

USING SOUNDTRACKS IN ROLEPLAYING GAMES

Notes Based on a Gaming Workshop

By Peter Schweighofer

Movie music uses the same techniques of blending leitmotifs and themes, perhaps best exemplified by John Williams and his work on innumerable film scores.

- ▣ Although viewers might not notice it, a film score enhances the action, subconsciously affects our emotions, and imprints on our memory.
- ▣ Leitmotifs are short musical themes used to introduce, describe, and reinforce our impressions of characters, locations, ideas, and general themes.
- ▣ Music from particular sequences in a film can help enhance similar action in your roleplaying game.
- ▣ Music in films and games serves as a cue for how to feel and what to expect. It sets the mood for the scene.
- ▣ Watch the film again to see how music enhances the action (and mine the movie for encounter and adventure ideas).
- ▣ Line up some tracks, then listen to them in order as you design your adventure or review a prepared scenario. Note in the margins or on a separate piece of scrap paper which track you want to play for which scenes.
- ▣ Read the adventure and play the music at the appropriate points. Practice starting or ending certain tracks if certain pieces blend into others you don't want to use.
- ▣ Remember, not every scene needs music. Choose tracks to enhance the most pivotal, exciting sequences in the adventure.

PREPARATION

Just as you would prepare a scenario by reading it, checking stats, and reviewing maps, prepare your soundtrack by listening to music appropriate to the adventure and selecting some tracks that enhance encounters.

- ▣ Listen to music while reviewing rules, reading new supplements, scripting campaigns, or designing adventures
- ▣ Familiarize yourself with a soundtrack's musical themes and find inspiration for music to tie into scenario events.
- ▣ Review scenario outline to find mood-setting or climactic scenes you can enhance with music.
- ▣ Jot down a play list with tracks keyed to adventure encounters.

RUNNING WITH SOUNDTRACKS

Balance playing music with the usual conversation that takes place during the game. If you're well-prepared, music can serve as an enhancement instead of a distraction.

- ▣ Make sure your gaming location has appropriate CD equipment to play your music, personal device, boom box, computer with CD drive, or a stereo system.
- ▣ If you're jumping around to various tracks on different CDs, try using a CD player with a changer carousel or magazine.
- ▣ Don't let the soundtrack dominate the game. Make sure all players can hear each other clearly. If the music interferes with communication, turn down the volume or shut it off for a moment.

IN-GAME SOUNDTRACK STRATEGIES

Here are four ways you might try incorporating a soundtrack into your gaming protocol.

- ▣ Play each track continuously throughout an appropriate scene, repeating at lower volume as action continues.
- ▣ Play each track only once at the beginning of the appropriate scenes—when you're describing what's going on—then turn it off while you play through the game mechanics.

▣ Let a player or a gamemaster aide run the soundtrack according to your adventure notes and signals from you during the game.

▣ If this all seems too complicated (and it can be at times), don't worry about what tracks to play, just find a CD of appropriate mood or genre music and let it play itself out in the background.

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QUICK TRACKS

If you're playing a game that shares a genre with certain films, use those movie scores. If you're running a *Star Trek* or *Star Wars* game, use those film soundtracks. Running a pulp game? Use the *Indiana Jones* soundtracks. *Pirates of the Caribbean* is perfect for a swashbuckling campaign. Run the CD in the background while gaming, or select tracks to play during specific scenes.

Below you'll find suggestions for film soundtracks to use in different gaming genres. Most include a variety of music to suit different situations (investigation, chases, combat) for their particular genre.

FANTASY

Conan the Barbarian
Lord of the Rings Soundtracks
Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves
Hercules & Xena
Braveheart

CYBERPUNK

Terminator
Terminator II
Robocop
Blade Runner
The Matrix Instrumental Score

SCIENCE FICTION

Total Recall
Fifth Element
Starship Troopers
Predator
Men in Black

HORROR

Silence of the Lambs
Aliens
The Abyss
The Crow
Basic Instinct

PULP

Raiders of the Lost Ark
Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade
The Rocketeer
The Mummy
James Bond 007 Film Soundtracks

PIRATES/SWASHBUCKLERS

Pirates of the Caribbean
13th Warrior
Three Musketeers
Mask of Zorro
Man in the Iron Mask