

How Musical Leitmotifs Enhance Narration and Evoke Emotion

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WHY LEITMOTIF?

Musical leitmotifs are underacknowledged in English-language game studies. When they are mentioned, it is usually only in passing (e.g. Colins, 2008; Pidkameny, 2008; Jørgensen, 2009). This is surprising given the prevalence and impact of leitmotifs in story-heavy games—particularly Japanese-style role-playing games (JRPGs). Since (ludo)musicology and film studies offer mostly inaccessible, ill-fitting, or anachronistic accounts of “Wagnerian” leitmotif (e.g. Gorbman, 1987; Biancorosso, 2013; Adorno, 2005), I advance a contemporary understanding of the term that is tailored to digital games and accessible to non-musicians. I identify and formalise nine narrational–affective functions of leitmotif, plus one cross-media application. Examples from JRPG-like series scaffold analysis.

WHAT ARE (LEIT)MOTIFS?

For the sake of artificial tidiness, let's sketch mutually exclusive definitions of themes, motifs, and leitmotifs. Consider the *Legend of Zelda* main theme, ubiquitous throughout the series. It is holistic; an overture—it represents not only Princess Zelda, but also the player–character, their adventure, the realm of Hyrule, the evil Ganon, and so on. For most *Zelda* fans, the main theme is guaranteed to rouse emotion. But such an emotion is not tied to a solitary character, event, or location—it encapsulates all of one's time spent within the *Zelda* universe. The same can be said of the *Star Wars* or *Harry Potter* main themes; they come to represent the franchise as a whole. A (main) theme may thus be defined as a complete musical idea that *can* allude to discrete aspects of the storyworld, but primarily evokes the work in toto.

A motif can be defined as the smallest musical unit capable of carrying thematic meaning (White, 1976). Examples are found in *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo, 1998). See *Epona's Song* (Fig. 1). The first three notes constitute a discernible motif. However, since this motif signifies Epona the horse *specifically*, it is not merely a motif, but rather Epona's *leitmotif*. For our purposes, then; where a motif is a fragmentary musical idea that *doesn't* represent something specific in the story, a leitmotif is a fragmentary *or* a more complete musical idea that *necessarily* represents a specific character, location, sentiment, or some other noun in the story (and/or interaction between them).

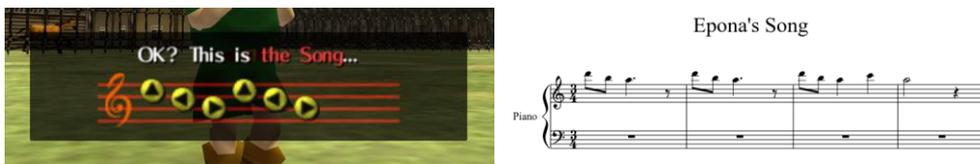


Fig 1: The in-game tabulation of *Epona's Song* (left) features its motif—a fragmentary musical idea—played twice. The score (right) repeats the motif a third time: The four-bar phrase—a more complete musical idea—is resolved with two additional notes. Both the fragment and the more complete musical idea are instances of leitmotif.

WHAT CAN LEITMOTIF DO?

Nine distinct (though usually co-occurring) intratextual functions of leitmotif can be identified and formalised. These are corroborated variously by Colins (2008), Buhler, Neumeyer, and Deemer (2010), Bribitzer-Stull (2015), and Yu (2016a; 2016b).

Leitmotifs can (1) *define* and (2) *differentiate* characters and locations, helping players process entities as unique and memorable. Simultaneously, leitmotifs (3) *seed* and (4) *substantiate* emotions, bootstrapping sympathetic or antipathetic character engagement (Smith, 1995). Consider the avaricious Shinra Inc. from *Final Fantasy VII* (Square, 1997). The Shinra leitmotif is an unsettling, rising melodic minor scale, first heard when the player encounters President Shinra. You realise not only that the leitmotif refers to President Shinra, designating (*differentiating*) him an antagonist (and *seeding* relevant emotions), but also that the music captures the ominousness of his corporation (*defining*; *substantiating* emotions). The Shinra leitmotif is next heard as you prepare to infiltrate the company's towering headquarters. In this rendition, an intrepid-sounding bridge juxtaposes the anxious refrain of the leitmotif, reminding you that though your mission is noble, the enemy's stronghold looms overhead. This is an example of how leitmotif can (5) *modulate* the context of a scene (here, by evoking an off-screen entity).

Further examples abound in *Undertale* (Fox, 2015). Right before you meet the alleged arch-antagonist, a poignant leitmotif from earlier in the game (“Home”) is reprised. Musical cues thus cement your realisation that you are about to confront the estranged husband of your adoptive mother: Leitmotifs from her theme music are blended with those of your current adversary, producing a new composition with hybrid semantic associations. In this way, leitmotifs can be used to (6) *interweave meaning*. Moreover, as you fight, you may realise that leitmotifs were used distally to (7) *foreshadow*, as well as proximally to (8) *prime* you affectively for the encounter.

The final intratextual function of leitmotifs is to (9) *constitute* an emotional climax, for instance as the backbone of a narrative set-piece. *Final Fantasy VIII* (Square, 1999) instils early in our subconscious its “love” leitmotif: We hear it when the sweethearts first meet, albeit masked as a lively waltz. When the star-crossed lovers are finally reunited, the leitmotif returns as a soaring lyrical ballad. The inclusion of recorded vocals catches us off-guard, positioning the song, *Eyes on Me* (or, rather, its leitmotif), as the pre-eminent emotive force linking romantic narrative arcs across the game's multiple generations and timelines.

Lastly, we can tentatively identify a tenth, *intertextual* function: Leitmotif as supporting transmedial world-building. Leitmotifs from *Final Fantasy VII* can be heard in spin-off media such as the prequel game *Crisis Core* (Square Enix, 2007) or the anime film *Last Order* (Asaka, 2005). But it is the series' enduring “Chocobo” leitmotif that stands as the clearest indicator of how music can carry meaning beyond the bounds of its original instalment. Debuting in *Final Fantasy II* (Square, 1988), the Chocobo theme/leitmotif (Fig. 2, bottom) has doubtless contributed to the mascot's popularity, as evidenced by Chocobo-related media ranging from manga (Fig. 2, second from right) to *keitai* games (Fig. 2, right). Owing to deep familiarity engendered by repeated exposure and positive associations, the character's cheerful leitmotif is liable to spring to mind even when fans are enjoying Choco-media with no auditory component. On these bases, I suggest in closing that memorable musical leitmotifs can play a subtle yet significant role in the cross-media phenomena referenced by this year's conference's theme, “the Emerging Ludo Mix”.



Fig 2: Cross-media instances of the Chocobo character united by a single, parsimonious leitmotif.

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