

Transistor



1. GAME DESCRIPTION

1.1 generic infos

Developer : Supergiant Games Composer : Darren Korb Release : May 20, 2014 Platform : PS4, Windows, Linux, OS X, iOS, Nintendo Switch Analysis : Corentin Gaspoz

1.2 Gameplay Description

Transistor is a top-down, action-strategy RPG. You play as Red, a former singer carrying the Transistor, a sword-like device. You make your way through the city of Cloudbank, fighting waves of enemies called „the Process“. The gameplay revolves around the Transistor and its powers : the Transistor can perform up to four actions, which can all be customized by the player using chips. The Transistor also allows Red to enter TURN() mode, a state in which time is frozen and the player can plan out a certain amount of actions that will be rapidly performed afterwards. TURN() has a cooldown that last longer the more actions you performed during whilst in it. The Process is comprised of a large variety of enemies, each having their own quirks and stats that work together to create puzzle-like encounters. As the game progresses, the player will find more chips they can mix and combine to increase their power or switch up their strategy.

2. SOUNDS INTEGRATION

2.1 Themes

2.1.1 Sci-fi vs Nature

Transistor takes place in a futuristic city. The soundscape of the game reflects this environment : synths and heavy sound modulation are used in the vast majority of the game's sfx and music. Natural, unaltered sounds do exist and are made more important due to their rarity. The most prominent example being Red's singing, humming and various grunts.

2.1.2 Individuality

Individuality is showcased in various ways throughout the entire game. Sound-wise, players can start „humming“ at any point by the press of a button and can build their own „sound“ by arranging different chips together that will inherently reflect something about them as individuals.

2.2 Informative Sounds

Each chips have a distinct sound associated to it. Combining multiple chips will often produce a mix of those sounds when the corresponding action is performed. Enemies also have unique sound that help distinguish them. Finally, Transistor features an extended collection of sfx that convey important gameplay information : cooldown refilled, hurt sound, ability unavailable etc.

2.3 Conveying Gameplay

The entire Soundscape changes when players enter TURN() mode : everything gets muffled, the music becomes quieter and an extra humming melody starts playing. Transistor also features evolving boss music, amping up tension until the very end of hard encounters.

3. SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE

3.1 Sound as a Guide

There is a big mood switch in terms of sound between TURN() mode and normal gameplay. During normal play, the players have to react on the fly to enemies movement and attacks, leading to a more frenetic and impulsive gameplay. This completely shifts when they enter TURN() mode, as the world around them becomes frozen. Instead of quick reaction, TURN() mode rewards slow, methodical thinking, asking players to come up with a strategy that won't backfire once they get back to combat. A muffled music and hummed melody guide the players towards that mentality change : When the soundscape is sharper, they have to be quick. When the soundscape becomes softer, they need to take their time and think.

3.2 Sound as a Reward

As mentioned before, TURN() mode makes the entire soundscape softer. Upon exiting TURN() mode, Red will perform each action planned in quick succession whilst the game sounds become sharp again. Each action performed is also player-customized, creating unique sounds for each actions. This quick burst of sound combination, planned and customized by the players feel like a reward : they emphasize the hits and play whatever the players have „composed“ with their chips, showcasing their own creativity in a concrete, hearable way.

3.3 Sound as a Narrative

3.3.1 Emotions

As Red is a silent protagonist, most of her emotional state is conveyed either by the sword-boyfriend or the sounds and music. The most obvious instances of this are within cutscenes and boss-battles, as they feature custom-made music specific to the narrative at that current time.

3.3.2 Corruption

The Process has its own soundscape, which is also used to convey how much a place or an entity has been corrupted by its power. A prime example of this is Sybil : her voice is almost incomprehensible once she's been taken over by the Process. This soundscape is also an evolution of the main game soundscape : synthetic, heavily modulated instrument or sounds. Narratively, it tells us that the trajectory of the world (mostly Cloudbank) will and was always meant to lead to the Process : a corrupted, individual-less world.

3.3.3 The Country

On the other side we have the natural sounds : those closer to reality, or to analogue instruments. They stand in direct opposition to the Process, depicting a clear „good vs evil“ narrative. In the end, Red is given a choice and completely leaves behind the technologic part of the world, accepting that this is the only way things can get better. This leads to a final, triumphant vocal track.

4. COMPARAISON with The Binding of Isaac

As compared to Transistor in terms of combat, The Binding of Isaac fights are always real-time and for that reason more hectic. The sounds inform the player of what's happening in the room and serve a more utilitarian function instead of Transistor's "sound sequence as a reward" that plays at the end of the strategic TURN() mode.

As for the narrative function of sound, The Binding of Isaac and Transistor are similar yet different. Their soundtracks (both music and sound effects) create a unique atmosphere for every "level" or "zone". However, Transistor has a more defined cyberpunk world/theme, with nature sounds being rare and creating a stark contrast to the majority of the game. On the other hand, The Binding of Isaac mixes the themes more freely, between and within the same level. (While moving within the same floor, the player can enter the Shop, the Secret Room, or the Angel Room, which all sound distinct from each other and have different moods.)

In a sense, Transistor's soundtrack is more unified and immersive, while The Binding of Isaac's is patchworked and all over the place.

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