CHAPTER 12

# MONSTROUS NOISE

## Silent Hill *and the Aesthetic Economies of Fear*

WILLIAM CHENG

I'm gripped by a nightmare within minutes of entering the game *Silent Hill*. After watching a brief introductory video—one that shows protagonist Harry Mason crashing his car into the side of a road while driving through the game's eponymous town—I take control of this avatar to go in search of his missing daughter. Things are quiet save for the hollow sounds of Harry's footfalls and the distant noise of creaking metal. While it's hard to see through the thick fog and flurries of snow, I soon spot a young girl not far away. She's standing still, her arms crossed, one leg angled oddly forward, thick strands of black hair covering her face. Just as I'm about to reach her, she springs to life and runs into an alley. I instinctively follow. Deeper and deeper into this dark alley I go, passing an empty wheelchair, then a blood-stained gurney, before arriving at a dead end where I encounter a dreadful sight: a flayed humanoid corpse, ribs all exposed, pinned against a barbed wire fence. Upon turning away from this abomination, I see—to my even greater horror—a trio of child-like monsters teetering toward me. I manage to edge past these enemies, but some kind of gate now blocks my path out of the alley. Although I could swear this barrier was not here before (as this was the same way I came), I have no time to dwell on such mysteries. Harry is defenseless and escape looks impossible. The monsters lunge at him with knives and emit guttural cries as they gnaw at his legs. No amount of button-mashing on my part is capable of averting this grisly fate. With a soft moan, Harry collapses and dies before my eyes.

A cutscene then shows Harry waking up—unscathed, it appears—inside a run-down diner (see Figure 12.1). Was it all a dream? This narrative sleight-of-hand reveals the protagonist's fake death to have been a pre-scripted, unavoidable event, a necessary part of advancing through the game. A certain sting of impotence, however, lingers in my mind. Though this diner looks like a relative safe haven, I'm not sure I feel any more

FIGURE 12.1 Left: Harry getting attacked by monsters in the opening alleyway sequence of *Silent Hill,* and Right: Harry waking up in a diner. Screen captures by author.

secure than I did before. The game has already tricked me once. Who knows what else it could be up to?

I know what this game wants me to do: exit the diner, solve some puzzles, fend off monsters, and find Harry's daughter. But after the foul play in the alleyway, I'm no longer sure how much I should trust this game or follow its orders. What am I getting myself—and Harry—into?

## No Exit

*Silent Hill* is a 1999 PlayStation survival-horror game developed by Team Silent and published by Konami Computer Entertainment Tokyo. Released in North America, Japan, and other territories, the game debuted to favorable reviews and has since spawned multiple sequels and film adaptations. Although preceded by notable survival-horror games such as *Alone in the Dark* (1992), *Clock Tower* (1995), and *Resident Evil* (1996), the *Silent Hill* series has emerged as one of this genre's most iconic franchises. To this day, players continue to fashion and debate intricate theories about the settings, characters, monsters, and timeline of the *Silent Hill* universe. Fan fictions, instruction manuals, strategy guides, novels, comic books, and other supplementary media have together done much in past years to flesh out the lore surrounding the fabricated American town of Silent Hill.

Writers have variously posited English Gothic literature, Japanese Noh theater, the stories of H. P. Lovecraft, and the films of Alfred Hitchcock as sources of inspiration for *Silent Hill*. Most evidently, the game draws from Japanese horror cinema (J-horror) and its topical arsenal of demonic mothers, victimized daughters, vengeful spirits, and terrorizing technologies. The conspiratorial plot of *Silent Hill* involves the torture of a young girl named Alessa Gillespie by her mother Dahlia. At one point in the game, Dahlia explains to Harry that Alessa's protracted agony has served to revive the god of

a cult: "For the seven years since that terrible day [the day on which Alessa was supposed to be sacrificed in a fire], Alessa has been kept alive, suffering a fate worse than death. Alessa has been trapped in an endless nightmare from which she never awakens. 'He' [the god] has been nurtured by that nightmare, waiting for the day to be born." The torment of Alessa is never depicted in the game, but her pain is palpable in its world's gruesome sights and sounds. Over the course of a player's adventure, the town of Silent Hill routinely transforms into an Otherworld, an alternate reality that, in Harry's words, looks like "someone's nightmarish delusions come to life," a realm soaked in shadows and stained with blood. The flesh wounds of Alessa are etched in these hellish environments, while echoes of her mental anguish reverberate through a soundscape that pulses with groaning metal, squeaking wheels, air raid sirens, howling monsters, and other noises of nature and technology gone awry. The jumbled sounds, darkness, and fog that permeate *Silent Hill* signal a disavowal of aesthetic legibility—a disavowal born of trauma so unspeakable that its symptoms and aftershocks lie beyond all conventional representation.

Paranormal externalizations of Alessa's pain are further mirrored in the player's distressing interactions with the game. *Silent Hill* compels its player to empathize with Alessa's suffering via gameplay that stresses vulnerability instead of blazing guns and superhuman feats. Harry Mason is a ludological anomaly who lacks the extravagant powers possessed by typical heroes and heroines of action-adventure games. He is an Everyman, an extraordinarily ordinary being whose poor offensive capabilities make him easy prey for the monsters in the gameworld.

Mark Simmons—project director of *Silent Hill: Origins* (2007) and *Silent Hill: Shattered Memories* (2009)—declared in an interview that when one "[looks] back at the survival-horror genre, it's pretty clear that the monster scares were built upon awkward controls, clumsy combat, and constantly being kept in a state of low health. Other genres had moved on [by] leaps and bounds, but the survival-horror genre continued to fall back on these unrefined elements of gameplay because they added to the fear."[1] One way survival-horror games elicit fear is indeed by teasing the player with an illusion of control, only to snatch it away at the worst moment. With this in mind, the opening alleyway sequence in *Silent Hill* is horrifying precisely because it is *not* a cutscene in the traditional sense. The player retains some control over Harry's movements as the monsters launch their assault. For a few awful seconds, the (first-time) player will instinctively fight for survival, pressing every possible button, frantically trying everything but accomplishing nothing. The game forces Harry to die in the player's hands.

In the same way that Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) famously broke the rules of the horror film by killing off its female protagonist mid-shower (and mid-story), so the first five minutes of *Silent Hill* effectively warn players that all bets are off. The most upsetting aspect of the alleyway attack lies in how it explodes the player's conceptions of what the *game* is allowed to do. The scripted demise is likely to leave us feeling not simply frightened, angry, and confused, but moreover betrayed by the breach of contract between gamer and game—a contract that, under ordinary circumstances,

should grant us some say over our characters' fates. This violation of trust in the opening moments of *Silent Hill* gives a player enough reason to be henceforth wary not only of the monsters in the game, but also of the monstrous game itself.With its narrative fake-outs, unreliable controls, and dearth of combat options, *Silent Hill* assumes the guise of a living entity actively seeking to undermine its player's agencies. The game imparts a sense of the uncanny, which, according to Ernst Jentsch's (ante-Freudian) definition, pertains to the "doubt as to whether an apparently living being is animate and, conversely, doubt as to whether a lifeless object may not in fact be animate. . . . [W]hen . . . a wild man has his first sight of a locomotive or of a steamboat . . . the feeling of trepidation will here be very great, for as a consequence of the enigmatic autonomous movement and the regular noises of the machine—reminding him of human breath—the giant apparatus can easily impress the completely ignorant person as a living mass."[2] At times, players of *Silent Hill* might likewise feel as if they are fighting an animate ludic apparatus, one that churns out fear through unruly mechanics and unfair outcomes.

Just as *Silent Hill* can seem to transgress its status as an idle medium, so its grotesque soundscape manifests as a sentient antagonist, an invisible yet omnipresent force that seethes and convulses as it plays mind games with the player. This essay contemplates the ludic, perceptual, and hermeneutic anxieties provoked by this horror game's uncanny sounds. By underscoring ways in which the industrial noises in *Silent Hill* haunt various borders—between diegetic and non-diegetic, real and virtual, lingering and ephemeral, organic and mechanical, surface and subdermal, instructive and manipulative—I explore how this game's audio works to unsettle a player's mental and bodily control. Through comparisons of discourses on noises and monsters, I frame the sounds in this gameworld as living monsters in their own right: abject, liminal, and always potentially trespassing on players' own inhabited spaces. Underpinning these considerations are broader investigations into the *aesthetic economies of fear*—the frightening efficiency with which the minimal sounds (and overall reductive aesthetics) of horror media can evoke maximal terror.

## Dead Ringers

Discrete musical tracks accompany a player's travels through *Silent Hill*. Some locales are deathly silent (aptly living up to the game's title), while others are almost intolerably clamorous. Japanese composer Akira Yamaoka (b. 1968) created a spooky soundworld using recorded and synthesized noises. Audio effects include microtonal slides, dissonant stacked chords, timbral distortions, juxtapositions of extreme registers, rapid vibrato, drones, loops, prolonged decays, and ghostly echoes.[3] As a whole, this aesthetic approximates a mix of industrial music, glitch music, Japanese noise music, punk, and other countercultural genres that emphasize the use of unconventional sounds. The result invokes what Zach Whalen calls an "atonal chaos" that "[reflects]

the player-character's [i.e. Harry Mason's] psychological state."[4] Although these strident sounds do convincingly exemplify Harry's unstable mind, they are also, as the game tells us, the supernatural projections of Alessa's pain. All the while, this cacophony contributes (and gives expression to) the player's own harrowing experience. Together, then, Harry, Alessa, and the player constitute a band of suffering souls, an ill-fated trio whose fears resound through a terrible world of din and darkness.

Annotations in Figure 12.2 trace the sound events in the game's introductory alleyway sequence. Predetermined layers of noise are progressively triggered and sustained as Harry reaches corresponding spatial nodes. Sounds increase in both density and volume as the passageway becomes ever narrower. A sense of claustrophobia is compounded by this simultaneous compression of space and expansion of noise: accumulating soundwaves overfill the slender alley, bracing against its walls and virtually bursting at the seams of our screen. As Harry's surroundings go dark—as it becomes almost impossible to *see* anything—the player has little choice but to lend a compensatory ear to the game's assaultive sounds, to listen to (and through) this noise for signs of danger. For while we can afford to cover our ears and close our eyes when things get scary in a horror film, this isn't a realistic option when playing a horror video game. A player is impelled to stay on high alert—to tolerate every terrifying byte of audiovisual data—for the sake of Harry's survival. Not until Harry dies his false death at the end of the alleyway do these suffocating sounds fade away. A grueling start to an unforgiving game.

Like recycled detritus, the repetitive noises in *Silent Hill* resemble an experiment in musical patchwork gone wild, comprising scraps of sound sewn together and grotesquely reanimated into an acoustic equivalent of Frankenstein's monster. These noises reach fever pitch whenever the town transforms into the nightmarish Otherworld. In one interview, Yamaoka explained that he scored this game with industrial noises because they could produce "much of the essence needed [for the game] . . . [a] cold and rusty feeling."[5] Industrial music, as Paul Hegarty describes, offers an "anti-aesthetic, using the tools of art to undo art. . . . Stylistically, it often combines objects not usually thought of as belonging to music."[6] Or, as Karen Collins writes: "[I]ndustrial music is built around 'non-musical' and often distorted, repetitive, percussive sounds of mechanical, electric and industrial machinery, commonly reflecting feelings of alienation and dehumanisation as a form of social critique."[7]

Industrial music's anti-aesthetic ideology is appropriate for *Silent Hill* given that the game—in frustrating the player's agencies—comes off as resolutely anti-*ludic*. Sounds in this gameworld constantly work to unhinge the player's mental fortitude and sensory orientation. One perturbing aspect of the soundscape is how its noises straddle the diegetic and non-diegetic divide: sirens, rattles, clinks, drips, whirs, and scrapes punctuate the game's environments but lack visible sources. It's often tough to tell (and, in many cases, impossible to verify) whether a sound is coming from an unseen monster, from some distant machinic apparatus, or from beyond the game's diegesis entirely.

Even more disturbing than the muddling of diegetic and nondiegetic noises is how these sounds cross from the game's virtual world into the real world inhabited by the

Following the car crash, Harry (1) wanders the streets of Silent Hill in search of his daughter. He (2) spots a girl in the distance and (3) follows her into a dark alley, passing (4) an abandoned wheelchair and (5) a bloody gurney. Heading deeper into the alley, Harry (6) reaches a dead end and (7) sees a flayed corpse pinned against a fence.

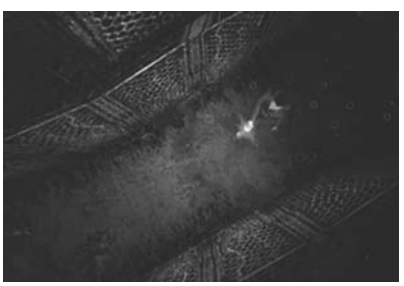
1) Sound of groaning metal

2) Addition of faint sounds intoned approximately at $G^{\flat}$, C, and $D^{\flat}$ (A=440)

3) Addition of air raid sirens

4) Addition of sound of grinding wheels (fades by the time Harry reaches the gurney)

5) Addition of resonant percussive noises



6) Addition of repeating dissonant chords (chordophone timbre) and a staccato melody that plays only once (metallophone timbre)


7) Addition of bass beat

**FIGURE 12.2** Progressively layered sound events in the introductory alleyway sequence. Segments (2) and (7) occur as cutscenes. Screen captures by author.

player. Buzzes, rumbles, door-slams, and other noises bleed with ease from the gameworld into the player's own environment precisely because they sound like everyday racket. We may occasionally be duped into hearing these in-game sounds as if they're coming from real-world sources—from our living rooms, from upstairs, from right outside our windows. Liable to fool us in this regard are not the game's outrageously loud, dissonant, or repetitive noise samples, but rather the little mundane sounds that pop up now and then: a creaking floorboard here, a muted thump there, a generic beep from nowhere. The sheer density of this industrial audio is enough to create the impression of surround-sound; that is, noises in the game—even when just piping out of a television's speakers—can so extensively saturate a player's physical space that they might sound as if they're invading from all directions. Such illusion stands to prevail despite the mediocre audio quality of the game's noises. A low-fi *thud* and a high-fi (or acoustic) *thud*, after all, are not easy to tell apart.

Since much of the industrial audio in *Silent Hill* is indistinguishable from real-world ruckus, it can sound like it's *coming from inside the house* (to borrow the chilling line from the opening sequence of Fred Walton's 1979 thriller *When a Stranger Calls*). Being led to believe that virtual noises are coming from our own surroundings is genuinely frightening because *real* sounds indicate *real* threats. When playing *Silent Hill*, we should have little problem reassuring ourselves that the noises we're hearing are all coming from the gameworld's dense, industrial soundscape. But since the noises in there are dead ringers for the everyday noises out here, we're working with scrambled sensoria. Regardless of how we might strive to perceive these noises as safely contained in the game, some uncertainty can continue to nibble at the fringes of our consciousness. Whenever we go on record saying that we know a horror film or game poses no real threat—whenever we're willing to affirm that the suspicious sound we just heard definitely came from the television set rather than from outside our own windows—we brush up against the question of whether we would bet our lives on this claim. It's easy to answer yes when we're in broad daylight, reading *about* horror while sitting in the middle of a bustling coffee shop, bundled in the warmth of ample company and the authority of rational thought. It isn't nearly so easy when we're in the middle of *experiencing* a horror movie or a horror game, when we're alone at night, when our minds and bodies are being held hostage by our own imaginations run amok.

## Of Noises and Monsters: The Horror, the Horror, the Horror

When asked about how his music for *Silent Hill* strikes fear in players, Akira Yamaoka responded: "First and foremost is 'irregularity.' People are analog creatures.... When

things don't happen as we expect, or when the rhythm breaks, we start to get very nervous. . . . In short, I betray the user's expectations."[8] In the game, as Yamaoka notes, individual loops of music contain irregular rhythms and sound events, most of which would defy accurate transcription with conventional Western notations for duration, pitch, and timbre. On a broader scale, however, several of the game's tracks actually achieve an oppressive effect by repeating samples with unwavering *regularity*. Much of this music can be parsed into melodic and rhythmic cells lasting no longer than a few seconds each. These recycled noise fragments evoke a hellish labyrinth in which paths toward escape and resolution are persistently concealed or deferred. Although a player can technically mute the game's audio, doing so is not advisable because these sounds supply important information about potential nearby dangers.

Like Jentsch's uncanny locomotive, the noises in *Silent Hill* chug away with a mechanical anempathy that verges on sentient antipathy. It's possible to hear this industrial music as somehow sinister in its mimicry of the player's own repetition of dreadful actions. A typical playthrough of the game involves Harry perishing again and again, getting resurrected each time (via the reloading of save files) for the gruesome ritual to carry on. The most cynical assessments of repetitious gameplay would cast it as a fatuous activity through which players are disciplined, subordinated, homogenized, and drained of all operative authority by a game's arbitrary demands for redundant action.

Several studies of musical minimalism in horror films and games posit repetition as a marker of mindlessness, psychological malfunction, or trauma. Claire King proposes that a looping melody in *The Exorcist* (1973) demonstrates a "struggle against the continuity of time [which] recalls the paralysis engendered by traumatic memory."[9] Inger Ekman and Petri Lankoski describe the repetitive moans of monsters in the 2001 survival-horror game *Fatal Frame* as a "sign of [the monsters'] mental incapacity."[10] And Kevin Donnelly frames the drone of white noise in John Carpenter's *The Fog* (1980) as an acoustic analogue to the fraught human unconscious.[11] Such readings could be deemed interpretatively compensatory in the way they strive to highlight minimalist music's maximal import—to eschew, in the words of Susan McClary, assumptions of minimalism as the mere "refusal" or "self-erasure" of meaning.[12] Or, as Robert Fink puts it, a "true cultural hermeneutic of minimal music . . . must attempt to make its emptied-out formal language *signify*."[13]

Noise—as material and metaphor—has been widely theorized with similar reliance on compensatory hermeneutic premises. Writers and composers since the turn of the twentieth century have increasingly embraced noise as an object "existing in all music . . . essential to its existence, but impolite to mention,"[14] comprising "sounds we have learned to ignore,"[15] signifying "only in relation to the system within which it is inscribed,"[16] connoting all the "local impurities [that] are subsumed under a communication presumed to be successful,"[17] and "present in every musical signal."[18] These characterizations familiarize noise by emphasizing its ontological relativity and phenomenological ubiquity, proclaiming not simply (and tautologically) that the *rest* is noise, but moreover that *all* is already potentially not-noise. A shared

mission of exegetes and experimental composers has been to salvage noise from non-signification, to find it a home, to grant it amnesty in sanctioned spaces of musical and verbal expression.

Apophenic sensibilities inhere in portrayals of noise as a semiotic vacuum—an auditory Rorschach test signifying at once everything and nothing. Appeals to definitional promiscuity abound in descriptions of noise as "a refusal of representation, a refusal of identity"[19] and "out of control . . . situated within excess, a transgressive act that exceeds managed data."[20] Electronic music composer Kim Cascone describes noise as an "aesthetics of failure,"[21] while other writers have insisted on noise as always already *failing to be* noise. According to Paul Hegarty, "noise cannot remain message and still be noise . . . . When noise catches on, . . . if it were to become a [cultural or artistic] movement or inspire one, it would already be failing."[22] To this point, Simon Reynolds asserts that "to speak of noise, to give it attributes, to claim things for it, is immediately to shackle it with meaning again, to make it part of culture. . . . To confer the status of value upon [the] excess and extremism [of noise] is to bring these things back within the pale of decency. So the rhetoricians of noise actually destroy the power they strive to celebrate."[23] Noise is, in a word, self-negating. Even as a countercultural artifact, it cannot but slip toward the mainstream, toward the realms of social and aesthetic respectability against which it is supposed to be defined. To be sure, some formulations of noise's paradoxical status revel in so much rhetorical ambivalence that they risk getting sucked into a similar nihilistic abyss (and hence becoming discursive noise themselves).

Just as noise is conceivably present in every signal, so monsters are popularly regarded as externalizations of the ubiquitous monstrosities in human nature. Descriptions of noise's polysemy closely mirror critiques of monsters as interstitial objects (organic and otherwise) that facilitate the deferral of hermeneutic terminus. The monster, according to scholars, is "a remarkably mobile, permeable, and infinitely interpretable body,"[24] a "fantasy screen where the multiplicity of meanings can appear and fight for hegemony,"[25] and "a category that is itself a kind of limit case, an extreme version of marginalization, an abjecting epistemological device."[26] Like noises, monsters are ideal sites for discursive play. Although they're intimidating and powerful, they reciprocally serve as vehicles for scholars' intimidating displays of interpretative power. Rhetoricians *qua* monster-tamers—much like music connoisseurs who claim to comprehend noise *as* music—champion definitional mutability in bids for intellectual authority. The relationship of hermeneuts to monsters is ironically vampiric given the ease with which the latter can be appropriated as repositories for deconstruction. To reformulate one of the overriding constructionist theses of Gothic criticism: monsters are not born, but made—made, in no small part, by (and into) discourse.

## Cheap Scares

Like the writers who work to domesticate monsters via critical inquiry, composers for early video games took up the role of noise-tamers in their attempts to fashion meaningful music out of *beeps* and *boops*. Until the 1990s, most video games contained soundtracks that accommodated no more than a few simultaneous melodic voices. Meager hardware and memory capacities further required designers to rely on the extensive repetition of short tracks. Game composers, consequently, were tasked with acoustically telescoping minimal musical material into sounds that could stand up to the monumental fantasies and larger-than-life characters of virtual worlds. Limited noises accompanying a player's encounters with dragons and giants had to be presented in a manner that inspired similar registers of awe and excitement. Prolific Japanese game composer Nobuo Uematsu explains the difficulties and rewards of audio design as follows: "The NES [Nintendo Entertainment System] only had three tracks [melodic voices], and each of their sounds was very unique. I had to focus on the melody itself and think about how each chord would move the audience. I struggled to produce originality in the same three tones, just like any composer for that period. It's amazing to listen to how [different] composers . . . had totally different creations by using the same three instruments."[27] Composers, of course, did not carry the full burden of creativity. Players, too, were expected to grow ears to extract maximal significance from minimal sounds. In the same way that players had to learn to interpret the pixilated graphics of early games as ludic iconography—for example, a triangular stack of dots as a spaceship—so they had to exercise a certain degree of aural imagination when confronted with the tinny *pew-pews* of interstellar battle. Composers and players of such games, much like the sound directors and audiences of radio dramas a half-century earlier, engaged in a semiotic business of audio data compression and decompression. Game audio design, as it came of age, was largely about negotiating technological constraints—or, more accurately, about cultivating the medium's expressive possibilities to forge innovative forms of sonic shorthand.

Much of early game audio was reductive by technical necessity, but developers of survival-horror games excelled at coming up with justifications for stripped-down designs. Aside from featuring an (oppressively) repetitive soundtrack, *Silent Hill* makes use of dark and foggy environments that obviate the need for graphical rendering beyond Harry's limited line-of-sight. Awkward camera angles, an unwieldy inventory system, fuzzy enemy hitboxes, the absence of weapon reticles, and other prohibitive quirks are prevalent during gameplay and yet all find plausible vindication in survival-horror's ludic and aesthetic conventions. These alleged defects, according to the sneaky wisdom of developers, make things *scarier*.

There's little doubt that a game like *Silent Hill* trades cunningly in horror's economies of fear—namely, in gaining esteem and commercial success via the exploitation

of (apparently) simplified aesthetics and low-budget production. Among the most familiar cases of such exploitation nowadays can be seen in the found-footage subgenre of horror films. Movies such as *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) and *Paranormal Activity* (2009) accrued indie cred and massive profits by capitalizing on elements of bare-bones presentation: low-resolution visuals, shaky camerawork, and sparse soundscapes all helped achieve a sense of DIY faux-realism and subcultural cachet. In these films, standard rubrics for labor and value are confounded by a license to *flaunt* what might be perceived in other genres as technical or presentational flaws. Horror films, as observed by Judith Halberstam, "constantly [attempt] to call our attention to cinematic production, its failures and its excesses…[exposing] the theatricality of identity because it makes specular precisely those images of loss, lack, penetration, violence that other films attempt to cover up."[28] Although horror movies are sometimes panned as "always-already 'low' "[29] and "the ultimate B-movies, crude, cheap, and basic,"[30] it's hard not to admire and envy them for owning up to—and taking advantage of—their rough edges and thrifty constitution.

Reductive art gets condemned when it is (assumed to be) the result of incompetence, but commended if it can somehow be confirmed as a product of intentional, painstaking stylization. We're bound to feel a bit uneasy when we can't tell the degree of effort that has gone into making something look simple. Content aside, one scary thing about horror films is their lucrative role in the entertainment industry. To put things in perspective: whereas mega-blockbuster movies such as James Cameron's *Titanic* ($200 million budget) and *Avatar* ($237 million budget) both earned approximately *10 times* their respective budgets at box offices worldwide, the first *Paranormal Activity* film (shot for a meager $15,000) earned about *12,000 times* its budget (with a combined domestic and international gross of $200 million). Horror media, in sum, is unsettling not least for curbing our ability to gauge how much labor, money, and time may have gone into manufacturing a lowbrow surface and, in turn, the extent to which the creators are profiting from our willingness to embrace the final products.

Also central to horror's economy is the sheer *efficiency* with which the genre viscerally affects its consumers. Linda Williams has influentially classified the horror film (along with pornographic and melodramatic films) as a "body genre" because it compels "the body of the spectator [to be] caught up in an almost involuntary mimicry of the emotion or sensation of the body on the screen,"[31] resulting in "an apparent lack of proper esthetic distance, a sense of over-involvement in sensation and emotion."[32] One of horror's most reliable scare tactics is the "stinger,"[33] a sudden loud sound used to galvanize the viewer or player. The economy of the stinger lies in the baseness of the sign (*mere* noise) as well as in its manipulative force (a *cheap* shot). Like visual jump-scares, the stinger has a reputation of being an underhanded, lowbrow maneuver. Whereas suspense tends to be lauded, shock gets scorned as lazily sensational. When we deride stingers as the inexpert stuff of B-movies and B-games, we may do so, in part, out of embarrassed indignation—the feeling of being cheated out of control of our own bodies, of being left with

little means of defending against such a rudimentary ploy. We have reason to begrudge a stinger, in other words, not only for its material economy, but also because—despite knowing that it's a cheap trick—we can't help falling for it. Seeing as how the impact of a stinger "precedes complex mental cognition and responses,"[34] its power can be nearly impossible to defy. Although it's a simple blast of sound, it represents a monster that cannot be tamed by discourse or mitigated by savvy. It doesn't matter if we're world-class experts on horror. Some stingers will get us all the same. In bypassing our intellectual faculties, this most vulgar of noises exposes all listeners as susceptible to shock, reminding us that—notwithstanding our persuasive words and theories—we're animals through and through.

While stingers are efficient generators of fear, they are not the only kinds of reductive noises capable of scaring us. Perhaps the single most manipulative sound in *Silent Hill* is, in fact, virtually the opposite of a stinger. This particular noise fades in and out, never takes the player by total surprise, and will recur hundreds of times in a single playthrough of the game. Yet it's flat-out terrifying. The force of this sound comes from the way it discreetly conditions and controls the player. Instead of delivering a jolt to the nervous system, it burrows deep into the mind and under the skin. To grasp what this noise is, how it works, and why it has become one of the most iconic sounds in survival-horror games to date, let us return to Harry's arrival in Silent Hill, to the beginning of the nightmare that didn't end.

## Because the Radio Told Me To

You know the story now by heart: crashed car, missing daughter, cacophonous alleyway, flayed corpse, invincible , unavoidable death. All a nightmare, perhaps. But then the nightmare goes on.

When Harry wakes up in a diner following these events, he's greeted by a lone cop. She tells him that strange things are happening around town: all phones are dead and the streets are dead empty. She hands Harry a gun, but warns him to use discretion before pulling the trigger. Ammunition is precious.

After the cop leaves the diner, I make Harry explore the small space to pick up a few more items—among them a map, a flashlight, and a knife. As I lead Harry toward the exit, a red pocket radio on a table starts emitting a static signal. A cutscene then shows Harry walking over to examine this device . . . but before he can pick it up, a flying pterodactyl-like beast smashes through one of the diner windows. The cutscene ends: Harry falls back under my control. In a panic, I shoot at the monster with the gun I received from the cop. The radio is still going berserk, though its white noise is now barely audible over my gunshots, the beast's screeches, and a percussive musical track (see Figure 12.3). Just as I start to wonder whether this is supposed to end in yet another scripted demise, the creature crumples to the ground. The radio noise stops. All is silent once more. I take the radio and head out into the foggy town.

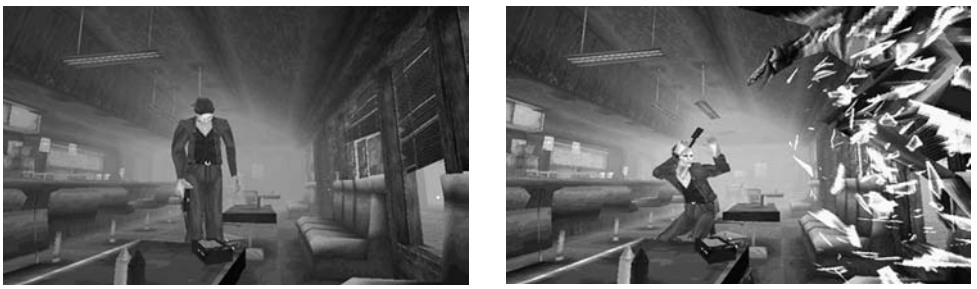


FIGURE 12.3 Harry's encounter with a monster in the diner. Screen captures by author.

Within minutes of wandering the streets, I come to realize that this pocket radio—though unable to perform any conventional receiving and transmitting functions—is a monster-detector. Its white noise increases in loudness as monsters approach Harry and dies away when they are successfully dispatched or eluded. While this sound telegraphs the proximity of enemies, it does not convey their exact location. Especially when heard amid the game's hazy environments, the noise is thus doubly alarming because it tells the player not only that monsters are near, but also that they can come from anywhere. This radio static, as noted earlier, is completely contrary to a stinger. Whereas the latter manifests as a blast of sound, the former ebbs and flows in volume. And whereas the visceral impact of a stinger comes largely from the shocking *noise* itself (rather than from an indication of a specific threat), the radio static, by portending the presence of enemies, is frightening precisely as an *index* of danger.

Harry's radio—a transmitter of messages from the beyond—literalizes the kinds of occult powers that writers attributed to this technology in the early twentieth century. Granted, players who are preoccupied with virtual survival in *Silent Hill* should have little incentive to reflect on how Harry's radio is able to do what it does. The fact that a player never sees Harry carrying the device eases the assimilation of its static into the level of pure interface. Players have no need to hear the signal as one that's coming from a pocket radio. What matters is its warning function. "Game sound," as Ekman and Lankoski put it, "is free to challenge narrative fit since it is primarily serving a function other than maintaining narrative plausibility: its role is to facilitate gameplay and help the player make meaningful choices. . . . The *functional fit* refers to the ease by which sound provides information for performing actions."[35] Although functional sounds can assist ludic progress, this isn't to say they unequivocally enhance a player's agency. The radio's noise in *Silent Hill* is useful, but an excessive dependence on the alarm may suggest that the *static* is controlling the *player*—leading the player, for example, to run aimlessly through fog or to unload scarce ammunition into the edges of the screen in hopes of striking as-yet-unseen monsters. The hyper-compressed nature of this radio static epitomizes horror's coercive economy: white noise, after all, is by definition the noisiest of all noises, combining signals devoid of aesthetic intervention, full of sound and fury,

signifying nothing. Still, for all its material crudeness, this noise in *Silent Hill* steers the player's actions with masterful efficiency. Despite serving as an aural lifeline, it points up players as Pavlovian creatures whose bodies tick with every *tick* of the radio.

The radio's static in *Silent Hill* is distressing not least for its ability to lull and lock its listener into a state of compliance. This techno-dystopian scenario invites broader reflections on all the little mechanized noises that subliminally shape our everyday acts of work and play. Beckoning beeps of computers, ringtones of mobile devices, musical earworms, and other contaminants of urban noise pollution all constitute automated audio signals with potential to move and master us.[36] Many of these sounds, while *legible*, influence our behaviors without ever providing us with much incentive to *read* them per se—to deconstruct their anatomy, source, and function so as to restore some semblance of human intellectual authority. A vision of players succumbing to the noises of *Silent Hill* resonates with popular media depictions of video games at large as a manipulative medium of entertainment. Players who grow conditioned to obey a game's white noise end up committing what might appear to be a host of mindless actions—exactly the sorts of actions that detractors of games love to lament.

As a tribute to the twists that tend to occur at the ends of horror stories, I'll offer a modest one to close out my discussion in kind. Like many who have written about *Silent Hill*, I've so far referred to the game's radio static as "white noise."[37] The reality is that this sound is technically *not* pure white noise, but rather a stylized representation of it. The radio static consists of a high ringing tone—pitched at approximately 700Hz—juxtaposed against looping samples of crackling sounds in a lower register. What's notable is that designers went this extra mile to create an aestheticized *approximation* of white noise when they could have just resorted to blasting actual static. One reason for investing such effort was perhaps to make this recurring noise more palatable to players' ears. Just as no player of a survival-horror game would want to suffer bodily harm, so most may not be so eager to tolerate literal white noise for a long time. The result of this stylization is a noise that retains a mildly grating timbre and yet befits extended aural consumption. That most players, critics, and scholars nevertheless describe the sound *as* white noise—and, presumably, perceive it (virtually) as such—testifies to the successful implementation of this almost-but-not-quite musicalized aesthetic. So while *Silent Hill* contains many sneakily economical aspects (a repetitive soundtrack, foggy environments, and plot holes *qua* traumatic visions), the radio static's sound design offers a reversed scenario. The stylized noise reminds us that, for all the labor- and cost-cutting strategies in the production of horror entertainment, there are also subtle acts of creative effort that can sometimes go unsung.

## Conclusion

One reason we voluntarily subject ourselves to horror media is to go forth and learn fear. And to experience fear in a horror video game, we must follow the trail of breadcrumbs through its terrible gauntlet. At every turn, *Silent Hill* implicitly asks us to venture into darkness, to peek around this corner, to open that door behind which might lurk a couple of formidable, even insurmountable, monsters. We instinctively oblige because, well, that's the point of the game. Thus we force Harry into the terrors of the unknown, making him (and ourselves) vulnerable to monsters from nowhere, noises from everywhere, stingers that shock us, static that steers us.

When it comes to survival-horror, the game is a monster of a medium: it oversteps its inanimate status, breaks with convention, violates ludic contracts, bombards us with noise, and teases us with illusions of real danger. Just as our spectatorship of horror films is said to be ruled by a masochistic impulse, so there's an awful pleasure in stumbling through the haunted house of a horror game, surrendering to its manipulation and being transgressed *against*.[38] Capitulating to cheap scares requires that we accept cacophony, reductive aesthetics, and illogical plot points as compelling conceits. To play *Silent Hill* with conviction is to play (and buy) *into* its economies of fear.

Visceral scares of horror media expose the limited defenses of our rational and rhetorical faculties. Try as we might to keep noises and monsters tucked safely away in our discursive webs, they're capable of slipping through, running wild, and returning to invade our imaginations. Noises and monsters make perfect subjects for metaphysical dissection, but—if there's anything we've learned from Dr. Frankenstein and his Gothic kin—these patients do not always remain docile. Hermeneutic control only gets us so far. As we attempt to discipline rogue phenomena with theories and theses, they discipline our minds and bodies in turn. Interpreting video games and their stimuli as uncannily living entities can shed light on interactivity, repetition, automation, and the intersection between our ludic, aural, and intellectual agencies. A fantasy of things come to life, of course, is the very stuff of video games—a medium that lets us displace authority onto virtual characters, to experience conflicting sensations of being in and out of control, and to inhabit murky spaces where nothing stays dead for long.

## Acknowledgments

I'm grateful to Kevin Donnelly, Amy Herzog, Hannah Lewis, Elizabeth Medina-Gray, Luci Mok, Alexander Rehding, John Richardson, Kay Shelemay, Carol Vernallis, and Gavin Williams for their valuable feedback on this essay.

## Notes

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2. Ernst Jentsch, "On the Psychology of the Uncanny," trans. Roy Sellars, *Angelaki* 2, no. 1 ([1906] 1997), 11.
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4. Zach Whalen, "Play Along—An Approach to Video Game Music," *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 4, no. 1 (2004), http://www.gamestudies.org/0401/whalen.
5. Quoted in Kalabakov, "Interview with Akira Yamaoka."
6. Paul Hegarty, *Noise/Music: A History* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 105.
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8. Akira Yamaoka, "Mad Maestro: Interview with Akira Yamaoka," *Nintendo Power* 241, no. 39 (2009): 3.
9. Claire King, "Ramblin' Men and Piano Men: Crises of Music and Masculinity in *The Exorcist*," in *Music in the Horror Film: Listening to Fear*, ed. Neil Lerner (New York: Routledge, 2010), 120.
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11. See K. J. Donnelly, "Hearing Deep Seated Fears: John Carpenter's *The Fog* (1980)," in *Music in the Horror Film*, ed. Neil Lerner (New York: Routledge, 2010), 160–161.
12. Susan McClary, "Minima Romantica," in *Beyond the Soundtrack: Representing Music in Cinema*, ed. Daniel Goldmark, Lawrence Kramer, and Richard Leppert (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 52.
13. Robert Fink, *Repeating Ourselves: American Minimal Music as Cultural Practice* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 18 (emphasis in original).
14. Henry Cowell, *Essential Cowell: Selected Writings on Music*, ed. Dick Higgins (Kingston, NY: Documentext, [1929] 2001), 252.
15. R. Murray Schafer, "The Music of the Environment," in *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, ed. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, [1973] 2004), 30.
16. Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 26.
17. Douglas Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 25.
18. Mary Russo and Daniel Warner, "Rough Music, Futurism, and Postpunk Industrial Noise Bands," in *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, ed. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004), 50. Or, as John Cage famously stated: "Wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise. When we ignore it,

it disturbs us. When we listen to it, we find it fascinating." John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 3.

19. Csaba Toth, "Noise Theory," in *Noise & Capitalism*, ed. Mattin Iles and Anthony Iles. Arteleku Audiolab, 2009), 27, http://www.arteleku.net/audiolab/noise_capitalism.pdf.
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33. K. J. Donnelly, *The Spectre of Sound: Music in Film and Television* (London: BFI, 2008), 95.
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35. Ekman and Lankoski, "Hair-Raising Entertainment," 185 (emphasis in original).
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37. See Bernard Perron, *Silent Hill: The Terror Engine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 28; Michael Nitsche, *Video Game Spaces: Image, Play, and Structure in 3D Game Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 132; Ewan Kirkland, "The Self-Reflexive

Funhouse of *Silent Hill*," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 13 (2007): 410; and Whalen, "Play along," 76.

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