

NACVGM 2025 Keynote

Pitch, Repetition, and Language in the Pitch-Corrected Speech Sounds of Two Video Game Characters

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In video games, sonic representations of speaking voices can be highly creative and characteristic, yet these sounds are a relatively under-examined component of video game soundscapes thus far. In recent years, my research has centered around these sounds, and I find them to be endlessly fascinating for their myriad facets and contexts: Such representations of speaking voices are shaped by an individual game's technology and aesthetics, and these sounds bring together issues of human and machine, language and text, and—when these sounds include music-like components—blurred boundaries between song and speech.

In this talk, I share a case study of two prominent video game characters whose speaking voices amply engage with all of the above issues: Here, I closely examine the sounds representing the speaking voices of GLaDOS, the initially benign but ultimately murderous AI character in *Portal* (Valve 2007), and Fi, the helpful spirit inside the player's character's sword in *The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword* (Nintendo 2011). In the case of both characters, prominent technological elements in these speech sounds help to frame these characters as machine-like. Moreover, a technological process of pitch correction—that is, correction to discrete pitches in standard equal-tempered tuning—contributes a quasi-musicality to these sounds, even while they are framed as speech. Through a close analysis of these sounds' pitch content and elements of repetition, I explore some ways in which these two representations of voices interface with issues of speech and song, human and machine, and language; and I suggest ways in which these issues are meaningful for these characters and for players' experiences.