

“Minecraft: Volume Alpha”—C418 (2011)

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Essay by Michelle Grosser (guest post)*



Minecraft Alpha Terrain Generation

“Minecraft: Volume Alpha,” released on March 4, 2011, consists of 14 musical tracks that have been in the video game “Minecraft” since its Alpha release in 2009, plus 10 bonus tracks, resulting in nearly one hour of music. Using Ableton Live, composer Daniel Rosenfeld (better known by his stage name “C418”) created a soundtrack of mostly simplistic, acoustic, sounds that use predominantly piano and strings to create an ambient, atmospheric aural experience. The album’s track order was intentional; Rosenfeld intended for the album to be able to be listened to independently of “Minecraft,” as a single piece of music, invoking composers such as Erik Satie, Hans-Hoachim Roedelius, and Brian Eno as inspiration. However, in-game, the music is played randomly, with no connection to player action or game environment.

“Minecraft” is an open-world sandbox in which the player explores a landscape composed entirely of pixelated blocks and creates their own projects with the materials available to them. Because the narrative of the game is open ended, the music is not designed to work within the player-generated events of the game. Rosenfeld intended to use simple, acoustic music that does not carry game-specific information to the player. He hoped that with this technique, the player would only notice the music when something happened in the game: “That way the player automatically identifies the music specifically with events that they themselves created... even though it’s completely random.”

It is the randomness of the soundtrack in-game that makes it unique compared to similar video game soundtracks. Typically, non-diegetic music in video games supports immersion and virtual subjectivity by setting the environment, connecting important gameplay events, serving as a transition between moments of action, providing the player with information about the game, and/or creating meaning in game events. Games that are successful in these functional goals use music that is bound to player action and game context including setting, time, and location.

Music in popular open-world games such as “The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim,” “Dark Souls,” and “The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild” all aid in the achievement of these goals through the connection with player action or game events. “Minecraft” is an outlier among open-world games in that its music occurs randomly and sporadically, inconsistently connected with elements of the setting such as time and location.

In a 2014 interview with “The Guardian,” Rosenfeld gives a couple different reasons for why he wrote the music the way he did. First, he states that the minimalist and melancholic style of the music was “unavoidable” as “‘Minecraft’ has a terrible sound engine” that “only has 20 sound channels.” I will challenge this statement by noting that the music in “Minecraft” is coded in Java (not a sound engine), which has the capacity to hold 64 channels of digital audio and/or synthesized midi simultaneously. In the case of “Minecraft,” digital audio files are stored as “.ogg” files, which can be as musically simple or complex as desired. Compared to video games from the 1980s, which were only able to support four sounds at a time, “Minecraft’s” sound capacity is more than capable of producing a fully orchestrated soundtrack.

Rosenfeld also states that the visual atmosphere would probably make people expect 8bit, chiptune music. He intentionally avoided this, because he wanted to do something unexpected, so he “worked with experimental simplistic acoustic music that doesn’t actually tell you anything about the game.” He notes that this works because the slower tracks allow players to take their time in the game: “‘Minecraft’ is a game about making stuff,” and the music provides a peaceful sonic play space that fosters this creative atmosphere. He also wanted the music to be unobtrusive enough to be easily phased out in the player’s mind. “I almost hoped that they’d only notice it when something interesting happens in the game,” he explains.

While the music in “Minecraft” demonstrates many of the compositional characteristics of exploration music in open-world games (such as ambiguous tactus, unclear meter, and slower tempo), the application of the music is atypical; the music in “Minecraft” is not congruent with specific player actions, game location, or important gameplay events. Comments on internet forums such as YouTube and Reddit suggest that this atypical application lends to different reactions from players. Some players, those who expect their actions in-game to have direct musical consequences, find their sense of agency jeopardized and their immersion broken. Meanwhile, players who can attribute musical occurrences to game design, luck, or chance, are more likely to look past the incongruence in search of the rare chance that the music and image will be randomly congruent.

Despite, or perhaps because of, its atypical application, the success of “Minecraft: Volume Alpha,” both as a soundtrack and as a standalone album, is undisputed. The album was nominated for Top Dance/Electronic Album in 2022 Billboard Music Awards and led to Rosenfeld reaching number one on the Billboard Emerging Artists charts. Three tracks on the album (“Sweden,” “Minecraft,” and “Subwoofer Lullaby”) have been certified gold by the Recording Industry Association of America, indicating that each track sold at least 500,000 units (or 75 million streams). Players and listeners look back on this album 14 years later and feel nostalgia for the music itself, and the memories that they created listening to it. Only time will tell, but surely the next 14 years of “Minecraft” players will have the same experience.

Michelle Grosser is a music theorist whose research is primarily concerned with music and sound in video games, with a special interest in immersion, embodied experience, and player subjectivity in contemporary games.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.