

# ***Dies Irae* in a fantasy world: Gregorian sequence and Requiem motifs in *Heroes of Might and Magic* series**

**Radosław Piotr Walczak**

Kazimierz Wielki University  
ul. Jana Karola Chodkiewicza 30  
85-064 Bydgoszcz, Poland  
[radoslaw.piotr.walczak@gmail.com](mailto:radoslaw.piotr.walczak@gmail.com)

## **Keywords**

video game soundtrack, music in video games, adaptation, cultural memory, Gregorian chant, *Dies Irae*, Requiem, *Heroes of Might and Magic*

## **EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

As it may be observed, Gregorian sequence *Dies Irae* and other Requiem motifs are present in the soundtrack throughout the *Heroes of Might and Magic* series and may be analyzed in such fields as theory of adaptation (e.g. Hutcheon 2013), transmediation (after McLuhan 1964), music criticism and continuity of cultural memory. In the *Heroes of Might and Magic* series, the *Dies Irae* theme will be heard in arrangements based on the most primal melody derived from Gregorian chant. Firstly, the motif appeared in an instrumental version in the third release of the series, from 1999. In the fifth release, it accompanies the user, in a choral and orchestral performance, already in the main menu of the game. The reference to the Gregorian chant may also be heard during later gameplay, however, beginning from the *Lacrimosa* stanza.

The sound in the *Heroes of Might and Magic* series is an interesting case to examine from a ludo-musical and ludo-narratological point of view. As Munday (2007 p. 52) states, the analysis of video-game music may be divided into three main sections: environmental, immersional and diegetic. Each release of this game will differ in graphic design and audio quality due to a twenty-year technological progress between first (1995) and last (2015) release. However, in all of the installments, the locations, currently explored areas and battles taking place are associated with a change in music or environmental sounds. Audio in these series is an adaptive source of information about the surroundings, engaging the player and amplifying the sense of immersion (Cook 2014 p. 169). It also serves a narrative function, indicating a specific location and type of story, even if there is no overarching plot (Ciesla 2023 p. 260). Moreover, the pieces of music in *Heroes of Might and Magic*

Proceedings of DiGRA 2025

© 2025 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

series vary from a stylistic point of view, not only amongst locations and fractions within a particular game, but also between the releases. For example, the soundtrack in the fourth release of the series is often classified as ambient, inspired by the New Age genre (Cook 2014 p. 170).

*Dies Irae* is a Latin sequence derived from medieval Gregorian chant from the end of the 13th century. Afterwards, the motif appeared as a part of Requiem, the music for the funeral masses, written by such composers as Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart around 1791 and Giuseppe Verdi in 1874. In addition to performances of these works in philharmonic halls, opera houses and churches around the world, *Dies Irae* by Mozart and Verdi appears quite often in mass media and cinematography, accompanying action scenes intensified by the majestic choral-orchestral performance. The primal melody, in instrumental form, has been used as a quotation in numerous classical pieces and movies (Ludwig 2019).

This particular Gregorian melody appeared in the third release of the *Heroes of Might and Magic* series, accompanying visits to Necropolis castle. Harpsichord is a distinctive instrument of this piece, accompanied by a string section. The sound of a gong may be heard in the background and clarinet solos are also included. On the other hand, the motif of *Dies Irae* from the fifth release of the series was adapted into a choral-orchestral performance. The first half of the recording is sung in unison, which is typical for a Gregorian chant. The melody is similar to the original medieval theme. During the first two repetitions of the text the woodwind and brass sections are accompanied by incoming strings. Afterwards, the first violin takes a foreground and the harmonies begin to appear in choir over third and fourth repetition. Fifth, final repetition is the most majestic as both orchestra and choir perform it on a full forte, with sopranos and tenors singing in their high registers. Another Requiem part may be heard in the Haven fraction. The vocal part of the theme accompanying this city is based on the lyrics taken from the *Lacrimosa*. The tension in this piece rises, beginning with a serene intro and sung in a middle register soprano performance. The main part of the recording is tempestuous and majestic, with a high pitched vocals, expressive brass section and a snare drum beat. The long outro is set in a New Age style with nature-like sounds, marked by a melancholic violin solo accompanied by a harp, and ended with another wrathful cadenza.

Apart from musical analysis, the inclusion of a Gregorian chant in a video game soundtrack is an interesting procedure in terms of cultural and literary studies. As Hutcheon (2013 p. xvi, xxiii) explains, adaptations “represent various ways of engaging audiences” and “target different audiences through different media”. Indeed, the *Dies Irae* theme used in the *Heroes of Might and Magic* series might present them as more realistic and immersive. The pieces may be analyzed in terms of the adaptation of medieval text and melody, also an example of maintaining cultural memory by transmediating a historical work into the video-game soundtrack. The score may be considered as characterised by artistic value due to the variety of the instruments and harmonization of voices, which might be noticed by musicians who perform soundtracks from this series.

## REFERENCES

- Black Hole Entertainment, Limbic Entertainment. 2011. *Might and Magic Heroes VI*. Microsoft Windows. Ubisoft.
- Caldicott, E., Fuchs, A. 2003. *Cultural Memory*. Peter Lang AG.
- Ciesla, R. 2023. *Sound and Music for Games: Basics of Digital Audio for Video Games*. Apress.
- Cook, K. M. 2014. *Music, History, and Progress in Sid Meier's Civilization IV*. [in:] Donnelly, K. J., Gibbons, W., & Lerner, N. W. (eds.). *Music in video games: Studying play*. Routledge.
- Hutcheon, L., & O'Flynn, S. 2013. *A theory of adaptation*. Routledge.
- Limbic Entertainment. 2015. *Might and Magic Heroes VII*. Microsoft Windows. Ubisoft.
- Ludwig, A. 2019. *Why this creepy melody is in so many movies*. An interview. Vox. YouTube.
- McLuhan, M. 1994. *Understanding media: the extensions of man*. Lapham, Lewis H. First MIT Press edition.
- Munday, R. 2007. *Music in Video games*. [in:] Sexton, J. (ed.). *Music, Sound and Multimedia. From the Live to the Virtual*. Edinburgh University Press.
- New World Computing. 1995-2003. *Heroes of Might and Magic*. DOS, Microsoft Windows, Mac OS, RISC OS, Linux, Game Boy Color. New World Computing, The 3DO Company.
- Nival Interactive. 2006. *Heroes of Might and Magic V*. Microsoft Windows, Mac OS. Ubisoft.
- Rice, R. 2012. *The Parish Book of Chant*. Church Music Association of America.
- Virtuos. 2013. *Might & Magic Heroes VI: Shades of Darkness*. Microsoft Windows. Ubisoft.