**Morriconian Aesthetics in Video Games: Musical Adaptation and Reinvention in Red Dead Revolver and Red Dead Redemption**

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Published as:

"L’esthétique morriconienne dans le jeu vidéo : adaptation et réinvention musicale dans Red Dead Revolver et Red Dead Redemption", transl. Dario Rudy, in Chloé Huvet (ed*.), Ennio Morricone : Et pour quelques notes de plus…* (dir.), Dijon, Éditions universitaires de Dijon, 2022, pp. 257-284.

In the introduction to her influential volume on video game audio, *Game Sound*, Karen Collins begins a section with the heading «Games are not films! But…[[1]](#footnote-1)» Collins goes on to briefly note how many aspects of music in films and games are similar – both are clearly audio-visual media, some musical styles operate across the boundaries between the media, and games and films may share production processes and composers. Yet, there are significant specific qualities of interactive media that are important for the creators and consumers of game music.

This chapter presents one of many possible ways to respond to the ellipsis at the end of Collins’s heading. The chapter focuses on three games that adapt Morricone’s music to the video game medium. It seeks to confront a set of specific questions:

* How and why has Morricone’s music been adapted to the interactive medium of the video game?
* What aesthetic experiences do games provide players through Morricone’s music?
* How is the aesthetic experience of Morricone’s music in games different from, and similar to, the experience of his music in film?

These questions of adaptation reflect back on the original sources, too. Thus discussing Morricone in the context of games can also provide insight into Morricone’s music in more traditional media, too.

Finally, it is worth considering what this discussion may betray about music in both film and interactive media more generally. Morricone’s music for film (particularly the Leone westerns) has long been used as a lens not only to understand the power and significance of the particular film texts, but experiences of film more generally[[2]](#footnote-2). Discussion of Morricone in the context of games can similarly illuminate important aspects of the musical aesthetics of games as an audiovisual medium.

***Red Dead Revolver* (2004)**

The main case studies for this chapter are *Red Dead Revolver* (2004) and *Red Dead Redemption* (2010), both developed by Rockstar Games. These are action games set in the «Wild West» genre.

*Red Dead Revolver* (hereafter *Revolver*)was released for PlayStation 2 and Xbox consoles simultaneously. The story primarily follows Red Harlow (a man with more than a passing resemblance to Clint Eastwood) on his odyssey to avenge the murder of his parents by a bandit. Though Red is the player’s main character, from time to time, they will also control other characters as part of subplots and tangential aspects of the main story.

At its core, *Revolver* is a third-person shooting game. The gameplay primarily consists of discrete, linear levels in which the main goal is to avoid or eliminate adversaries. These levels are occasionally interspersed with opportunities to walk around a frontier town. The main levels draw inspiration from stock Western film setpieces, like a train hijacking, the pistol duel, jailbreak, Mexican-American War conflict and saloon fights. There are other levels that draw on more peripheral tropes like the «Weird West» for a subplot about a supernatural circus. As the player succeeds in progressing through the levels, they follow the plot as it plays out through the action and cutscenes (non-interactive film clips). The game displays its cinematic influences clearly: outside the main gameplay sequences, a visual filter is applied to the image, simulating the grain and distortion of worn celluloid passing through a projector.

The music in *Revolver* is programmed (implemented) in a straightforward way. Pieces of music are used to accompany cutscenes, much like a film score. Levels are typically segmented into sections, with a piece of music repeating in a loop until the player triumphs or fails. Perhaps the player will succeed, prompting a new loop to be substituted, or maybe the villains will get the better of them, causing the music to be silenced. Sometimes loops simply fade out, or at other times very short musical conclusions will play to quickly round off a loop. Levels, then, are typically linearly scored, moving from cue to cue, though the timing of that transition is indeterminate (Figure 1).

Figure 1: General musical level structure of *Red Dead Revolver*. There may be several gameplay sequences, or just one. Sometimes transitions will cover changes of loop, at other times, there will simply be a hard cut. During the gameplay, the player may lose at any point in the cue loop.

*Music and Style in Red Dead Revolver*

While the manner in which the music is programmed in *Revolver* is not particularly remarkable, the content used for this system is. The music for *Revolver* consists almost entirely of excerpts of music from Italian Westerns from 1964 to 1980, compiled by Patrick Whitaker. The game’s credits refer to cues taken from 29 films (Table 1), but further films and cues are also used in the game, such as «Lucas» from Django! Prépare ton cercueil (*Preparati La Bara!*, Ferdinando Baldi, 1968) by Gianfranco Reverberi. There are a number of composers represented in the selection, including Morricone. However, with the possible exception of Nino Rota (whose music is used for a circus-themed level), these composers are writing in the stylistic idiom established by Morricone in *Pour une poignée de dollars* (Sergio Leone, 1964) and the subsequent Westerns he scored. Indeed, such is the stylistic congruity with Morricone, a gamer might assume that the cues are all taken from Morricone Western scores.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Cue(s)** | **Film** | **Year** | **Genre** | **Composer** |
| Gringos a Caballo; Bloody Sunset | Sette Dollari sul Rosso | 1966 | Western | Francesco de Masi |
| Suspence Al Villaggio; L’Assulto di Santana; Johnny Sulla Croce | Quella Sporca Storia Nel West | 1968 | Western | Francesco de Masi |
| Un Uomo, Un Cavallo, Una Pistola; Faccia a Terra; Le Pistole Attendono, Sentiero Rosso; Esterno Saloon | Un Uomo, Un Cavallo, Una Pistola | 1967 | Western | Stelvio Cipriani |
| Long Neck; Jackie; Siddle Sack; Sombrero; Tumble Weed | Minnesota Clay | 1964 | Western | Piero Piccioni |
| Pistoleros in Agguato | Un Dollaro Bucato | 1965 | Western | Gianni Ferrio |
| T.5; T.10; T.13 | Anda Muchacho, Spara! | 1971 | Western | Bruno Nicolai |
| T.19 | Django Spara Per Primo | 1966 | Western | Bruno Nicolai |
| Nevada; La Confessione; Delitto fra le Montagn[e] | Nevada [aka El Mas Fabuloso Golpe Del Far West] | 1972 | Western | Stelvio Cipriani |
| Per Salvarsi | Los Amigos | 1973 | Western | Daniele Patucchi |
| Il Bandito Messicano; Il Falso Soldato | Un Dollaro Tra i Denti | 1967 | Western | Benedetto Ghiglia |
| Fuga Dall’Ovest | Corri Uomo Corri | 1968 | Western | Bruno Nicolai |
| Umor Giallo | Stark System | 1980 | Drama | Ennio Morricone |
| Agguato a Dallas; Il Fischio; Il Ponte | Il Prezzo Del Potere | 1969 | Western | Luis Bacalov |
| L’uccello Magico; L’uccello Magico a Roma; Il Duca di Wuttenberg | Il Casanova | 1976 | Historical drama | Nino Rota |
| T.5 | Ringo, il Cavaliere Solitario | 1968 | Western | G.P. Reverberi |
| T.15; T.19 | L’Ultimo Mercenario aka Die Grosse Treibjagd | 1968 | Action/Modern Western | Bruno Nicolai |
| T.4 | Suor Omicidi | 1979 | Horror/nunsploitation | Alessandro Alessandroni |
| T.3; T.5; T.9; T.10 | Buon Funerale Amigos!... paga Sartana | 1970 | Western | Bruno Nicolai |
| T.12; T.15; T.17; T.20 | Gli Fumavano le Colt... Lo Chiamavano Camposanto | 1971 | Western | Bruno Nicolai |
| T.2; T.4; T.6; T.7 | Una Bara per lo Sceriffo | 1965 | Western | Francesco de Masi |
| Pt.11; T.22 | Il Ranch Degli Spietati | 1965 | Western | Francesco de Masi |
| T.12; T.13; T.15 | Un Uomo Chiamato Apocalisse Joe | 1970 | Western | Bruno Nicolai |
| T.18; T.23; T.27 | Lo Chiamavano Tresette… Giocava Sempre Col Morto | 1973 | Western/comedy | Bruno Nicolai |
| T.26; T.28; T.29; T.30 | Prega Il Morto e Ammazza il Vivo | 1971 | Western | Mario Migliardi |
| Al Tren! | Quién sabe? | 1967 | Western | Luis Bacalov |
| Main Theme | Lo Chiamavano King | 1971 | Western | Luis Bacalov |
| Senza Scampo; Balla Per un Pistolero | Il pistolero dell’Ave Maria | 1969 | Western | Roberto Pregadio (manual also credits to Franco Micalizzi) |
| Trinity: A Mollo Nella Tinozza | Lo Chiamavano Trinità… | 1970 | Western/comedy | Franco Micalizzi (manual also credits to Roberto Pregadio) |
| Main Titles | …E Per Tetto un Cielo di Stelle | 1968 | Western/comedy | Ennio Morricone |

Table 1: Music credits, as listed in *Red Dead Revolver*.

*Revolver*, outside the music, already takes great aesthetic influence from Italian Westerns. Using music from those films that influenced the style is no great leap of imagination. Yet, despite the huge number of video games that take similarly close inspiration from particular film genres and styles, it is highly unusual for a game to be scored almost exclusively with music from a group of films. Apart from situations of a game based on a specific film, film series, or television series (*Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, *James Bond*, etc.), taking cues from across a genre is almost unheard of, primarily because of the particular demands of scoring for games. We may find stylistic homages to particular film music genre archetypes, but the collage of pre-existing music, as found in *Revolver* is singular. Instead, in the vast majority of cases, producers commission new scores. The fact that this collage approach to the Western is possible is itself telling. When music from different films and a variety of composers can be melded together into a coherent soundscape, we get a clear image of the consistency of the Italian Western musical genre, and, by extension, how rapidly and thoroughly Morricone’s style was emulated by his contemporaries.

*Morricone’s Western Style*

The Morriconian musical style for Westerns is highly distinct. Staig and Williams write,

«[C]ertain musical conventions evolved from the genre to which many composers conformed. […] In one case many people in Great Britain and the USA were convinced that Morricone and Nicolai were one and the same person because of similarities in their music. Many Italian Western scores sound very similar. Cracking whips, bells, chants, fuzzy guitar passages and solo whistling is not merely an Ennio Morricone trademark, it is the trademark of a peculiarly original kind of scoring, and a type that is unique to the Italian Western[[3]](#footnote-3).»

Jeff Smith similarly characterized the style as one that «juxtaposes static ostinatos with ear-bending themes; surf guitars with mariachi trumpets; wordless grunts and whistles with mellifluous singing[[4]](#footnote-4).»

Smith argues that the distinctive elements of the musical style create a sonically appealing musical style which helped the popularity of the films. That striking sonic appeal seems to have been similarly potent for the game, given that it is consistently highlighted by reviewers as a positive feature of the game[[5]](#footnote-5).

This distinctive musical style is part of how this game articulates its genre as a Western game, particularly inspired by the aesthetics of the Italian Western. By using the style, it invokes a whole host of pre-existing associations to bear on the game, rounding out beyond what is specifically shown on-screen (a process I have elsewhere termed «musical texturing[[6]](#footnote-6).»

Staig and Williams paint a picture of a collaborative group of composers, with Morricone at its centre, sharing a musical language and working with, and for, each other:

«[A] stock of film composers evolved, almost all of whom lived and worked in and around Rome. Many of these composers shared studios, worked in each other’s orchestras, belonged to the same company and so on. It is not therefore surprising to find that Bruno Nicolai may conduct for Carlo Rustichelli, play organ for Ennio Morricone whilst writing his own score for *A Man Called Apocalypse Joe!* [*Quand les colts fument... on l'appelle Cimetière*][…] All of these superb musicians and composers are like one large family (very like the opera tradition)[[7]](#footnote-7).»

It is mostly from this wider «school» of composition, both emulating, and likely inspiring, Morricone’s style, that the cues in *Revolver* are drawn[[8]](#footnote-8). Indeed, excerpts from *Quand les colts fument... on l'appelle Cimetière* are included on the soundtrack.

Jeff Smith has written about the symbiotic relationship between the music of Italian Westerns and the recording industry. He argues that «the formal parameters of [Morricone’s] scores bear certain similarities» with songs, and that «[T]hough Morricone did not initially intend his scores to be popular, the accessibility of their component parts allowed them to function within the context of the Italian and American recording industries».[[9]](#footnote-9) The significant investment in film soundtracks by the Italian recording industry gave rise to the soundtrack albums. This proliferation of soundtrack recordings created and preserved the musical corpus from which *Revolver* takes its cues.

*Excerpt Choice*

The cues chosen for *Revolver* respond to particular dramatic modes. While not every cue fits neatly into these categories, there are clear cue archetypes:

The suspense cue (like the Tavern cues from *Il était une fois dans l'Ouest* (*C'era una volta il West*, Sergio Leone, 1968): Sustained strings and/or pointillist textures, dissonant and fragmentary, e.g. T.5 from Bonnes funérailles, amis, Sartana paiera (Buon Funerale Amigos!... paga Sartana, Giuliano Carnimeo, 1970).

The quasi-source cue (in the model of «Bad Orchestra» from *Il était une fois dans l'Ouest*): A piece emulating musical traditions of the West (like folk tune) or amateur band, e.g. Track 11 (from *Il Ranch Degli Spietati*, Jaime Jesús Balcázar, 1965).

The rollicking action cue, often like a title theme (in the model of the title from *Le Bon, la brute, le truand* (Il buono, il brutto, il cattivo, Sergio Leone, 1966): Wordless male chorus vocals, electric guitar melody and/or brass-led fanfare figures, string countermelody, driving percussion in galloping rhythm (esp. snare drums and timpani), tubular bells, e.g. Title from *Quand les colts fument... on l'appelle Cimetière* (*Gli Fumavano le Colt... Lo Chiamavano Camposanto*, Giuliano Carnimeo, 1971)*.*

The Cheyenne cue (in the model of «Cheyenne» from *Il était une fois dans l'Ouest*): andante lolloping rhythm, rhythmic guitar strumming, detuned piano, clip-clop percussion, Description, e.g. T.5 from *Ma dernière balle sera pour toi!* (Aldo Florio, *Anda Muchacho, Spara!*, 1971)

The choice of cue types in *Revolver* illuminate cue archetypes in the Italian Western. They serve to articulate the dramatic moments in gameplay just as they do in film. When music is such a significant contribution to the dramatic atmosphere in the genre of the Italian Western, it is well-suited to another medium that often prioritizes and uses music for similar ends. The sensationalist spectacle of Italian Westerns, has much in common with action games which also prioritize techniques to grab their audiences and provide them with thrilling, exaggerated, overdetermined experiences. Small wonder that both turn to music as part of this agenda, and it is effective in both contexts.

Another factor that makes this musical style effective in a video game context is the musical structure. Smith argues that Morricone’s musical style has significant parallels with popular musical techniques. Beyond the surf-rock influences noted above, he explores how Morricone often uses 16-bar song forms for his themes[[10]](#footnote-10). Morricone also tends to avoid harmonic movement, once saying, «When I begin a theme in a certain key, say, D minor, I never depart from this original key. If it begins in D minor, it ends in D minor. This harmonic simplicity is accessible to everyone».[[11]](#footnote-11) These two qualities of Morricone’s style – static harmonies and unit-based formal design, make the material well-suited for adaptation to the medium of the video game.

Like many action games, *Revolver* uses musical loops as a way to deal with the temporal indeterminacy of the medium. Karen Collins notes that, «looping was an aesthetic that developed in the early years of game music[[12]](#footnote-12).» This has held for modern games, as Michael Sweet notes, «The first building block of creating music for games is the creation of a seamless loop[[13]](#footnote-13),» and Gina Zdanowicz and Spencer Bambrick, writing in 2020, describe composing in loops as an «essential skill[[14]](#footnote-14)» for game composers. It would not be accurate to describe Morricone as writing in loops, but the segmented structure and static tonal design provide moments that are well-suited for adapting the music into loops. This approach also allows the score to retain its prominent melodic qualities. Cues are cut into segments which can also be deployed independently of the whole piece.

The musical editing style of the Italian Western is not known for its subtlety. Abrupt musical changes, rather than smooth fade-in and fade-out are typical of such films. These musical hard edges are stylistically useful for games. Many games, particular those that aspire to emulate filmic aesthetics, may try to minimize such abruptness in the way music is triggered in games, in favour of a smoother effect. Here, however, straightforward triggers and obvious musical entries and are completely in keeping with the stylistic model the game follows.

Rockstar’s assembly of the music (and indeed the game as a whole) is arguably similar to Leone’s process in constructing *Il était une fois dans l'Ouest*. Christopher Frayling has noted how the film is saturated with elements and scenes replicated from other American Westerns[[15]](#footnote-15). In reciprocity, then, this score is a microcosm of the game, assembling, collage-like, tropes and elements from Italian Westerns.

It is notable that the selection of cues used in *Revolver* avoid the most well-known pieces of music from Italian Westerns. These examples are unlikely to be recognized by the majority of players, though the general stylistic association is clearly signified.

There may be financial reasons for using lesser-known cues – these cues are primarily licensed by CAM, rather than the Sony-owned RCA records which hold the rights to the Leone westerns. Beyond this dimension, however, there are two other results that follow this decision. First, by avoiding the most famous cues that an audience might recognize, it means that the intertextual reference is not too specific. Secondly, the manipulation of the music avoids becoming distracting for the player. If, for instance, the game were to feature, for instance, «Ecstasy of Gold», not only would Leone’s stylistic world be brought to mind, but also the specific characters, plot and scenes of *Le Bon, la brute, le truand*, clashing with the storyline in the game. Players might expect to see Tuco, Angel Eyes and Blondie. In using a well-known cue, players would also be aware of where the cue has been edited to loop for a gameplay situation or cutscene. The divergence between the expectation and the loop could be distracting, including when it may have to be prematurely silenced, when the player prompts a musical transition. Smith notes the «ear-grabbing appeal[[16]](#footnote-16)» of Morricone’s themes, which makes it particularly likely that cues from well-known films may be recalled by audiences. In *Revolver*, then, Morricone’s music is largely ignored, instead in favour of his repertory or school of composers, despite the fact that the style is undoubtedly Morriconian.

A typical example is a level from midway through *Revolver*. In this level, the player controls Annie Stoakes, a character clearly inspired by Annie Oakley. In this level, Stoakes has to defend her ranch from attackers and help her livestock to escape (Table 2).

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Action** | **Cue** | **Composer** |
| Opening Cutscene – Annie returns to her ranch to find her help gone and the ranch under attack | Il Ponte from Il Prezzo del Potere, excerpt only | Luis Bacalov |
| Gameplay 1: Clear the ranch of invaders and release the cattle from the burning barn. | Main Theme (from Lo Chiamavano King), looped and skips to track end when objective complete | Luis Bacalov |
| Cutscene 1: Further bandits arrive | Not scored |  |
| Gameplay 2: Dispatch the bandits | Main Titles (…E Per Tetto un Cielo di Stelle), looped | Ennio Morricone |
| Cutscene 2: Reinforcements arrive | Main Titles (…E Per Tetto un Cielo di Stelle), re-starts, brief excerpt only | Ennio Morricone |
| Gameplay 3: Dispatch the reinforcements | Il Ponte (from Il Prezzo del Potere), looped and skips to ending tag when objective complete | Luis Bacalov |
| Cutscene 4: Boss enemies Buff and Holstein appear | Not scored |  |
| Gameplay 4: Boss Fight | Faccia a Terra from Un Uomo, Un Cavallo, Una Pistola, looped | Stelvio Cipriani |
| Cutscene 5a: Final boss killed | Al Tren! from Quien Sabe? | Luis Bacalov |
| Cutscene 5b: Red meets Annie | T. 13 Anda Muchacho, Spara! | Bruno Nicolai |

Table 2: The level Range War in *Red Dead Revolver.*

There are many advantages that come with using the soundtrack recordings for the score of *Revolver*. As noted above, particular distinct timbres are crucial characteristic elements of Morricone’s style. The pre-existing music preserves those timbres and the qualities of music production (the grain of the recordings, the processing of the sounds through the recording style and equipment of the 1960s/1970s Italian soundtrack industry, etc.). These aspects of the style are present in the game’s music, not through imitation or synthesis, but through the original sonic artefacts.

Similarly, while acknowledging that music licensing can be costly, using these original recordings allowed access to a richness of orchestration, and size of ensemble that would be unavailable to composers without huge expenditure. Composers may instead have been forced to turn to synthesized instrumentation that could sound distractingly unconvincing, or even like an insincere parody of the style.

While one must be careful with the term «authenticity,» the use of music taken from actual Italian Westerns certainly adds a veracity to the game’s emulation of the Italian Western genre, exactly replicating the soundworld, and opens the possibility of strong intertextual links (both of the style in general, and the films from which the music is taken).

The use of a score with music from Italian Westerns can also be a useful point of marketing for the game, making the music a feature to be remarked upon in reviews and commentary about the game. The game was also nominated for an award for «Best Licensed Music[[17]](#footnote-17)» by prominent gaming website GameSpot. If, as Staig and Williams suggest, there is «No true Italian Western without this score style[[18]](#footnote-18),» then the makers of *Revolver* fulfilled this criterion beyond question.

We may also note the similarity between some aspects of the sonic style of games and the Italian Western. Leone, amongst other directors of Italian Westerns de-emphasized dialogue in favour of music and sound effects.[[19]](#footnote-19) A clear parallel can be drawn with action games, which similarly tend toward only sparse, or de-prioritized dialogue. Vococentric cinema (to use Neumayer’s phrase) this is not[[20]](#footnote-20), and neither are action games typically vococentric. In a genre that uses setpieces as moments for musical exposition, these cues fit well for a game based around such setpieces.

While the impulse for using the Morriconian music is clearly one of homage and copying the cinematic style, some aspects of this recontextualization are also a reformulation, addressing what might be understood as problematic aspects of the scoring of Italian Westerns. As a genre broadly characterized, Italian Westerns are not known for positive or empowered depictions of women. Women in these films tend be relegated to secondary roles, powerless situations, and often fall into stereotypes of virginal wives or dangerous whores. Many Italian Westerns can be fairly charged as having a misogynist attitude[[21]](#footnote-21). Native Americans fare a little better in terms of representation, but mostly because of their relative absence compared to the American Western. As a result of the film content, Morricone’s heroic music and style for the Westerns tends to be associated with white or Mexican male characters.

In *Revolver*, however, apart from Red, players also control Annie, as well as Shadow Wolf (Native American), Buffalo Soldier (African American) and Javier Diego (Mexican). The music for these levels draws from the same repertoire as the white male characters. Thus we find Annie, in Range War, being accompanied by music original written for a male hero Main Theme (from *On m'appelle King*, *Lo Chiamavano King*, Giancarlo Romitelli, 1971). Indeed, earlier in the game, the same clip was used for part of a level featuring Red (Ugly Streetfight). Her action-packed violence is just as musically epic as the male hero, in a way largely absent from the historical Italian Western. In this way, *Revolver* opens out the associations of the Morriconian heroic musical style beyond the limited gendered locus of the original film corpus.

*Missing a Night at the Opera*

So far, I have primarily focused on the aesthetic successes of *Revolver*’s approach to scoring. The admirable achievements of the score recognized, there are also aspects of the game that do not fully translate the Morriconian aesthetic to the game, even while the musical citations are entirely apt and clearly carefully chosen. Where *Revolver* departs from its cinematic cousins is in one of the most important elements of the Morriconian style – its connection with the image. Simply put, we lose the operatic quality of Morricone’s work.

When scholars and critics describe the close integration of Morricone’s music with the visual aspects of the Italian Westerns, they do not mean something as superficial as mickey-mousing (indeed, it was not uncommon for Morricone to avoid writing to picture). Instead, the audio-visual fusion that gives Morricone’s music provides the enrapturing effect that many critics have described as «operatic[[22]](#footnote-22).»

I, along with other scholars, have elsewhere suggested that the so-called «operatic» qualities of the Leone/Morricone Westerns is found in several features including a fusion of musical and dramatic structures, a unity of gesture encompassing the film and audio, the sonic dominance of music, and the use of music to contribute substantially to the identity of characters[[23]](#footnote-23). *Revolver*, though using music from Morricone and his circle, is not able to replicate this «operatic» quality. An instructive example is the Railroaded level, which stages an action sequence across a train (Table 3).

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Action** | **Cue** | **Composer** |
| Gameplay 1: Red must fight his way along a train on the outside of the carriages and across the cargo. | T.15 from Gli Fumavano le Colt... Lo Chiamavano Camposanto, looped with ending tag | Bruno Nicolai |
| Cutscene 1: An unseen woman screams that the train is speeding up. | Unscored |  |
| Gameplay 2: Red must make his way back to the front of the train, now avoiding low bridges and other obstacles, as well as enemies. | Pistoleros in Agguato from Un Dollaro Bucato, looped | Gianni Ferrio |
| Cutscene 2: The train driver attempts to slow the train down | Unscored |  |
| Gameplay 3: Defend the train driver from the horseback bandits. | Lucas from Preparati La Bara!, looped | Gianfranco Reverberi |
| Cutscene: The train arrives at the station. |  |  |

Table 3: The level Railroaded in *Red Dead Revolver.*

*Revolver* uses loops to deal with the temporal indeterminacy of the medium, but it is not able to align musical structure with the timing and ebb and flow of the action. Music is faded out prematurely, rather than the conclusion synchronizing with the end of one of the Morriconian periodic phrases or sections (the very periodicity that made a useful point for looping). In Railroaded the melodies of «Lucas» and «Pistoleros in Agguato» are prematurely cut short when the player finishes the sequence at a point that does not align with the musical conclusion.

Similarly, there can be sequences where very little action is happening, but the theme from *Quand les colts fument... on l'appelle Cimetière*  (very much in the model of the main theme from *Le Bon, la brute, le truand* ) continues to be sung with enthusiasm and the propulsive percussion continues, in an odd mismatching of music and image.

The compilation of musical material from so many films also means that the score has little thematic consistency, apart from when cues from the same film are used in close succession[[24]](#footnote-24). The score is not used to characterize particular heroes or villains, but instead more generally evokes the genre and atmosphere of the Italian Western.

The music in the Italian Western is typically very prominent in the mix. While, as noted above, the sparseness of dialogue in the game goes some way to foregrounding the music, the score can often end up in conflict for aural dominance in a way that is not found in Leonean Westerns. In Railroaded, sometimes the music can be the most clear audio component, and at others, it may be completely submerged by sound effects. Leone instead often preferred to use sound effects, dialogue and music in alteration more than competition. In *Revolver*,there are options in the menu system of the game to adjust the relative volume of music and sound effects, but those settings alter the overall volume of each component, rather than just avoiding the conflict.

Though the game goes to great lengths to use the music of Morricone and his circle, it never fully gives over to the most characteristic audiovisual aesthetic of the genre – moments when the music dominates the soundscape. Because of the indeterminacy of timing in an interactive situation, it is not able to adapt these pieces to create dramatic crescendi to shootouts or music synchronized to audiovisual gesture. We do not experience any moments equivalent to the «Ecstasy of Gold» from *Le Bon, la brute, le truand* or Jill’s arrival into Sweetwater in *Il était une fois dans l'Ouest*.Whereas the films can afford to have audiovisual moments organized around musical processes, where dramatic structure is shaped by musical structure, and music becomes the dominant aesthetic force, the game cannot integrate this into an interactive context. Because of the importance of the agency afforded the player in the game, the musical processes of the pre-existing cues cannot take over the audiovisual processes as they can in the non-interactive films[[25]](#footnote-25). The integration of pre-existing music and gameplay means that either players can override the musical material, disrupting the musical discourse, or musical material would have to override the player’s will. Of course, it is perfectly possible to design games in which gameplay is subservient to musical concerns, but since *Revolver* did not aspire to be a music game.

*Revolver* is in a difficult situation – the soundtrack is a key element of the Italian Western genre’s identity, a symbolic presence, but there are also considerable challenges of integrating this aspect into an interactive gameplay situation, even when using «authentic» music. The game never truly replicates the audiovisual synthesis of the Leone Western. This indicates that the integration of music in the Italian Western, as much as its musical material, is fundamental. Whether the music was written before or after filming, synchronization is key, which becomes challenging when temporal indeterminacy is introduced in the video game context. While *Revolver* omitted important elements of the audiovisual synchronization with action, the sequel would take an approach that would deal with this question of agency and synchronization.

***Red Dead Redemption***

For the sequel to *Red Dead Revolver*, the developers chose a slightly different approach to the music. *Red Dead Redemption* (hereafter *Redemption*)is not a direct continuation of Red’s story, but a spiritual successor. This game follows John Marston: a cowboy and former outlaw. Marston is blackmailed by government agents (holding his family hostage) to seek out his former associates. The main development from the prequel to sequel was the change from the highly segmented levels of *Revolver* into an «open world»-style game, which allowed the player significantly more choice in exploring the landscape, more options for how to approach quests, and greater freedom in how and when to engage with the game goals. In this context, the highly linear approach to music in *Revolver* (Figure 1)would not have fitted neatly into the game’s new structure.

*Music System in Red Dead Redemption*

Rather than using pre-existing music, instead, a newly-written score was created by Bill Elm and Woody Jackson. A new approach to music implementation was used. To create a score that would fit more closely with the in-game action, matching the excitement and action throughout the level, a highly atomized system was made. Rather than making complete cues (like *Revolver*’s pre-existing music), instead, the music for *Redemption* is created as a series of short musical fragments called stems. These stems are typically short (a few bars) and represent one musical element of the score – they usually consist of one instrument (or perhaps multiple instruments playing in homophony). These stems are triggered by the music programming in the course of the gameplay, and can be introduced, repeated and silenced as required to match the gameplay. These building blocks make up the score of the game.

Because the stems can be layered, sequenced, and combined in a huge variety of ways, the composers were challenged to find ways to ensure that the cues would fit together effectively. To solve this question, the whole score was recorded at a tempo of 130 beats per minute (or multiplication/division thereof), and in the key of A minor. (Some elements were also non-pitched and/or in free time.) This meant that stems could be recombined from across the game without the fear of unexpected dissonant harmony or rhythmically mismatched. The developers programmed the deployment of these cues to match the action in the game. As soundtrack supervisor Ivan Pavlovich explains: «If you jump on a horse, a bassline kicks in, when you start getting chased, timpanis [*sic*] roll in and big fuzz guitars roll in […] The music actually changes with the action[[26]](#footnote-26).»

The flexible and highly granular system, closely connected to the gameplay, avoids the issues of musical mismatching and lack of structure that we observed in *Revolver*. While there are a few cutscenes in the game, the vast majority of *Redemption* uses this music system.

*Score and Aesthetics*

*Redemption* is less musically saturated than *Revolver*. In the earlier game, music is nearly always playing in the dense collage of pre-exiting music. Here, however, not only are some sections left unscored without non-diegetic music in the quietest moments, but there are also moments where musical fragments are deployed very sparsely.

The music of *Redemption* is a deconstruction of Morricone’s style into its constituent musical elements, and more specifically, a stratification of that style into layers. We have already noted above that Morricone uses limited tonal movement in his cues, and musical repetition is a feature of the way that Morricone’s structures. Thus, the static harmonies and repeating elements of *Redemption*’s score programming fit well with emulating Morricone’s soundworld.

Indeed, one of the impressive aspects of the *Redemption* score is how similar it is to Morricone’s timbres. The characteristic Morriconian elements are all present, acoustically recorded. At one extreme, during the quietest moments of the game, we hear musical fragments in isolation – while walking around a ranch, for example, players may hear a few notes on the banjo, followed some time later by a twang on a jaw harp, a single strum on a guitar, or a single phrase on a folk violin. Then, in suspenseful sequences, tremolo strings may be heard, perhaps with a rasping bass harmonica part, metallic chimes, waterphones, glockenspiel, vibraslap, scraped cymbal, and alto flute. In sequences with more action, like riding on a horse, we may hear electric or acoustic bass guitar, snare drum and bongo percussion and shakers providing a galloping beat, rhythmic strumming on guitars, dulcimer, honky-tonk piano, accordion, rhythmically punctuated harmonica chords, muted trumpet phrases, electric guitar melodic fragments, and percussion from everyday objects like metallic bowls. At the highest levels of action, horns and trumpets become prominent, along with rolling cymbals, marcato strings, tambourines, timpani, drum kit/bass drums, tubular bells, distorted fuzzy guitar, horns and sometimes synthesized male voices. These are not strict layers moving from one level to the next, but instead, a much more fluid combination of parts. From the pointillist textures of low energy to the galloping action music, the music exists on a spectrum of activity that effectively matches the game action. Table 4, shows an example of how eight stems/musical elements are distributed across eight game states. The continual combination and recombination of the musical elements provides significant musical variety, even if the tempo and harmonies are confined by the parameters of the score.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Stem** | **Idle** | **Pastoral** | **Suspense** | **Dramatic** | **Chase** | **Chase Intense** | **Gunfight** | **Gunfight intense** |
| 1: Main instrument | X | X |  | X |  |  |  |  |
| 2 2nd instrument/percussion |  | X | X | X | X | X |  |  |
| 3 Suspense and/or percussion |  |  | X |  |  |  |  |  |
| 4 Upright bass |  |  |  | X |  |  |  |  |
| 5 Electric bass |  |  |  |  | X | X |  |  |
| 6 Chase element |  |  |  |  |  | X |  |  |
| 7 Extra intensity |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | X |
| 8 Gunfight element |  |  |  |  |  |  | X | X |

Table 4: Example stem layout, from production diagram.[[27]](#footnote-27)

*Redemption* takes place in three main sections, based on the geography of the game’s world. The outer chapters are set in America, but the middle section sees Martson journey into Mexico. *Redemption* does not have discrete cues in the way that *Revolver* does, and we do not have the same strong sense of cue types or clear segmentation of game modes. Instead, each chapter uses a slightly different selection of stems, though none strays too far from Morricone’s model. Elm and Jackson added some «coleur locale» to the section in Mexico. Here, the stems tend toward the Mexican side of Morricone’s style. We hear more stems that feature castanets, accordions, more acoustic guitars, deguello fragments, and brass phrases clearly inspired by mariachi music. The varying stems in the different chapters of the game also provide a sense of musical progression.

While the stems in *Redemption* clearly copy Morricone’s music in terms of the instrumentation and idiomatic styles of playing, they do not, however, replicate one of the core components of his style. We do not hear distinct, memorable or «ear-catching» (to use Smith’s phrase) themes. Instead, the emphasis is on musical textures and the melodies tend toward scales, arpeggios, fragments and improvisatory figures. There are a few recurring motifs which are identifiable, but these are hardly the song-like themes with period phrasing. The closest *Redemption* gets to a «main theme» is a trumpet-led melody which itself is separated into short arpeggio-like motifs, which are heard independently of the whole melody. By avoiding melodies with distinct periodic phrases, musical changes can be made quickly without interrupting themes (as heard in *Revolver*).

As a result, we lose the sense of a musical structure to the action, there are no themes for characters, nor grandiose musical moments with strong thematic identities. Indeed, despite the interactive qualities of the score, and how it is able to closely match the level of action and tension, it steps back from direct semiotic connection between the music and the action. The high degree of randomization in the score deployment helps the variety of the music (rather than simple loops repeating for hours on end), but it erodes the strength of the musical signification. When walking around a ranch with sparse fragments sounding – as described above – those musical elements do not seem to be motivated by, or connected to, on-screen action. Some major dramatic moments are not scored, there is no specific musical «build up to the draw», and there are no grand thematic statements for emotional moments.

Yet, music shapes the action, successfully articulating and accentuating the ebb and flow of excitement in the game. It structures the contour of progress, through textual/timbral change, as layers of stems are added and removed. Further, unlike the segmented approach of *Revolver*, where musical rupture segmented the non-interactive cutscenes from the gameplay (see Tables above), in *Redemption*, stems are often frequently used to score non-interactive moments, smoothing over the shift between level and cutscene, action and plot. The mixing in *Redemption* generally emphasizes smoothness and gradation, rather than the sharp and startling musical editing of Leonian/Morriconian westerns. This «stepping back» from very close synchronization with the image means that slow or inconsistent reactions to the on-screen action are less problematic. If the music were to be clearly anchored in the image, and given the degree of player freedom in this «open world» game, the musical reactions lagging behind the on-screen developments, or reacting too soon ahead of the action, would be too obvious. (Music is, however, anchored to the image in the increased amount of diegetic music in *Redemption* compared to its prequel.)

*Redemption*, then, integrates Morriconian aesthetics into a form that facilitates the musical programming. Morricone’s consistency of timbres, idioms and harmonic processes make this straightforward, but the thematic/melodic/motivic elements of his score are avoided in favour of an improvisatory melodic style. While the music is matched to the action of the game, and helps in articulating the gameplay, it is one step removed from the kinds of close synchronization and clear semiosis of the Morricone/Leone western.

*Genre and Authenticity*

*Redemption* does not attempt to re-create specific pieces of pre-existing music in adaptive systems, so it has the same advantages that came with *Revolver*’s use of lesser-known cues. At the same time, while the general connection with the Morricone Westerns is strong, the possibility of specific intertextuality that *Revolver* maintained, is lost. The historical-sonic fidelity to the original Italian Westerns is less strong in *Redemption* than in *Revolver.*

It is interesting the degree to which questions of authenticity seem to be prominent in the developers’ discussion of the music. Marketing for the game refers to «authentic» «traditional period instruments,» «authentic Western experience,» the «true sound of the West,» and seeking «instruments to have an authentic western sound[[28]](#footnote-28).» This is a score that prioritizes timpani and electric guitars (of various types). It is clear that, first, historical authenticity has become conflated with conforming to cinematic precedent (the filmic past stands for the historical past), but, secondly, that Morricone’s musical tradition – an Italian composer for Italian Westerns – has similarly displaced the American film musical West as «more authentic». This is the case, even when the game as a whole is far less concerned with the cinematic Italian Western. Though *Redemption* certainly has cinematic qualities, it does not copy the screen Western like *Revolver* does. Authenticity here, is not concerned with historical authenticity, but instead authenticity to the hyperreal historical sonic world of Leone[[29]](#footnote-29).

*Players and Agency*

Non-diegetic music in *Redemption* is anchored to John Marston and the player, specifically, not so much to the filmic style (as in *Revolver*), here music is connected to the shared experience between player and avatar: their actions prompt musical changes (in the quotation above, Pavlovich conflates the player and character in terms of the musical reaction). In this sense, the dynamic music may amplify the sense of heroism supplied by the game, when the music responds to the player-driven action (even if the specific relation between music and action is indeterminate).

Even though *Redemption* uses a musical system that provides solutions to some of the challenges faced by *Revolver*’s impressive score, it too, is distinctly different from the cinematic Leone/Morricone synthesis. The non-linear score sacrifices melodic themes and autonomous musical structure in order to better match the action and provide player empowerment. Perhaps these examples reveal that (part of) the power of the Leone/Morricone aesthetic is the viewer’s lack of agency to affect the action. Not for nothing are topics of fate and inevitability important in Leone’s work. When an inevitable sequence of events is set in motion, with Morricone’s music indexing the passage of time and the building towards a climax, that fatalism will be eroded if a player is able to opt-out or change the sequence of those events. *Redemption* does, however, have musically-centred and «staged» moments, but paradoxically, they are furthest away from Morricone’s material.

Songs of *Redemption*

While *Redemption* does not have a parallel to the «Ecstasy of Gold» or Jill’s arrival into Sweetwater, it does have musical moments that players as report as emotionally powerful. At two points during the game[[30]](#footnote-30), songs begin to play on the soundtrack. These are apparently non-diegetic, and they are both heard during important points in the plot, when Marston must make a journey by horse. In both cases, Marston begins to ride, but instead of the usual Morriconian stems, modern indie-folk songs are heard. When Marston begins his ride into Mexico, at the start of the second chapter of the game, the song «Far Away» by José González sounds, and during the final stages of the game, when Marston begins his journey back to find his family, «Compass» by Jamie Lidell plays. Both of these examples have attracted much popular commentary on their emotional power for players[[31]](#footnote-31).

When Marston rides into Mexico, «Far Away,» with its distinctly contemporary recording quality and style, is surprising. The allusive, emotional lyrics are evocative, the accompaniment ostinato is hypnotic, and mirrored with the landscape, the song fuses brings together the geographic and emotional journey of Marston. The player remains in control of Marston and if they dismount the horse, the song will end. Players often report how the song makes them change how they listen and play the game. For example, one player writes,

«[F]or once in a game you are not rushing to the next objective; you are being encouraged to pause, take a breath, and take in the environment. […] [The developers have given you no task or objective at this point, so you are encouraged to just keep wandering around, taking in your new surroundings, all the while listening to this slightly haunting, even beautiful song. And although you can move wherever you want, soon your movements on the horse subconsciously seem to match the mood created by the song and the visuals. It does not feel right to gallop the horse. […] In a film, or a traditional video-game cut scene, a similar scene would involve the hero looking around and the viewer / player just watching, which can be effective enough, but in Red Dead Redemption the effect is amplified by the fact you still have control of the character. By changing your behaviour from chasing the next objective to simply taking in the new surroundings, it creates a sense of immersion far stronger than many films. You are John Marston, and you are simply looking around, taking things in, slightly in awe of the new surroundings in which you find yourself[[32]](#footnote-32).»

This player reports how the music encourages the player to alter their playing style to give the music space and attention, without relinquishing control. Rather than trying to match music to the player’s decisions and the resulting gameplay, here the music affects the way the player interacts with the game. This sentiment is articulated in many other comments and reports from players.

Even if the musical idiom of these songs is different from Morricone, perhaps the overall aims are not so far from the rapturous moments of the Leone/Morricone westerns. This is a moment of musical focus with music as the most prominent element of the text. Listeners interrogate the music to gain deeper understanding of the text. Like the «arias[[33]](#footnote-33)» of Leone Westerns where no literal action happens, but Morricone’s music plays, we are prompted to consider the broader narrative sweep and mythic qualities of the stories. In *Redemption*, rather than simply importing the musical style from the film to a game, which is fraught with difficulties (as we have explored), instead, music is used to cue the player into facilitating these kinds of moments. In both Leone/Morricone films and *Redemption*, music structures and organizes the audiovisual experience, but in *Redemption*, it does so through encouraging the player to co-create these moments, participating in the staging, through the striking musical materials and setting, and without depriving them of agency. Paradoxically, arguably the most Morriconian/Leonian moment of the game is absent of his musical style.

**Conclusions**

This chapter has considered the adaptation and reinvention of Morricone’s music for Westerns in *Red Dead* games. *Revolver* and *Redemption* take different approaches to adapting Morricone’s music, with different aesthetic results. A key theme for both examples have been the issues of synchronization and player agency, and how Morricone’s music and style can be adapted to the new media context.

*Revolver*’s linear gameplay highlighted Morricone’s suitability for looping processes and that the school of composers surrounding him gave a large (but consistent) repertoire to choose from. The mass appeal of Morricone’s style and its integration with promotional possibilities continue to be evident. The game highlighted particular typical types of Morriconian cues, which in turn indicated the moods and modes of the genre. The musical selections were part of the game’s fidelity to the Italian Western genre. The game’s main musical challenge was synchronizing the pre-existing music to the action. Musical reactions were generally rapid, but musically awkward. *Revolver* instead deconstructed Morricone’s style into its constituent elements and a much more fluid and less segmented score. It matches the ebb and flow of the action, but does not actively structure the action in the manner of the films. It provided geographic variation and progression through different stems, but Morricone’s approach to themes is absent, and generally lacks specific signification. The moments of musical spectacle and myth-making (in the «operatic» Leonean mode) were achieved instead with music that prompted the player to co-create these moments, rather than eroding player control, or musical integrity.

These games present several perspectives on Morricone. In considering Morricone’s music beyond Morricone, they ask us to attend to the school and circle of composers beyond him. The transmission and adaptation of his style (in Italian Westerns and beyond) is testament to the stylistic register he created. The games highlight the importance of structure and synchronization to Morricone’s style and its aesthetic effects. They also indicate the legacy of Morricone’s work, particularly in terms of its relationship with history in the public imagination.

The Morricone-game dialogue further highlights the issues we have explored regarding agency and control, particularly the power dynamic between filmmaker/composer and viewer; and the complexity when that relationship is changed by adding an empowered player into the audiovisual context. These games also illustrate the way that games can reconfigure and re-present music and musical styles to new audiences with new experiences. Finally, it highlights the myriad meanings of «authenticity» in terms of screen music, and how they may work at cross-purposes: authenticity of musical style, of musical materials, of musical processes, or even of aesthetic goals. Morricone’s music continues to challenge musicians and designers to create powerful aesthetic experiences with remarkable music. His music, style and legacy are configured and reconfigured in interactive games. The joy for us, is that we get to ride, and play, along with Morricone.

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6. Summers, Tim, *Understanding Video Game Music*,Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2016, p. 57–84. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Staig and Williams, *Italian Western*, p. 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Given the collaborative conditions of composition that Staig and Williams describe, it seems reductive to characterize the Roman school of composers as only imitating Morricone. While it is nearly impossible to quantify, with Morricone part of this world, it is likely that Morricone was, to at least some extent, inspired and influenced by those with whom he worked so closely and extensively. It does not detract from Morricone’s status or achievements in codifying this Italian Western style to present the circles of composers as both inspiring and inspired by, Morricone. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Smith, *Sounds of Commerce*,p. 131, 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Smith, *Sounds of Commerce*, p. 136. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Morricone, quoted in Smith, *Sounds of Commerce*, p. 134 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Collins, Karen, *Game Sound*, p. 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
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24. The level Railroaded is shortly followed by another cue from *Gli Fumavano Le Colt…*, which features a variation of the same theme heard in the cue from the film used in the level. This is a rare instance of thematic continuity in the game. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Richard Stevens discusses this question of tension between musical and gameplay processes in more general contexts in his chapter, «The Inherent Conflicts of Musical Interactivity in Video Games», in *The Cambridge Companion to Video Game Music*, ed. Melanie Fritsch and Tim Summers,Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021, p. 74–93. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
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30. A further song is heard during a cutscene towards the end of the game, and another plays over the end credits. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. For just two examples among many: On ‘Far Away’: Heritage, Stuart, «Do We Need Red Dead Redemption 2 When the First Provided Gaming’s Best Moment?», *The Guardian* Juillet 19, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/jul/19/red-dead-redemption-2-first-gaming-best-moment.

    On ‘Compass’: McCarthy, Caty, «How a Somber Music Cue Defines the Beginning of Red Dead Redemption’s Iconic Final Act>, *US* *Gamer* Octobre 16, 2018, https://www.usgamer.net/articles/music-cue-compass-red-dead-redemption-final-act-ending. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Williams, Richard, «Sound Design for the Moving Image» (c.2013), p. 10–11. Unpublished research. https://web.archive.org/web/20170828220244/http://www.flywheelapps.com/uploads/3/9/9/2/39925215/\_disney\_sound\_design.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Jameson, Richard, «Something To Do With Death», *Film Comment,* 9/2 (1973), p. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)