
Music Preference in World of Warcraft

An inquiry into
player disposition to
in-game music

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Introduction

Music is an ancient, artistic expression that is common to every culture. It satisfies a universal need that is deeply seeded in the evolution of the brain. Valorie Salimpoor, a neurologist at the McGill University of Montreal, reports that music triggers activity in the nucleus accumbens, the same part of the brain that releases the "pleasure chemical" dopamine during eating and sex (Salimpoor, 2013). "Music also activates the amygdala," says Salimpoor, "which is involved with the processing of emotion, as well as areas of the prefrontal cortex involved in abstract decision making. When we're listening to music, the most advanced areas of the brain tie in to the most ancient" (Salimpoor, 2013). Thus, an emotional as well as an intellectual reaction is evoked in the act of listening to music. This is why throughout human ages, stories and history were told through songs. Music weaves a story with melody and rhythm, regardless of the presence of words. It can create intricate worlds with the right arrangement of notes.

Imagine watching the Lord of the Rings Trilogy without the accompanying orchestral soundtrack. To say the least, the film would lose a gargantuan element of drama and fantasy that transports the viewer to Middle Earth. A similar soundtrack is that of the MMORPG game, *World of Warcraft*. The original composition was created primarily by Jason Hayes, but the soundtrack was later enhanced by Tracy W. Bush, Russell Brower, Derek Duke, and Glenn Stafford.

Even new age musician, David Arkenstone, added music in a later expansion. The extensive soundtrack changes based upon environment and player preferences such as faction, race, and map locations. The “epic” style music is intended to teleport the player fully into the game, appealing to the auditory sense that works in combination with the complex, interactive visuals of the game.

Furthermore, *World of Warcraft* is a problem-solving, merit-based system, which challenges player’s mental capabilities and critical thinking skills. Research conducted by the Stanford University School of Medicine has found that music moves the brain to pay more attention. By using brain images of people listening to short 18th-century symphonies, the research team gained new insight into how the brain sorts out the environment around it. Their study showed that music engages the areas of the brain involved with paying attention, making predictions, and updating the event in memory (Sridharan, et al, 2007). Deeper research concluded that peak brain activity happened during a short period of silence between musical movements, when outwardly nothing was happening. This finding might enlighten the correlation between WoW player in-game activity, success and music preference (in-game music on or off). In an interview held by computerandvideogames.com, Russell Brower even admitted that “One of [the game’s] most important tools in *World of Warcraft* is actually silence. Using silence allows the player to absorb the

ambience of the space between the cues that much more - and it also allows us to reserve our larger cues for the bigger story moments" (Ingham, 2010).

Research into the massive sphere of MMORPG music has thus far focused upon analyzing external music sources during game-play (Parsons, 2010). Studies were directed to answer the question: "What out-of-game music are players listening to?" This study will primarily center upon player's preference for playing with or without in-game music. It will discuss the motivations of players for having in-game music on or off. The primary question this research will aim to answer is: How does in-game music in *World of Warcraft* enhance or depreciate from overall game experience?

Methods

Two different forms of research were used to gather data in this study. The primary source of data was taken from two similar but separate forum posts on Wowhead and the official *World of Warcraft* Battle.net forums that questioned player's motives for leaving game music on or off (Appendix A). 56 responses were collected from these posts, and were synthesized to find patterns and reoccurrences. Something that should be noted about the data mined from these sources is the participants that engage in the forums. Of the 36 responses attained from the Blizzard forum, 92% were from players with a level 90, and 97% were from players with a level higher than 40. This overall high level of experience might have influence or sway upon the findings in the data since the

players have had so much time to “exhaust” in-game music. Another element to the responses synthesized on the forum is the personality type of respondents. People who post to the forums might hold generally stronger opinions upon gameplay and elements of *World of Warcraft*.

The other method of research conducted was a series of 20 in-game interviews (Appendix B) that spanned four different races (Blood Elf, Undead, Worgen, and Dwarf). Two races were chosen from the Alliance and two from the Horde to fairly include both musical styles. This part of the research provided more in depth, specific reasoning behind player’s preference to in-game music. This approach also allowed correlations to be made between player age, gender, experience, and music preference that the forums could not provide. This data also has a broader pool of experience levels. A potential drawback to this form of data mining was the limitations of interviewing within only four realms. But during interviews, players (especially more experienced players) disclosed to having multiple characters in different realms, therefore eliminating the fear of slanted data. Stronger correlations were expected and found in personal interviews because of the obvious direct, pointedness of the questions, rather than the general discussion of the forum. Likewise, the forum posts had to sustain the casual “identity” of the researcher, producing less directed responses.

Terminology

In-game music: Music that produced by Blizzard that normally plays inside of *World of Warcraft*, ranging from different races, to PvP, to different activities within the game structure.

Out-of-game Music: Music that players choose to play either in place of or over In-game music. Out-of-game music includes news, movies, all genres of music, comedy shows, the radio, etc.

Grinding: A grind is a repetitive action that players often don't enjoy for a reward that they do enjoy. (Example: farming)

Results

The preferences between forum posters and one on one in-game interviews, proved so different that the data has been organized into two different sections.

Study 1 (gathered from forum posts)

Organization of Posts

Of the 56 responses, 3 major categories stood out: Players who always listened with in-game music on, never listened with in-game music on, and sometimes listened to in-game music.

Always Listen to In-game Music

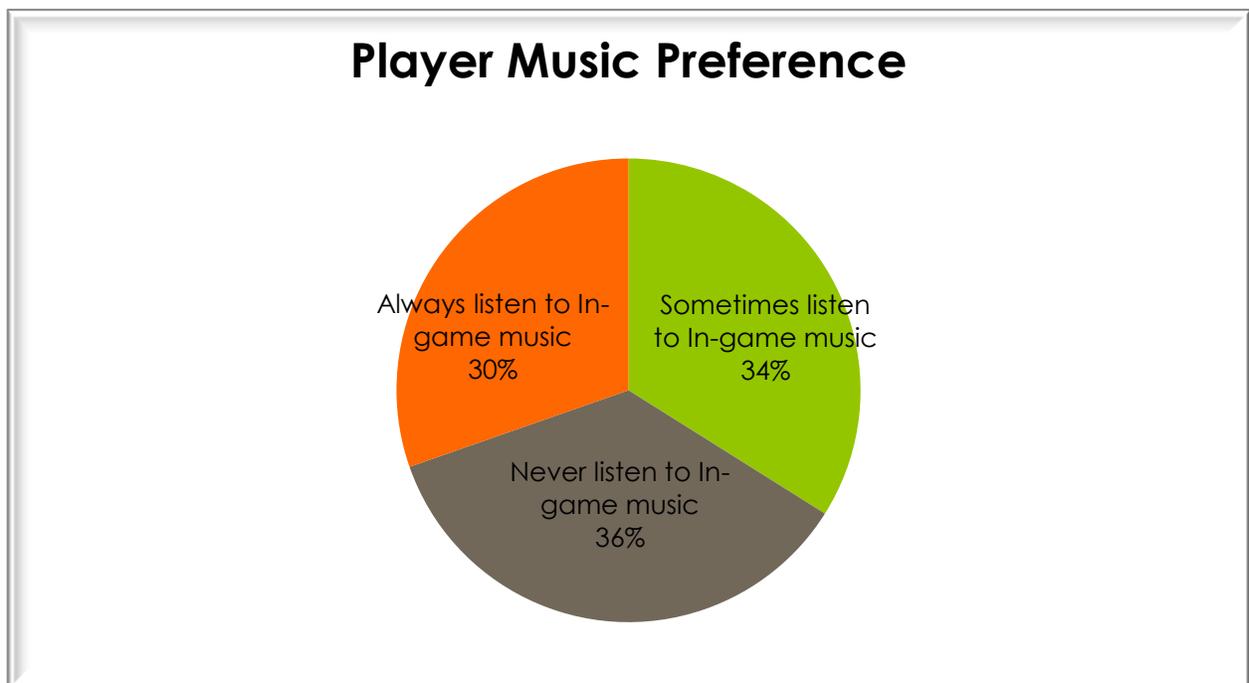
These players reported high preference for listening to in-game music, usually expressing some sort of dissatisfaction with the game if in-game music was not playing. Tush declared that he “couldn’t play with any other music, than the in-game one... it would be too distracting”(Tush, 2013).

Sometimes Listen to In-game Music

Players that fell into the “sometimes” group based their in-game music usage on different parts of the land and different activities, as well as mood. xSylvane presented that her “preference varies based on what [she] is doing and what kind of mood [she is] in”(xSylvan, 2013). “Sometimes” group motivations and variance of listening to in-game music are explored in the section “Reoccurring Themes”.

Never Listen to In-game Music

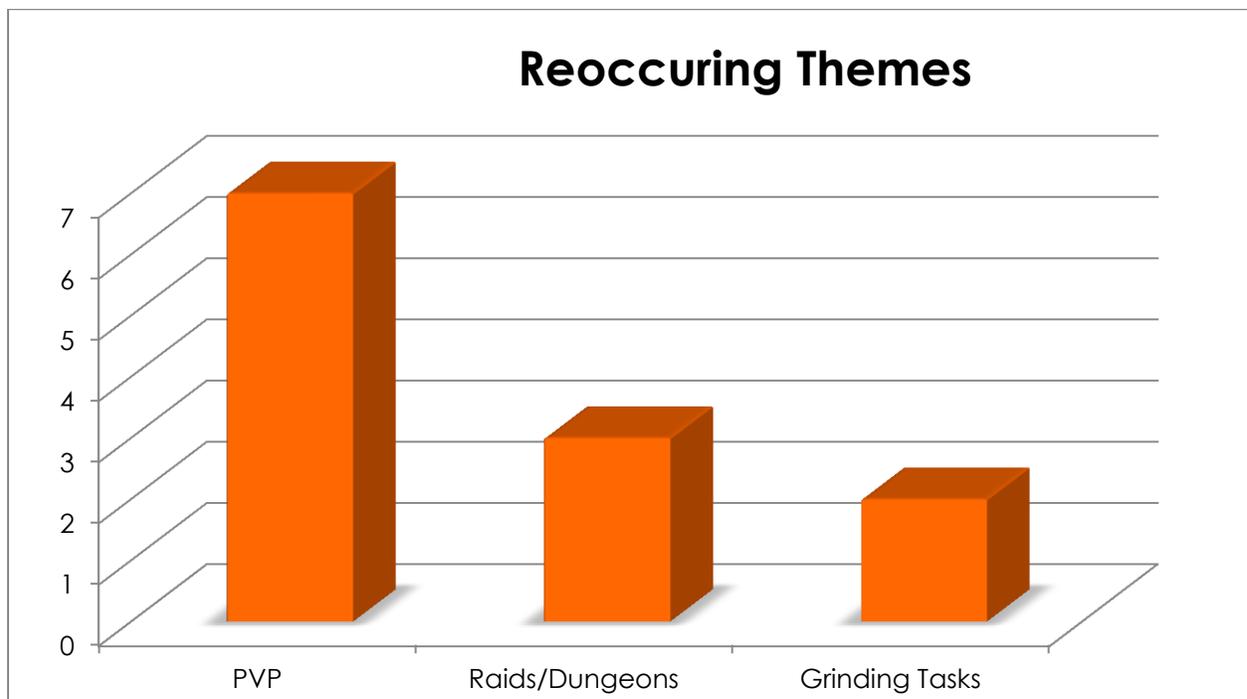
This group chooses to listen to out-of-game music, which includes news, radio, movies/TV, Youtube videos, and personal music selection. 15.2% of all posts listed looping as the primary reason given for never listening to in-game music. 40% of all posters who fell into the "Never" group brought up looping or repetitiveness in their post.



Reoccurring Themes

Four key themes were mined from the 56 posts between the two *World of Warcraft* forums. Players listed PvP, Raids and Dungeons, and "grinding" tasks, as motives for music preference. Inside of the PvP and Grinding group, all 12 posters, reported they preferred in-game music off. Inside of those that mentioned Raids/Dungeons as a music influences, large fluctuations as to music

preference occurred. A 60% in-game music preference, and 40% out-of-game preference, characterized this group. Finally, 11% of posters expressed a preference for keeping game sound effects at a higher level than actual game music, suggesting that the primary irritation the in-game sound is in the repetitive nature of the soundtrack.



Correlations

The findings taken from the forum data hold weaker correlations than those of the interviews because the questions are more casually directed and

worded. The strongest correlation (52.6%) found was between the category of sometimes listening to in-game music and specific preferences in PvP, dungeons, and raids, essentially activities that require more focus or working with others. The next strongest relationship (19.4%) lies with those that always or sometimes listen to in-game music, listing atmosphere/ambiance as the primary reason for motivations for listening to in-game music.

Study 2 (gathered from in-game interviews)

Dissimilar to data gathered from forum posts, the most remarkable finding in one-on-one interviews was the general taste for leaving in-game music on. 16 out of 20 (80%) interviewees reported a taste for leaving in-game music on. Player age inside this group did not seem to have any correlation to music preference, as ages ranged from 13 to 45. Also the player gender or character race did not seem to have an effect on music preference. Across the four races interviewed (Blood Elf, Undead, Worgen, and Dwarf), players evenly articulated a general enjoyment for the soundtrack that *World of Warcraft* provided.

One commonality found, which agrees with Study 1, is the exception of in-game music when grinding. Candens, a level 27 Dwarf, reported that she “sometimes [puts] on other music when [she is] stuck in one place (i.e. grinding) and [doesn't] want to listen to the same song over and over”. Gheron, a level 90 Worgen said, “If I'm just grinding in an area I've played since launch, and know like the back of my hand I'll watch TV or Netflix on my TV while playing”.

Interestingly enough, 65% of players that reported playing for the immersion or fantasy aspect of WoW also reported a preference for playing overall sounds and in-game music at medium to high levels. Heyitscuddle, a level 5 Blood Elf who plays in-game music on high, pronounced “for me music in

game is just part of the experience (good or bad). It helps set the mood for the specific area. WoW's music is nice because it's unobtrusive and very area specific".

Yet, 36.5% of interviewees reported changing the music while PvP-ing, because of the repetitive, looping nature of the soundtrack especially there. Others said that listening to out-of-game music gave an extra edge to their game play when listening to something with a fast beat such as dance music or metal in the PvP context.

The greatest agreement lied in the question of playing with any sound at all. 85% of interviewees responded that any music played at all improved their overall success and achievement inside the game. Not a single interviewee or blog post insinuated that they ever played the game in silence.

Discussion

The primary disillusionment found with the *World of Warcraft* music is looping or finiteness of soundtrack. Zenkrush, a 90 level Tauren Druid, eloquently expressed that "When you play so many hours, the music really does tend to get old. It is well written and orchestrated, but you can only write so much of it, so naturally you'll run into looping, not to mention, it isn't exactly ideal for blowing through 85-90" (Zenkrush, 2013). One of the biggest struggles composers faced in creating in-game music was dealing with the problem that people will be in the

same world for a number of years, and even hanging around the same locations for hours at a time.

Many players also disclosed certain preferences for in-game music when playing in certain parts of map or doing certain activities. A reoccurring preference was to cut out in-game music completely when playing in a PvP server. As far as dungeons and raids went, players had strong preferences for music in these settings, yet some strongly favored out-of-game music, while others favored in-game music.

Players that reported always having the in-game music on, said that “atmosphere”, “ambiance”, “fantasy”, or “immersion” were all important parts of the game to them, and music strongly added to this element.

Differences in studies

It is assumed that the large differences in preference between studies are due to the personality type and experience levels in the samples taken. Forum posters maintain disproportionately higher-level characters and probably hold stronger opinions on *World of Warcraft*, enough to actively voice their thoughts on subjects such as music preference. Players interviewed on the other hand, largely enjoyed listening to in-game music, disclosed that it added to the experience. This might be do to the range in experience and time spent with the game on a weekly basis.

Significance

The conclusions reached from this study must be acknowledged for their practical applications. Players can use the advice and preferences of other players in this study to successfully tailor their own gaming experience in relationship to music preference. Conclusions reached in this study may also aid game designers and composers in future *World of Warcraft* expansions create a more diverse or structured soundtrack in specific parts of the game. It also clearly addresses the major concern of in-game music to developers: Looping. Other researchers may find this information useful when assessing gamer productivity or motivation for game play.

Limitations And Implications

The primary limitations of this study lies in fact that most blog posters or interviewees were of upper level (50+), possibly skewing the results to reflect that the major concern with in-game music was with looping. Because higher levels have spent significantly more time inside the game, there is a far greater chance of them becoming weary of the music generated by WoW. Another limitation was that the study did not examine when and if people play in complete silence. This category could have split "Sometimes" category even further, specifying results. The final limitation of this study is it's inability to quantify productivity in relation to music as well as make correlations between gender and age. A third form of method would have to been used (such as a survey) to

generate the data needed to make any conclusions. Future research could look into the productivity/achievement of players with in-game music on or off, or even any music completely off. Another direction research could take would be to make clearer connections between player age, gender, and game-motivation.

Appendix A

<http://www.wowhead.com/forums&topic=212578/in-game-music-on-or-off>

"I was playing WoW the other day and the sound on my computer was not working for some reason. I noticed that it really bothered me, and got me to thinking as to why I held a significant preference for playing WoW with the music/sound effects. I even tried playing with my I-Pod in and did not have the same satisfaction as I would have if I had been playing with in-game music. I was wondering what other player's preferences were to playing WoW with/without music and why we prefer what we prefer? I am also curious as to what levels people like the sound on (personally I like it at a quieter level) and if sound preferences change based upon what setting you play in or if you play with other people in the room."

Appendix B

SURVEY

1. Age:
2. Gender:
3. Experience (highest level player):
4. How many hours a week do you spend playing WoW?
5. Would you say a primary draw of playing WoW is the “immersion aspect”?
6. Do you typically prefer to play WoW with in game music on or off?
7. Does your in-game music preference ever change with location/activity in the game?
8. Do you often play your own music/news/radio?
9. At what level do you prefer the volume? Why?
10. Do you think playing music (general) increase your skill level/productivity/success?

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