

Theorists perspective

With any creative skill, which is a craft and done in the practical world, comes theorists, who have never worked with microphones, computers or mixers, but invent terms for you to use for analysis of your sounds. I believe that all these terms and thoughts of these terms are not only good to know, they are essential. But have in mind, that these are not laws on how things must work, there are good ideas and industry standard expressions on how things work.

You don't need to know the word diegetic, to make diegetic sounds, or knowing that non-diegetic is probably your background music if the source is not presented in the film or game. But knowing these terms help you understand what is going on, and helps you think creatively if used properly..

One of the main issues that I have come upon while studying sound, electronic music composition, sound design, game and film audio, is that game audio, is still such a new medium, that the terms invented by theorists 50 years ago for the academic worlds analysis on mediums and for the film industry are somewhat obsolete, yet the terms they created can still be used in game audio, it's not the same as with film audio and vice versa.

Many theorists have gotten it right, and their thoughts should be considered when creating sounds. R. Murray Schafer for one, and has written a brilliant book named "The Soundscape". This book is about the sounds that surround us, and basically a brilliant explanation to how the world sounds in a natural sense, and this leads to sound ecology, ambience and the manipulation of such.

Sound ecology for one, is a good discussion. Because should ambient sounds of any environment be manipulated? The human brain knows billions of sounds, and if it doesn't know a sound it instantly creates a link between what it knows and this new sound, creating an artificial image of what the sound source might be.

Sound ecology, or the green peace of sound environments, as some have come to call it, is the discussion between sounds in real life, real ambient recordings and the manipulation of these. Humans are very influenced by the sounds we decipher from mediums, and the discussion about sound ecology is if humans are beginning to only know the sounds of the sound designer.

Sound designers use birds as an indicator of morning, insects as an indicator of dusk, flies as indicator of something bad and rotten, cities have traffic noise, space ships have engine noise and explosions in space are gigantic, and wait.

Most of these are true and creates the right reference in our mind, but we have no clue of what space ships actually sound like, and from an sound ecologists perspective, that specific town you are looking at in your game or film, might not be the actual soundscape you are hearing. The soundscape you are hearing could sometimes be any other city, with traffic noise and all, which actually causes a distorted perspective for the viewer.

The difference between sound design, audio ecology and real audio comes into play here. Because if you are watching a film, your brain does not care if the sounds it is hearing are authentic to the visual source, only if the sound is "real" in that sense.

Footsteps, created by hands in corn flour, are definitely not authentic footsteps, but may act as real footsteps in your game and film. Plastic bags stepped on or moved around, serve as great real sounds for clothing, footsteps and other things.

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The importance is if the sound is "real" to your visuals, then the source, authentic or not, is irrelevant.

Some ecologists believe that sounds should be authentic, as non-authentic sources distort our minds and make people come to believe that the soundscape of the world is actually sounding like plastic bags. The tiny changes in a sound of a hand in corn flour vs. The actual sound of a foot walking in snow, is absorbed by the mind and ecologists consider this a major issue when it comes to our true sonic perspective on everything within our world.

Diegetic

and non-diegetic, is a term that everybody should be familiar with. It's not the most important term in the world, but it explains quite a bit of what is going on.

Of course over the years, when theorists have come across problems explaining specific sounds, they have invented new terms, which resemble other terms, which in the end is only adding confusion to the equation.

Diegetic is a term used whenever a sound is "on screen", it doesn't mean it can't be off screen, but if you as an audience knows the source of a sound then it is diegetic.

The easy explanation is that the footsteps of the character is diegetic and the background music is non-diegetic. But what if the source of the music is displayed? The character turning on the radio for example, leads us to know the source of the music being played, from the radio and therefore it's diegetic.

But what if there is background music, to which, late in the progress of the film or game, you see a band playing this music, then it was basically diegetic all along, but was considered non-diegetic for great parts of the piece you just witnessed.

Michael Chion, created a term for this, acousmatic. A term used for when sounds appear as non-diegetic for periods of time but suddenly become diegetic because the source is revealed. This is known as de-acousmatizing, and is basically a term used when the mystery of a sound source is revealed.

De-mystifying, as David Sonnenschein calls it in his brilliant book on sound design for cinema.

A voice over narrator is non-diegetic, but the intercom announcer at the airport is diegetic.

Hundreds of new terms, and variations of this diegesis term has come to life. And diegetic sounds are often referred to as story sounds, sounds that relate to the story as an image or perhaps a videogame without an image, like Papisangre.

A diegetic sound can be both on and off- screen. Often expressed as internal or external diegetic sounds, making the difference between the footsteps of the character and the soundscape of the city, or birds singing in the background but you don't actually see the birds.

Diegetic sounds, can also be defined as sounds that act and support your created designed soundscape. They are usually manipulated by the physical laws of sound, vs. Non-diegetic sounds to being completely in the front of the sound picture all the time.

The sound of footsteps, as we just agreed upon, is diegetic, but how far away are the footsteps? Of course your designed soundscape is a depiction of the realistic world but can only come close to realism, but will of course never really be.

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When a sound is further away, it's volume is lower, it's high frequencies are lower, all of these factors imply when creating a "realistic" sounding footstep sequence. And only diegetic sounds will be affected by this, non-diegetic sounds will not.