

Scoring the Story: Dissecting Interactive Game Music and Sound Design in *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*

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Abstract

The award-winning video game *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*, built by British video game developer The Chinese Room, divided critics and audiences when it premiered in 2015. Viewed as an ambitious and elegant challenging of musical and visual tropes typically found within the post-apocalyptic genre, the game heavily constructs itself on interactive sounds that are both uniquely responsive and self-generating. Composer Jessica Curry and audio designer Adam Hay earned prestigious accolades for their work in *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* involving building a soundscape that simultaneously serves as environmental ambiance and a primary story narrative. Purposefully omitting prominent uses of characters and dialogue, the players' gameplay heavily relies on unique audio interactions to design the story-based game's narrative and action — essentially allowing players to score the story. Dissecting how the game places crucial responsibility on the relationship between players and audio reaffirms how *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* can be viewed as an impressive and important achievement in interactive media music and sound design.

Keywords: Video Games, Media Music, Sound Design, Interactive Music.

Anotando la historia: diseccionando la música del juego interactivo y el diseño de sonido en *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*

Resumen

El galardonado videojuego *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*, creado por el desarrollador británico de videojuegos The Chinese Room, dividió a los críticos y al público cuando se estrenó en 2015. Visto como un ambicioso y elegante desafío de tropos musicales y visuales que se encuentran típicamente en el post. En un género apocalíptico, el juego se construye en gran medida a partir de sonidos interactivos que responden de forma única y se generan a sí mismos. La compositora Jessica Curry y el diseñador de audio Adam Hay obtuvieron prestigiosos elogios por su trabajo en *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* que involucra la construcción de un paisaje sonoro que sirve simultáneamente como ambiente ambiental y narrativa principal de la historia. Al omitir intencionalmente los usos destacados de los personajes y el diálogo, la jugabilidad de los jugadores se basa en gran medida en interacciones de audio únicas para diseñar la narrativa y la acción del juego basado en la historia, lo que esencialmente permite a los jugadores marcar la historia. Analizar cómo el juego asigna una responsabilidad crucial a la relación entre los jugadores y el audio reafirma cómo *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* puede verse como un logro impresionante e importante en la música de medios interactivos y el diseño de sonido.

Palabras clave: videojuegos, música multimedia, diseño de sonido, música interactiva.

Introduction

The award-winning video game *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* premiered in 2015 exclusively on the PlayStation 4 platform, followed by a 2016 launch for Microsoft Windows. The single-player game, built by British video game developer The Chinese Room, immerses gamers in a 1980s fictional small English village whose residents have mysteriously vanished. Players are challenged to explore the intimate setting by interacting with mundane objects and strange floating lights, all of which provide vital clues for discovering the reasoning for the mass disappearances. Upon its release, the game earned both praise and criticism for its gentler art-house approach to the post-apocalyptic genre. While winning several prestigious awards for its creativity, artistry, and writing, the game's aural achievements in interactive sound experiences — consisting of composer Jessica Curry's original musical score and audio designer Adam Hay's sound work — earned the majority of the game's accolades and celebration.

Gameplay, Music, and Audio

Everybody's Gone to the Rapture begins by dropping players into an idealized fictional quaint village named Yaughton (set in 1980s Shropshire county in western England). Players navigate the town in the first-person perspective as a nameless observer and quickly discover all of the village's residents have disappeared, prompting the game's primary objective of exploring Yaughton and unraveling the mystery of the mass vanishing. As players slowly move through the deserted open environment, they are presented with clues that offer fragmented insights into what truly happened in the village. Gamers interact with telephones and radios that replay various news broadcasts and private conversations between characters. Players also follow mysterious floating lights that swirl through the air to guide towards locations where the illuminations temporarily transform into human-shaped silhouettes and re-enact past moments involving the story's central figures (which include two scientists in a dysfunctional marriage, a troubled priest, an outspoken mother, a grieving widower, and a crippled adulteress).

The interactions with electronic communication devices and memory-manifesting orbs of light provide the only instances of audible dialogue and character presences, leaving Curry's score and Hay's sound design to complete the encompassing aural experience. As players progress in their widespread exploration, they are consistently challenged to determine if the cause of the mysterious vanishings is connected to a religious experience, an extraterrestrial encounter, a pandemic, a natural disaster, or a human-made catastrophe. Ultimately, after hours of play, gamers discover the true reasoning behind the mystery — a revelation rooted in a philosophical pondering of human existence and people's remarkable interconnections.

The Chinese Room developed *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* as a "spiritual successor" to their previous game *Dear Esther* (Matulef, 2012), a 2012 first-person exploration game that similarly centers on players slowly exploring an intimate setting covering an uninhabited European area while unraveling an emotional story rooted in interpretative philosophies regarding human connections. *Dear Esther* showcased how The Chinese Room "preferred story to shooting" (Thursten, 2012), a sentiment further elaborated on in the more expansive *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*. The game developers purposefully abandoned numerous fundamental visual and aural tropes typically associated with contemporary post-apocalyptic video games. *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* rejects overly-popularized mechanics such as rapid movements, high-energy pacing, puzzles or obstacle challenges requiring completion, combat-centered scenarios, dramatic explosions, technologically advanced weaponry, and exotic settings. Moreover, the accompanying sound and music disregard high-octane audio elements that have become stereotypical in apocalyptic story settings, including dramatic explosions, orchestral

'jump scares' accents, and energetic musical loops containing pulsating percussion and thunderous brass tones. Instead, the developers behind *The Chinese Room* felt heavily inspired by the 20th-century movement in the English science fiction genre that set end-of-the-world scenarios against the quiet backdrop of idyllic English countryside environments. The game's developers believed their intimate scenic setting built on unsettling stillness would create a "pastoral apocalypse" (Stuart, 2015) that paid homage to British "cosy catastrophe" fiction literature (McMullan, 2014).

Upon its premiere, *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture's* heavy focus on slow-paced exploration and story-driven discoveries immediately warranted divisive public reactions towards the product for being perceived as less of a game and more of an experience. Praiseful reviews include remarks on the product being "a game, product, or perhaps even a piece of art, that's simply gorgeous" (Rignall, 2015), "an ambitious game that is fundamentally about the acceptance of death" (Byrd, 2015), commending its playing experience for delivering "a fantastic mystery that culminates in a powerful payoff" (IGN, 2015), and appreciating how the game offers a "heart-wrenching story" (Valdes, 2015) that ultimately "contains astounding humanity" (Kollar, 2015). Conversely, ridicule of the game includes critical perspectives describing the experience as "painfully slow" (Kollar, 2015) and essentially being a "walking simulator" (a term often considered derogatory in the gaming world) that prompts "hate" and "anger" from traditional mainstream gamers (Thier, 2015).

Despite mixed reception from critics and players, *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* has earned universal praise for its aural achievements, even from the game's harshest critics. Reviewers described the game's ambitious approach to interactive music and audio as "remarkable" (Service, n.d.), "incredible" (Kollar, 2015), "stupendous" (Byrd, 2015), "exquisite" (Stuart, 2015), "powerful" (Valdes, 2015), "fantastic" (IGN, 2015), "simply marvelous" (Rignall, 2015), and "phenomenal...magnificent" (Game-Trailers, 2016).

Composer Jessica Curry aimed to base her score around "the pastoral ideal" (Stuart, 2015) to evoke the romanticized nostalgia for England's countryside that has been popularized in literature and entertainment in modern history. Subsequently, her music constructs itself on individualized musical themes performed on a live-recorded string and woodwind orchestra. Additionally, she utilizes solo violin for more intimate motifs and two full choirs that perform haunting choral arrangements with lyrics penned by Dan Pinchbeck (*The Chinese Room* co-founder). The result is an ambitious and all-encompassing score that provides sophisticated layers of symphonic cinematic-style instrumental sections, hymn-like choral passages, and soloistic songs reminiscent of Elizabethan ballads with Shakespearean-esque poetic lyrics. Curry abandoned the explosive musical tropes that pulsate through typical action-adventure games set in post-apocalyptic worlds. Instead, she composed an emotional score that is mature, patient, melancholy, and appropriately provides both sweeping and lingering musical segments while alternating between building and relieving tension.

In addition to Curry's classically stylized score, sound designer Adam Hay executed several audio editing techniques to provide an aural experience that offered fully-realized interaction and collaboration with each game player. Hay's work centered on "procedural ambience" (Etch Play, 2015), a phrase referring to a process of audio content being generated by randomized events. He implemented a granular synthesis process which consists of chopping up audio samples into smaller 'grain' chunks to be independently triggered and manipulated. Furthermore, he instructed the game's intelligence to structurally vary essential aspects of isolated audio stems and music sections from Curry's score. Through various deliberate mechanisms, Hay purposefully programmed procedures that would "mess up the sound" (Etch Play, 2015) in ways that "broke it down" (Stuart, 2015) when a player's actions triggered audio cues. These triggerable effects include time stretches, audio bounced through analog

systems, decaying tape loops, and randomized parameters involving such elements as pitch, tuning, volume, spatial panning, and noise filters through sequence processors. Moreover, Hay constructed frameworks that specified BPM (beats per minute tempo speeds) and modal scales (key signatures that root each music track's melodies and harmonies) (Etch Play, 2015), ensuring a cohesive aural bonding between atmospheric sound design and a composed score.

Hay's layered approach to incorporating Curry's music within his sound design work results in a uniquely interactive audio experience built on a consistently transformative soundscape manipulated by both the players and the game itself. With impressive self-generating abilities, sophisticated sound manipulations, and individualized randomization towards cued sequences, *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* assigns players the power and responsibility to determine the sounds they hear through self-controlled actions. A recent BBC publication exploring the evolution of video game music specifically highlighted *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* as a progressive example of modern interactive media music and sound design. The BBC story applauded the game's unique platform where "no two players experience the same music" and for creating a sound world where "the player becomes the composer" (Service, n.d.). Essentially, the game challenges and trusts gamers to score the story.

Interactive music has historically been a unique component of video games when compared to the experience of watching film and television. In 1978, Taito Corporation released their arcade game *Space Invaders*, a revolutionary product credited as the first game to feature continuous music that changed throughout gameplay (pulsating notes would increase speed as aliens continually lowered towards the bottom of the screen). The game's groundbreaking approach to its soundtrack paved the way for the concept of "dynamic, reactive, adaptive, or interactive music" (Wolf, 2021, p. 673). This new establishment of audio design ingenuity led to a progressive wave of milestones in game music for arcade machines and home consoles, such as the first instance of a continuous polyphonic loop in Namco's *Rally-X* (1980) and the development of FM synthesis and 8-bit chiptunes that allowed increased complexity and innovation in compositions for games such as Nintendo's popular series *Super Mario Bros.* and *Final Fantasy* (both franchises launched during the 1980s). As games increased in sophistication during the turn of the 21st century, so did the accompanying music. Players experienced tailored soundscapes determined by their voluntary actions. Symphonic Hollywood-style scores appropriately transitioned with scenic changes throughout thematic environments while simultaneously adapting musical sequences and sound design effects in intelligent reactive ways. Unlike film and television viewers who idly listen to on-screen scores in an inactive manner, video game players instantaneously build an interactive relationship with the music coming from their screens.

Everybody's Gone to the Rapture raises the responsibility of adaptive music to a higher level beyond being intricately dynamic and reactive. The game's lack of physical characters heightens the importance of the active audio. As players explore abandoned locations throughout the open-world environment, music themes uniquely assigned to each prominent vanished character move into the aural foreground and establish purposes to surrounding environmental clues that are inherently mundane in nature. This crucial function allows the game's interactive music and complex audio design to cohesively piece together a fragmented story by holistically serving as an assisting navigational guide, exploration partner, and translating storyteller. As journalist Keith Stuart described in his review of *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*: "The apocalypse communicates to the player through music, sound and song...The music is the message" (Stuart, 2015). The game's sound does not merely deepen emotional responses — it provides narrative meaning.

Conclusions

The heightened roles of Jessica Curry's score and Adam Hay's sound design in *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* helped lead to universal praise of the game's audio experience. With the majority of the game's prestigious awards being for music and audio achievements, the significant power of its interactive sounds is acknowledged and celebrated. Players experience a continuously surprising environment while unraveling a thought-provoking mystery rooted in deep philosophical consideration of the true meaning behind human and spiritual existence — all while uniquely determining the sound execution process that essentially trusts players to score the story themselves. As game critic Phillip Kollar wrote in his review: "It's a bit surprising that a game where you literally never see another person has the most humanity of anything I've played this year" (Kollar, 2015). The impressive accomplishments of the game's interactive music and sound design further validate that deepened emotional experiences and human connection may not be in what one sees but in what one hears. If music is indeed the message, then *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* has a profound amount to say.

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