationships through the song's name and lyrical content, as Geralt has never met Priscilla. 'Wolven Storm' likens itself to the white wolf appearance of Geralt and acts as a space for reminiscence of the romantic relationship between Geralt and Yennefer.



Figure 5: Geralt looking reminiscent during Yennefer's descriptors.

The significance of the lyrical content is emphasized through the visuals. Geralt's intrigue and focus on Priscilla during the song gives it importance, see figure 5, as the player is told near the beginning of the game that Yennefer's signature smell is gooseberries and lilacs.

Priscilla has no lack of agency at this moment in time, but the player never hears her performance again. The player has unknown agency in the disruption of Priscilla's life as an entertainer. If the player chooses a quest to aid Dandelion in renovating his business then Priscilla is attacked, off-screen, with 'formaldehyde forced in her throat, and an incision made into her voice box' (Wiki 2015). Although Priscilla has agency on stage and screen, disrupting the gameplay and aural world, the player has agency in destroying Priscilla's career as an entertainer. The song itself can be disruptive to the player's romantic plans. The song sings of Geralt's assumed true love Yennefer but her disembodiment from the screen, as

Yennefer is not present, moves her to a position of folk lore. Yennefer's disembodiment occurs in the first two *Witcher* games, as Geralt and Yennefer have lost their memories and thus each other, and Yennefer only starts to appear on-screen as memories in *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings* (CD Projekt Red 2011). It is not until the opening of *The Witcher 3* where Geralt remembers Yennefer and they reunite, removing Yennefer from her disembodied folk lore position, only to be reinstated as lore through Priscilla's song; the song disembodies Yennefer as the player can aim Geralt's romantic interests towards Triss, an original relationship from *The Witcher* (CD Projekt Red 2007). This can be problematic as Geralt looks reminiscent towards Yennefer through Priscilla's lyrics, disrupting the player's judgement of Triss or validating their choice of Yennefer. This instance of solo vocal performance acts to remove Geralt from his continued isolation and convoluted status as a witcher, by singing of his relationships with other characters. Priscilla disrupts this isolation and almost normalizes Geralt by bringing audience members to tears with his story. *The Witcher* shows how a unique performance by a female entertainer can transport the player into the game world and blur the boundary between themselves, their goals, and the player-character's goals.

TRANSISTOR: MUTISM AND PERFORMATIVE AGENCY

Transistor is an action role-playing game where the player has control of a single playable character named Red who, unlike in *The Witcher*, is both the protagonist and entertainer of the game world. Red is an entertainer whose voice was stolen by the secret organizational antagonists, the Camerata, in an attack before the start of gameplay. The Camerata used the sword named Transistor to ensnare high profile personalities for unknown reasons other than to create a better Cloudbank city. The first action for the player is to press a button which takes them from an opening screen where an unknown male voice speaks; "Hey Red...We're not going to get away with this are we..." (figure 6), thus triggering a musical cue. Initially, the player believes these words suggest that Red and the Transistor have killed a man and need to get away with the murder. Shortly following, the sword continues with its informal and close dialogue with Red, stating "Together again" after instructing Red to pull itself from the unknown man, suggesting these characters have been accomplices for some time. The player is not initially told that Red is mute, and Transistor speaks largely on behalf of Red by narrating where the player is, directing player interaction, and commenting on moments of combat (see Table 1).

Story	Directional	Combat
"...I'm so sorry Red."	"C'mon just go."	"Nice...!"
"They took your voice."	"Let's have a look downstairs."	"Get out of here."
"Poll's a little out of date."	"Wait want to check the Channel back there?"	"Gross."

“Think I know where we are.”	“Unmarked alley... East of the bay...”	“OK get ready.”
“...When I first saw you up on that stage back there it was like...everyone loved you.”	“Sea Monster’s really the only choice here.”	“I guess we’re done here...”

Table 1: The columns show a selection of story, directional, and combat dialogue from the Transistor.

The three types of male diegetic dialogue are a type of voice-over but, because of the sword's materiality, the voice aligns more with Chion's explanation of the 'complete acousmètre, the one who is not-yet-seen, but who remains liable to appear in the visual field at any moment' (1999: 21). Complete acousmètre in *Transistor* occurs through the inclusion of the male voice, which is disembodied and embodied with the Transistor. As the player progresses to the end of the first level, they learn that the voice does not belong to the sword and has no natural connection to a body or visual profile; the actual victim of the sword was meant to be Red. This takes us away from the 'complete acousmètre' as the body of the voice was seen by the player at the beginning of the game and thus could take the definition of the 'visualized acousmètre' (Chion 1999: 21). Both can be argued here, the player may not have paid notice to the male body at the very start of gameplay (figure 7), and thus not committed it to memory, as the body is not highlighted as significant by the developers; the player can thus hope that Red will somehow rebuild the unknown man's body with the Transistor, the hopeful acousmètre. This acousmètre sits alongside the voiceless Red and continuously narrates her journey. The male voice does not take agency from Red; her agency is provided by the voice later found to be her partner in a time of unrest and within a lifeless city which is slowly being erased by the Process. The Process are a system antagonist created by the Camerata. The male voice removes Red, and the player, from the voiceless world and provides practical and emotional guidance⁴ to Red, as seen in Table 1.

⁴ The player does not need to heed any directional guidance from the voice, but it points out anything interactive they may have missed.



Figure 6: Opening visuals with the Transistor's voice.



Figure 7: Red, Transistor, and the Unknown Man.

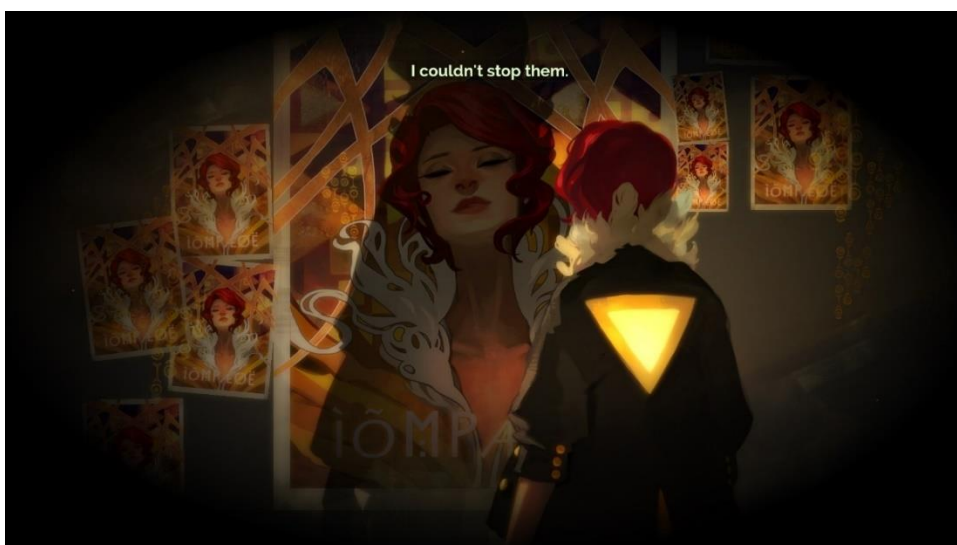


Figure 8: Story dialogue from the Transistor and Red's reflection on her past self.

Whereas Priscilla's performance in *The Witcher* was disruptive through a lack of musicality in the overarching story of the game, *Transistor*'s story surrounds itself in performance, but has disrupted Red's ability to perform. As the male voice disrupts the silence of the world, the player is given access to performative disruption with Red's voice, humming. The player has control of a hum function which can be accessed by the pressing of a specific button or key. Humming gives no advantage to the player and ceases all activity to allow Red a space for reflection. As the player gives Red her ability to vocalize, Red takes the *Transistor* into an embrace, a spotlight shines down on Red as though she is performing, and her hum is cued over the soundscape; the hum is not random and is tailored to each cued song. *Transistor* transforms into Red's world at this point, showcasing that the non-diegetic soundtrack is a part of Red's repertoire, making it a part of the fantastical gap. Although the hum function is not available in combat, Red's vocalizations are cued into a combat mechanic (a way of resolving conflict between character and enemy). This unique mechanic for the game is named Turn() and freezes in-game time so the player has time to think and perform actions without enemy attack or interruption. The player must cue actions, such as an attack, during the mechanic which are then executed quickly by Red when time restarts in the game world, before the enemy has chance for their own movement. The hum is heard within the frozen time and space of Turn() but is not actively performed by Red. The music itself is disrupted, for the calm and thoughtful space of Turn() reduces the velocity of instruments, including guitar and percussion, and introduces Red's humming to the forefront of the aural space. To direct attention towards Red's vocalizations, a number of effects are added to the track. Reverb is added to the voice, to represent the undisrupted space of Turn(), and EQs are added to other instrumentation to reduce their presence. This disruptive vocalization is always a part of the sound world but is muted until the player actively triggers the humming. Vertical layering brings this vocalization to the forefront of the soundscape, a function described by Winifred Phillips as passages of sound and music that can be presented separately during gameplay, by triggers which turn the separate audio files on and off (2014: 29). This vertical layering of sound creates the sense that the player is disrupting the soundscape.

Red's agency as a performer and entertainer is not only governed through the *Transistor*'s voice. As Red finds a poster of herself, and other objects which remind her of her former life, she reminisces of herself as an entertainer; see figure 8. Red's song 'The Spine' is performed here in the fantastical gap as the song appears in the non-diegetic space but was triggered by Red's reminiscing. This appearance of Red's voice comes from her memory, seeing rather than un-seeing in her imagination. Voices as disruption in *Transistor* are not seen from voice-over effects to remove Red from herself as an entertainer, but to give the player agency in her recovery through interactive voices. Mutism and performative agency exist in the aural environment with Red seeing similarities in treatment to Ophelia's performances and femininity in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. As Leslie C. Dunn explains, Ophelia's perceived madness and performance are relatable as 'singing, then, functions as a highly theoretical sign of Ophelia's estrangement from "normal" social discourse, as well as from her "normal" self' (Dunn and Jones 1994: 51). Red's mental state is only implied in a few moments, in her return to Cloudbank rather than fleeing to enact her revenge on the Camerata, and her eventual suicide. Although Red and the player take back control of the Process and city, Red's suicide shows her inability to move past the voice and companion she has lost. Red becomes a part of her own reality, a trait identified by Susan McClary within the character Lucia, in Donizetti's opera *Lucia di Lammermoor*, who relives moments with the character

Edgardo, and her ‘exuberant singing leaves the mundane world of social convention behind as she performs high-wire, nonverbal acrobatics that challenge the very limits of human ability’ (McClary 2002: 92); Red’s humming is a potential spill of musical lament into her non-verbal aural world, in-kind with female madness and lamenting of lost lovers, outlined by McClary’s discussion of the nymph character in Monteverdi’s *Lament della Ninfa* (2002: 86).

DIVINITY: ORIGINAL SIN 2: DISRUPTING MISSING AGENCIES

Divinity: Original Sin 2 (Divinity) is a role-playing game in which the player chooses or creates their personal character party of four, their skills, appearances, and almost all of their personality; this is unlike the pre-made characters of *The Witcher* and *Transistor*. When creating characters, the player can either create a custom player-avatar, with no voice acting, or choose one of six characters with voice acting and pre-set backstories. As the game progresses, regardless of their original character choice, the player has three character party spaces which means they may interact with zero to four pre-set characters in their party. Unlike the linearity of character development in *Transistor*, the player choices in *Divinity* means a random amount of engagement with the backstories and present actions of the pre-set characters, depending on the player.⁵

Assuming the player engages with the character, the female entertainer character is a human named Lohse; Lohse defines herself in the character selection as an entertainer who is widely celebrated in the world of Rivellon. With this character, *Divinity* disrupts the aural space of the game world in two ways, by both denying and allowing the character a chance to perform. Lohse’s musical disruptions are personal to her past life, occurring because of a demon who has possessed her body and dislikes music. The demon, also known as the doctor, wishes to fulfil the character’s journey in becoming Godwoken, aligning with the player’s main goal, but to take the power for themselves. The player quickly learns that Lohse’s performances will be disrupted by the demon at any given chance. The player is given the option to allow Lohse to play a lute, this swiftly ends in a broken instrument as the demon takes control of Lohse and wills her to smash any instrument played. Lohse’s character development sees her confrontation with the demon until a final combat, in the final game environment of Arx, where eventually the player’s party overcomes the demon and Lohse is returned her ability to perform. This disruption to Lohse’s literal physical inability to perform is lifted and the player has access to a performance from Lohse at any point in the game henceforth.

As Lohse’s life as an entertainer is absent, her ability to search and fight for her right to entertain remains. Much like Red, because of the loss of herself as an entertainer, Lohse directly confronts the demon on several occasions and, frustrated at her God’s inability to contact her because of the demon, finds her own will to continue her journey with little guidance from ethereal beings. Lohse frequently disrupts gameplay progression through the demon’s will; attacking characters helpful to the player, not being able to speak to her god because of the demon’s meddling, and the player’s inability to allow her song disrupts the player’s progressions. The lyrics of ‘Lohse’s Song’ call to the player’s interaction with her

⁵ In first playthroughs, players are likely to be more than willing to engage with the stories of pre-set characters, as most players feel a sense of relationship with playable characters.

story, and her disruptions until this point. The act of performativity in ‘Lohse’s Song’ is almost lost, as the player can trigger the song anywhere (except for combat). The visual inclusions of light, and the provision of an ethereal lute for Lohse to perform with, stops this loss of performativity. Visually, Lohse creates her own stage and spotlight as the song progresses, gathering light beneath her feet as fairies and butterflies surround her person. As ‘Lohse’s song’ climaxes, the light explodes as she taps her foot and a bass drum is struck for gravitas.

The lyrics for ‘Lohse’s song’ identify the relationship between Lohse and the player, their combatant past, and their musical future, outlined in Table 2.

Part of the first verse:	Meaning:	Chorus:	Meaning:
<i>Sway with me, we’ll make them scream.</i>	Call to player, past combat.	<i>Listen, do you hear it.</i>	Call to player for celebration.
<i>Dance with me, we’ll make them bleed.</i>	Call to player, past combat.	<i>Listen, do you feel it.</i>	Call to player for celebration.
<i>Sing for me, I’ll sing along.</i>	Call to the player, Lohse’s entertainer mutism.	<i>Listen, I’m calling you.</i>	Call to player, breaking the fourth wall.
<i>Sing for me, oh sing for me.</i>	Call to the player, the player must try and regain Lohse’s voice.	<i>Listen, you do know me.</i>	Call to player, the relationship built with Lohse over the game.
		<i>Listen, swing and roll me.</i>	Player moving the character, the roll of virtual dice for game interaction success and failure.
		<i>Listen, I’m calling you.</i>	Call to player, breaking the fourth wall.

Table 2: Lyrical meanings of ‘Lohse’s Song’.

Lohse performs each stanza in her own popular entertainer style rather than focusing on a complex and historically informed lute performance, like Priscilla’s trobairitz style. Lohse repeats simple melodic riffs during the verse and chorus, whilst accompanied by four lute chords of A minor, C, G, and D repeated with each stanza, see figure 9. Alongside what is assumed to be a solo performance, Lohse is accompanied by drones on low strings throughout and extra female voices performing the ‘destiny topos’ trope of “ah” vocalizations during the bridge. Whereas Priscilla’s song attempts to mimic a trobairitz style performance, Lohse’s modal pop song shows her independence from the demon and the medieval aesthetics of the game.

The musical score for 'Lohse's song' consists of eight bars of music, labeled A. The key signature is one sharp (F#). The lyrics and chord progressions are as follows:

- Bar 8: Chord D (above bar line), Chord Am (above bar line). Lyrics: Sing for me, Oh, sing for me.
- Bar 10: Chord Am (above bar line). Lyrics: Sway with me, we'll make them scream.
- Bar 11: Chord C (above bar line), Chord G (above bar line). Lyrics: Dance with me, we'll make them bleed. Sing for me, I'll sing a- long.
- Bar 13: Chord D (above bar line), Chord Am (above bar line), Chord Am (above bar line). Lyrics: Sing for me, Oh, sing for me. List- en, do you hear it?

Figure 9: Eight bars of 'Lohse's song', note the repeated patterns in the chord sequence and rhythm.⁶

This celebration, although appropriate at its first performance after defeating the demon, can be disruptive from its use outside of context; although, the player may wish to hear the performance after every future success; unlike Priscilla's song in *The Witcher*, the player can exit the performance at any time. As Lohse begins to perform the song, the diegetic sounds of movement, by other characters in the game world, and non-diegetic music are disrupted to provide a performance space for Lohse. Like that of *Transistor*, when Lohse is asked by the player to perform, her sounds and visuals come to the forefront of the aural world, see figure 10. Sounds do not completely drop out of the aural space, but the dynamic highlight is on Lohse. The song is visually in the diegetic space, but the audio quality appears that of a non-diegetic cue as it lacks the effects which submit the audio to the diegetic world. This causes the song to cross game and sound world boundaries, breaking the fourth wall with its lyrical content and falling into the fantastical gap, disrupting the aural game world's continuity. Lohse herself is a transporative entertainer. Her celebration of her release from the non-musical demon interrupts her missing agency, resetting the character to her role before player inclusion. Lohse's aligned position as femme fatale is considered through her celebratory performance, synergizing with the classic Hollywood perception of the deviant identity, outlined earlier by Haworth. Lohse's consideration of combat as excitement, alongside her personality as a jester, assumes her position as femme fatale.

⁶ Thank you to Josh Dibble for a speedy transcription of 'Lohse's Song' for the purpose of this article.

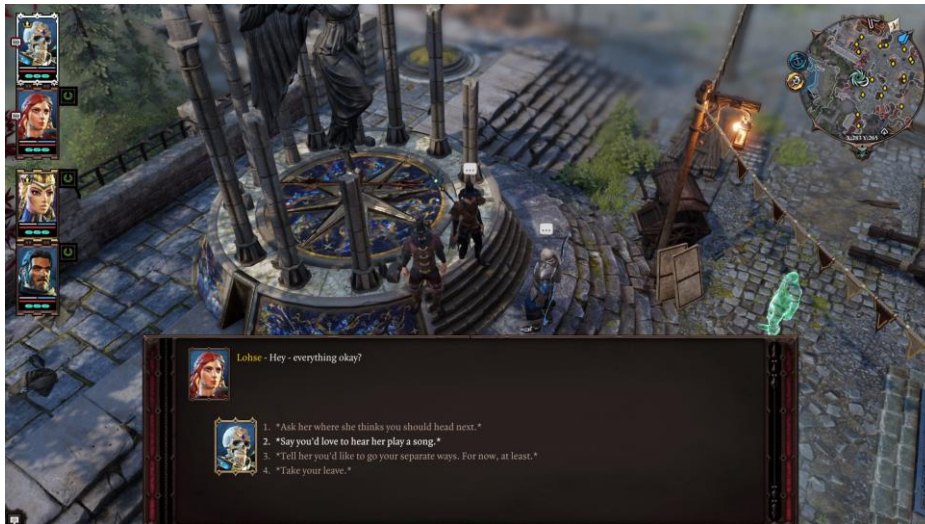


Figure 10: The option to request 'Lohse's Song' at any point, after defeating the demon.

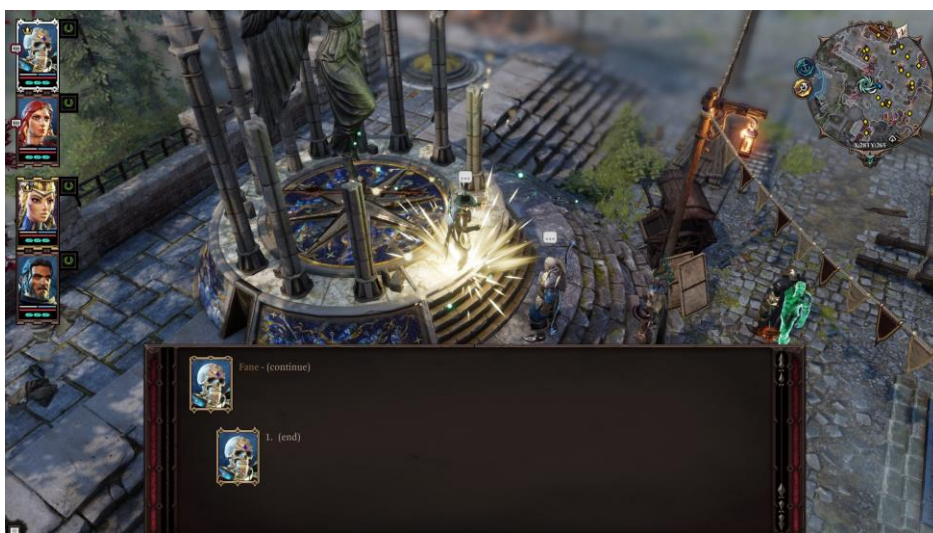


Figure 11: The explosion of light when Lohse stamps her foot and the song climaxes.

As seen in figures 10-11, Lohse's small character model does not stop her from performing her song as Lohse moves her body to the beat of the song, and each strum of the guitar is mimicked by her model. In the break, which sees the lyrics "You hardly know" aimed at the player, Lohse looks about the environment seemingly looking through the veil of the screen in one moment. Lohse then acknowledges the player as she sings "Let's make then scream", standing completely still, and goading the player into joyfully following her into combat with her returned singing voice.

CONCLUSION

When discussing the limited role of the female third-person narrator Kozloff identifies a possible theory that 'female narrators are likely to be confined to a certain domestic or personal ghetto' (1988: 100). Although this aligns with American fiction film and not video games, we can see from two of the three case studies that the female entertainers are narrating their own personal stories. Priscilla falls outside of this confinement by performing the

storylines of the previous two *Witcher* games, but falls short through the domestic and romantic content of the lyrics; Priscilla's fate then somewhat follows the stereotype of a Shakespearean tragedy as she further loses her voice after this performance, and her ability to narrate is lost. Returning to Sjorgren's identifications of the female voiceover in cinema as the memory seeker with an internally blind vision, each female entertainer identified submits to this role of looking to the past; although each character has an individual goal to find something that was lost, to celebrate the end of a non-musical era, or to voice-over the past. The female entertainer frequently disrupts the aural game world to front their own personal goals or perceptions of another. Although disruptive to player gameplay, and the aural game world, these personal performances and vocalizations bring unexpected interaction between player and storytelling. The pause in gameplay for each game's vocal performance highlights the significance of the character's, and therefore the player's, engagement through song, and a further personal backstory. These female entertainers can see a movement away from classic feminine Hollywood cinema tropes, but their varied mutisms appear clichéd.

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