Finding *Untitled Goose Game*'s dynamic music in the world of silent cinema

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Keywords
Videogame music, dynamic music systems, Untitled Goose Game, musical adaptation, silent cinema

ABSTRACT
There are three unusual things about *Untitled Goose Game*'s music. First, for an independent videogame produced by a small studio, the music is dynamic and reactive – often costly exercises – to a high degree. The game uses pre-recorded, non-generative musical performances, and yet will respond to on-screen events within a buffer of only a few seconds at maximum. Secondly, the music takes inspiration not from other dynamic music systems in videogames, but from the varying practices of musical accompaniment for silent cinema, aiming to replicate affect rather than process. Finally, the music for *Untitled Goose Game* takes the unusual step of adapting pre-existing classical music from the public domain – in this case, six of Claude Debussy's *Preludes* for solo piano, from 1909-1912 – rather than creating an original score intended from its conception to be dynamic. This unusual step, combined with the other above factors, created a unique practical problem to be solved: how can music never conceptualised to be reactive or subject to interactivity be made to perform in a responsive context?

This paper outlines the dynamic music system at work in *Untitled Goose Game*, and the influence drawn on for this system from non-videogame approaches to musical accompaniment. In particular, I will discuss the varying practices to music for the silent era of cinema, and the theoretical frameworks used to conceptualise these many divergent approaches (Abel and Altman, 2001; Altman 1992; Altman, 2004), and whether we can recognise their legacy at work in *Untitled Goose Game*'s soundtrack. Ultimately, this paper will argue that by looking to approaches beyond more familiar debates about dynamic music for videogames, *Untitled Goose Game* helped shortcut familiar problems that confront developers and composers when working with dynamic and reactive music. The net result was the creation of a system with a theoretical minimum of 10^{52} possible performances of each of these century-old pieces of music. To say that no player will hear the same performance is an understatement. *Untitled Goose Game*'s dynamic music can also be seen as successful on its own terms, given the frequency of press mentions of the game's music as both pleasurably dynamic and also akin to silent cinema (Plante, 2019; Rychter, 2019; O'Connor, 2019).

Creating dynamic music for videogames is frequently seen both as desirable and also notoriously difficult. "The fact that music exists in time is an essential problem when composing music for computer games," argues Kaae (2008), who also offers a number of parameters to mitigate this problem when composing for videogames.

Proceedings of DiGRA Australia 2020

However, Debussy's *Preludes* were not composed for *Untitled Goose Game*, and therefore such compositional strategising is impossible: reactivity was applied to the music post-hoc. Theory can aid us yet, though: despite there being wide divergence in approaches to creating dynamic music, *Untitled Goose Game*'s approach still broadly corresponds to van Geelen's "branching" (2008) understanding of dynamic music, if perhaps to a more granular degree than previously imagined. Indeed, the game's cinematic influences extend to serendipitous matching of image and music being "read" by the player as containing greater correspondence than is intentional. As Michael Chion argues, the "added value" of sound "engages the very structuring of visions… by rigorously framing it" (Chion, 1990). Players of videogames are just as likely to see what they hear as the cinema spectator is. This is a vital lesson for composers of dynamic music.

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BIO

Dan Golding is a Senior Lecturer in Media and Communication at Swinburne University. With House House, he created the soundtracks for *Untitled Goose Game* and *Push Me Pull You*, and *The Haunted Island* as part of Worm Club. His new book, *Star Wars After Lucas*, was published by the University of Minnesota Press in 2019. Dan also co-wrote *Game Changers* (Affirm Press, 2016) and is the host of Screen Sounds on ABC Classic.