

Narrative Metatopics for Spotting Sound Design Opportunities

1. Introduction

Narrative Metatopics are recurrent, general narrative devices used in audiovisual media like film and video games, for which sound plays a central role in the design and interpretation process. Narrative Metatopics help to identify opportunities for sound design beyond strictly functional aspects usually associated with "Auditory Display". They contribute to the characterization of an artifact and to its experience in an interaction process.

Moreover, Narrative Metatopics help to navigate a body of heterogeneous reference material, which can be used for initial inspiration and for understanding cultural & aesthetic conventions in sound design, but also for identifying novel and so-far unnoticed sound design strategies.

Due to their abstract quality, Narrative Metatopics can be easily linked and related to qualities of the interaction process, e.g. by analyzing specific interaction sequences following the same process as for the AV-media analysis (see below).

2. List of Narrative Metatopics

The following classes of Narrative Metatopics and related subcategories have been discovered so far (Hug 2010a)

Nature and judgment of artifact

Familiar-unknown, friendly-evil, danger level, uncanniness, eeriness, strange, defamiliarized qualitative characterization, as magic, valuable, precious, or "just" simple tool
technical – organic, industry vs. "nature" vs. "magic" vs. electric etc....

Qualities of Use

(in)correct use
(in)appropriate use
succeeded or failed use
compatibility with other artifacts or user

Qualities of Control

in control, out of control
autonomous vs. remote control
level of autonomy / control / agency / intentionality
hacking, diverting from intended use
eating / swallowing / taking over / infection with alien power

Power / Energy and its Qualities

General presence of power or energy
Type: magic, natural/physical, electrical,...
Moral judgment: evil/good, scary/friendly, familiar/alien, human/superhuman, comprehensible/incomprehensible
extension: ubiquitous / immersive / penetrative / localized
power relations (to other sources / to user)

Energy/Power Life Cycles and Dramaturgy

activation, starting, charging, building up, discharging, releasing, transferring, exchanging, storing, loss of

adjustment, calibration, tuning

Structural States

solidity, stability, integrity, decay, closing, sealing, breaking open

Manifestation of Life

dead matter becomes alive

anthropomorphization

smartness, understanding vs. simple processing of information, computing

organic/inorganic nature

living matter/animated matter

animal presence

pain

Gesturality

movement/gesture

transfer of emotional expression on sound material ("gestural sound")

Transformation Processes

transition, change, transformation, metamorphosis, (e.g. turning good or evil)

Temporal structure

Pacing, speed

determined process vs. open-ended

outburst vs. closure

Atmosphere, Mood

atmospheric machine ("stimmungsvoll")

dream world/otherworld

dissonance, consonance

Intimacy/distance

3. Method for Identifying Narrative Metatopics

Narrative Metatopics can be elicited from audiovisual material using the following process. As material for analysis, clips showing an interaction with and artifact, or a process happening to or going on in an artifact, are the most suitable ones. The clip duration usually lies between a few seconds and one minute. The narrative context of the story is not relevant.

Clip Analysis Protocol (ca 20 min. / clip)

1. Description of interaction and narrative

Differentiate between two levels of experience:

- 1st order experience: my own experience
- 2nd order experience: understanding the protagonist's experience
 - a. What happens (narrative, story)? What is the meaning and character of the protagonists, actions and objects involved?
 - b. Why do I interpret it like this? (perceptions like images, sounds, movements...).
 - c. Create a *label* for the scene and characterize the scene with *adverbs*, *verbs* (of actions and processes, agents), *adjectives* and *nouns* (objects).

2. Description of essential sounds: Using vocabulary from “toolbox for sound analysis

- a. Why was sound essential for my interpretation? Which sounds were important? Describe them. **Also analyze using sound only!** Try to identify specific components.
- b. How do the specific sounds contribute to the interpretations made? Why do I interpret the sounds this way? (Refinement of 1.b.)
- c. How are action and sound configured and related to each other? (Use action – sound analysis toolbox)
- d. Create tags for the sounds of the scene described (analog to above: adverbs, verbs, adjectives and nouns), with a short note about their meaning

3. Technical description of sound material: components, composition, processing, mix, dynamics, etc. (as far as possible) –> in your text document / diary.

- a. How is the narrative implementation achieved?
- b. What design strategies (e.g. archetypes, defamiliarization, material indices) are used?

Write findings down, including labels, attributes and the identified metatopics. Also describe the related sound design.