

Cuphead

Cuphead is a run and gun indie video game developed and published by Studio MDHR. As the title character Cuphead, along with his brother, Mugman, one or two players fight a series of bosses to repay a debt to the devil. The game was heavily inspired by the Rubber Hose style of animation used in cartoons of the 1930s, such as the work of studios Fleischer and Walt Disney Animation, seeking to mirror their subversive and surrealist qualities. Released on PC and Xbox One on September 29, 2017, after seven years development, and several delays, the game was praised for its art style and noted for its difficulty. It was both a critical and commercial success, selling over two million copies by the end of 2017.

Alongside the artwork, the hand drawing animations, and its challenging difficulty, Cuphead is also praised for its music. Composed by Kristofer Maddigan, the official soundtrack (OST) emulates the music of the cartoons of the '30s magnificently and helps bring to life the world that the game is presenting to us. Nominated for the 2017 Video Game Awards (VGA) in the category: Best Score/Music, this game showed all who played it that Jazz and the music of the '30s are components that can fit on a video game and that this music is still awesome.

This game was also nominated for the VGA in the categories: Best Art Direction, Best Independent Game, Best Debut Indie Game, and Best Action Game, winning all of above except the Best Action Game, and Best Score/Music Categories; this last one won by Nier Automata. Cuphead was also nominated for the Golden Joystick Awards (GJA) in the categories: Best Visual Design, and Best Xbox Game of the Year, winning both of them.



Cartoons in the 30's

Cuphead is a game that has its influence trace back to the era of the 1930s. During this period of time, the United States was living the Great Depression, an event that shattered the North American economy, and at the same time changed a lot of the American culture, for we have the Prohibition Law, that forbidden alcohol sale and used, and the rise of the Sin Industries (Casinos and Gambling). Fortunately, not all was bad during this period for the businesses in the USA, especially the entertainment industry, for it is during this period that The Golden Age of Animation began.

The Golden Age of American Animation was a period in the history of U.S. animation that began with the advent of sound cartoons in 1928 and continued until around 1969 when theatrical animated shorts began losing to the new medium of television animation. During this troublesome decade, people were eager to find entertainment to try and forget the harsh life that they were living thanks to the Great Depression, so it is not a surprise to see during this period of time a boom in the Sin Industries (Casinos and Gambling), the Moonshine Industries (Illegal alcohol production, sale and used, as consequence to the Prohibition Law) and the Animation industries. The Animation industry boom was led by two major studios and personalities: Walt Disney (Walt Disney Animation), and Max Fleischer (Fleischer Studios). Both of this cartoonist define what we nowadays call Rubber Hose animation, which can be defined as the first animation style that became standardized in the American animation industry. The defining characteristic of the style were the "rubber hose limbs" – arms, and sometimes legs, that are frequently simple, flowing curves, without articulation (no hinged wrists or elbows). Both of these studios worked with this type of animation, but they had their style differences, while Disney was more into the European Folklore, animating movies such as Snow White and Sleeping Beauty (aside from Mickey Mouse and its childish style), Fleischer was more into the spooky, ironic and risqué humor, like the ones found in their more renown cartoons, Popeye the Sailor and Betty Boop. Rubber Hose animation gradually faded away when further sophistication of the cartoons was introduced, especially by Walt Disney. He wanted to make his cartoons more realistic and have them follow much of the same rules as live-action, a direction that would later be named full animation.

The animation process during the '30s was a very complex and difficult one, it required very skilled personal and big cartoon studios that counted with the necessary equipment to develop these tasks (there is a video below that explains the development process of animation in the Fleischer studios in detail). In a very general way, the process starts with the drawing of the characters and the storyboard that is going to be used during the development of the cartoon. Right after they are finished, the drawings are sent to the animator, the people in charge of drawing the in-between drawings that helped give movement to the characters. At the same time, the background artist illustrates the scenarios of the cartoon, but they do it directly in celluloid (cells) with ink or watercolor (in some cases the background could even be a sculpture... For more on this check the video below). When the animator finishes their work, the drawing is sent to the cartoon inkers that re-draw all the images in celluloid and then they are sent to the color department to get colorize. Finally, when all of that work is ready (Drawings and Scenarios), the final product is sent to the film department where they photograph each frame at a time in a camera, then they were sent to the editing team, and right after, these are reproduced at 24fps (frames per second) so that the movement could be appreciated.

This is the kind of influences, technically, that Cuphead mirrors, for the game took seven years in development (and was delayed several times), because of the art style that Studios MDHR decided to work with. The animations in the game were developed in the same way as they were in the 30's cartoons, only skipping the hand-coloring process, for the drawing were sent to a computer and colorize digitally. Even the stop-motion technique was used, for the game scanned the different drawing and then sequence them to create the movement, the big difference being that the 30's cartoons were played at a 24fps rate, while Cuphead is played at 60fps.

Also, the American culture of the 30's played a big part in the feel of the game, for we can see, especially in King Dies Casino, that the background animations tend to show people smoking cigars, gambling and drinking alcohol, just like they did in the '30s, with the same stylish outfit of the time and indoor decoration for the establishments. Finally, one last detail to acknowledge Studio MDHR is the fact that they, as happened in the early 30's color cartoon, was aware of the color inconsistency, and replicated it, that is why in some frames Cuphead and Mugman appear wearing brown shoes and in some others yellow or red/blue shoes (accordingly); same with their gloves, in some white and in some yellow.

Cuphead's Music

Cuphead not only takes inspiration from the animation style of the '30s, but it also manages to reproduce the sound of that decade. During the 1930's the USA, as we have already said, was going through the Great Depression, and that helped some industries take off, but there was one more that took advantage of those industries to have a boom by its own, the Music Industry. While it is true that during this time African Americans were denied jobs, even musicians, the white jazz musicians did have an opportunity to shine, and thanks to the boom of casinos, dance halls and the inclusion of sound and music into animation, they had work to do.

During this time the predominant genre of music was Jazz, more specifically Swing, and that type of music was normally found in radio stations, dance halls, music concert, casinos, but also, in the T.V Studios. Most of the time, during the 30's the small Jazz trios, quartets or even quintets tended to be found at the clubs, but at the T.V studios and dance halls, the main Jazz interpreters were Big Band Orchestras. A Big Band is a type of musical ensemble that usually consists of ten or more musicians with four sections: saxophones, trumpets, trombones, and a rhythm section. Big bands originated during the early 1910s and dominated jazz in the mid-1930s when Swing was most popular. But not only did they play music for the T.V series and shows, they also had to be included in the cartoons. Due to the lack of technology that we have nowadays, back then all music had to be recorded live, and that was kind of an issue, not because of the complexity of recording Big Orchestras, but because they had to work only with natural sounds, so the idea of creating a musical composition that could fade out and describe a scene and right after becoming an electronic EDM soundtrack was impossible, so music had to be treated as it was, pure music. Also, the fact that during that time the more juvenile, and rebel type of music was Jazz (nothing was more rebellious than a teen listening to black music during the '30s) meant that it was the best choice for the childish, silly and funny cartoons that the T.V studios were broadcasting.

Now, when we hear Cuphead's music we can trace a lot of the things that had been mentioned above. First, we have Jazz/swing genres present in most of the OST. Secondly, all songs, or at least most of them, are played by a live Big Band Orchestra from Canada that was the one responsible for playing the music. Third, we have the standard structure of the way Jazz (in general) is played: Theme - Solo1 - Bridge - Solo2 - Theme; and lastly, all of the OST is composed as common music, and not as video game music.

The responsible for the music in this video game is Kristofer Maddigan, a percussionist, drummer, and composer based in Toronto, Canada. He did the music for this project because he was contacted directly by his friends Chad & Jared Moldenhauer (Studios MDHR owners) because they knew he could do this job (the three of them have been a friend for years), even when Maddigan had never work in a video game project before. Maddigan did a great job at reproducing the sound of the cartoons in the '30s and that helped the project in general, but one of the most unusual concept that he wanted to work with for this project was the creation of full musical pieces for each section of the game, instead of looping music and using lied motives. This helped a lot to create the right general feel for game because it reinforces the idea that we are playing/watching an old cartoon instead of a video game. The fact that the music was recorded live, and that its composed of full-length compositions creates a strange feel (but the right one, non-the less) when playing the game, because it makes you almost forget about the fact that you are playing a video game and instead transports you to the idea of you watching an animated cartoon you can control.

The music of this incredible video game has to be one of the more detailed OST to have ever been made. The solos change every time you re-play a stage, for the musician were ask, after finishing recording, to record additional solos to add and subtract to the audios so that each time the theme sounds a little different. Also, is one of the few video game OST that you can hear by its own and enjoy because it is music (Jazz) and not video game music as most of other OST from other titles. Finally the magic of the music in Cuphead is the fact that it reinforces the idea of how music was done in the 30's, adding to the great influences 30's cartoons had in the project, because even though it does not describe a character, a situation, or what is happening in the screen, it helps you get into the idea of playing a 30's cartoon, at the same time that it makes you get ready and focused for what you are about to face.

The music of Cuphead is incredible and there is a lot to learn from it, from its harmony, its chords progression, the fusion of Jazz with other types of music genre, its rhythms, etc... but to make thing a little bit easier, we have divided the music of this video game into seven (7) categories: Main Theme, Introduction, Inkwell Isles, Bosses, Run n Gun Levels, King Dies and The Devil, and Bonus Music. In a general way, the OST is made up of 56 pieces that have a total duration of 2 hours and 54 minutes.

Before we dive into each category is important to understand that not only were Big Bands commonly found in T.V studios because of Jazz and Swing relevance, but because the union of musician who worked at these studios demanded the employment of live orchestras to create the music for the shows, a very different practice than that of today in which a T.V studio (or any entertainment studio) tend to have a single composer/arranger that creates the music and in most cases re-produce these with Digital Instruments (MIDI), Instead of living recording with their orchestras. This live orchestra recording is, as of today, kind of strange but some studios (T.V, Video Games, Film) still use it, such as Blizzard, who has a full orchestra for each one of their different games

Main Theme

The main theme of the game is the one that plays during the title screen. The instrumentation is a Barbershop quartet during the first part of the song, and a piano tune in the second. Barber Shop Quartets were a type of format very popular in the United States during the '30s and they consisted of a four-part harmony without accompaniment by any instruments, a style called a capella. It consists of a lead, the vocal part which generally carries the tune/melody; a bass, the part which provides the bass line to the melody; a tenor, the part which harmonizes above the lead; and a baritone, the part that completes the chord with the note not being sung by the lead, bass, or tenor singers. The lyrics of the song tell the story, in a very summarized way, of what the main plot of the game is and, in a way, prepares the player for what is about to come.

The second part of the theme is the same piece, just that instead of the lyrics we hear a piano take over and play the whole tune by its own.

Introduction

The introduction theme song is probably one of the most iconic theme songs in the game. It plays during the first cutscene, and the King Dies Boss, and Bosses battle. This is pure fast, up-tempo swing, and its drum introduction is a clear reference to the piece Sing, Sing, Sing with a Swing, a very iconic standard in the Big Band Orchestras repertory. The orchestration of this piece is standard Big Band Orchestration and shows how well Maddigan manages the different combinations and roles each instrument in the Big Band has. Lasting approximately three minutes, the piece has the first solo in charge of a trumpet that does a good job at playing clean and showing a nice consistency in the idea that wants to express. A piano section that helps connect the first and the second solo. The second solo in charge of a trombone that recreates a kind of low scratchiness that is very common for solo Jazz trombonist to use, but not easy to perform. A beautiful break where piano and drums shine. A drum section where the drums cite part of the riff that they used at the beginning of the piece. A third solo that, once again is played by a trumpet and a fourth solo in charge, once more, to a trombone. A fifth solo played by a saxophone, short but very pleasant to the ear, and finally, the last part is a combination of a drum solo, followed by the main riff by the orchestra and a final drum fill that helps the orchestra fit a last up note with a descending wah to conclude the piece.

This piece is very important because with its structure, breaks, orchestration, and solos, has, in a three minutes mark, introduce us to the whole orchestra, or at least to the different families or sections that make up a Big Band Orchestra.

Even when the Bass, and not all of the instruments have a "solo" section, they can be easily heard; and the spaces that are created as consequence of the orchestration help identify the different instruments that are being played by giving each one of them its place on the different sound layers that the piece has.

INTRO - Main Theme, Solo 1 - (Response) - Piano - (Response) - Solo 2 - Piano and Drum Break - Main Theme - Drum Solo - Main Theme - Solo 3 - (Response) - Solo 4 - (Responses) - Solo 5 - Drum Solo - Main Theme - Drum Solo - ENDING

Inkwell Isles

The first Inkwell Isle theme song is a kind of silly and happy one, like the ones that were used during the 30's cartoons to help simulate, and accompany, the idea of a character going by its own and happy through a forest, town, city, etc. It reinforces the idea that you are happily wandering that forest island mining your own business and ready to kick the butt of all the tough guys that reside there, just as The Devil told you to do so you can save your soul. The genre resembles the Dixieland music that was played during the early 20th century. Dixieland is sometimes also referred to as hot jazz or traditional jazz and is a style of jazz based on the music that was developed in New Orleans at the start of the 20th century. The instrumentation for this piece is a common Big Band Orchestra, the only additional instrument being a Flute, an instrument that is not always present in the Big Band standard format. A Clarinet, which in the other hand, is a more often used instrument in the traditional Big Band Orchestra ensemble, and normally replaces (and is played) by one of the two Alto Saxophones. Meanwhile, in the Dixie Land ensemble it was common to find Clarinets and Flutes, as well as at least one instrument of each of the families that compose the Big Band, plus some others like the Tuba; and the Drum set tended to be played by multiple musicians instead of one, so one would have the Bass Drum, other the Snare Drum, other the Hi-hat, etc...

Inkwell Isle two has the same idea that was developed in the first Inkwell Isle. The big notorious difference is that this one resembles more the idea of the carnival. The music is a very big mirroring of the sound that people living during the decade of the '30s tended to associate circus and carnivals too. The Dixieland genre is still a big influence. There are a few marching drums in the middle of the piece but mostly is just Dixieland.

Contrasting with Inkwell Isle one and two, Inkwell Isle three is pretty smooth. In this map, the music that sounds is pure Swing. The ensembles now resemble that of a Big Band Orchestra, and we can find the typical Big Band Orchestra Instrumentation, even the Clarinet, and the Flute are completely gone. This piece has as it may instrument the Saxophone and the Swing plays at a mid-tempo, almost slow. The piece is very similar to the Jazz that the Trios, Quartets, and Quintets tended to play at night clubs, and that helps reinforce the visual idea of you walking and exploring a city like Inkwell Isle three.

Accordingly, Inkwell Hell is the last map you will play and as such, the theme of it is a Ballad/Swing. Ballad/Swings are a sub-genre of Swing that is slower and has a more heavy and darker aspect to the sound of it. This specific theme takes a lot from the orchestration and harmonization techniques that Gil Evans used to implement in its music when scoring for Big Bands. The piece reinforces the idea that this is the end of your journey, but at the same time, that you are going to be face to face with the hardest and toughest bosses of the whole game.

Finally, it is very interesting to see that not only is the music from the maps describing perfectly and accurately the visuals and the feel of the isles but also that it kind of shows the musical evolution of Jazz. Every aisle in its style a reference to a type of Jazz played during different period of time periods, starting with Dixieland Orchestras (1910's), going forwards into the early days of the Big Band (1920's), when Dixieland was still a thing but at the same time was fading away, so Big Bands still used a lot of harmonization and ensemble techniques used by Dixieland Bands, continuing with a pure Big Band feel (1930's) to finally end in the later era of Jazz (1940's) when Big Bands started to experiment with sound by the hands of composers and arranger such as Gil Evans, clear influence of the last Inkwell Isle theme song (Inkwell Hell, that is technically a cave).

Bosses

The music of every one of the Bosses of Cuphead is magnificent, but we are not going to talk about each one of them because it will take too much time, and to do a precise analysis we would need to have the original scores or a copy of these, so instead we are going to talk about them in a more general way.

The music from the Boss Battles are the ones that show how well Maddigan uses the Big Band Orchestra. The way he mixes the different interments that make up the Orchestra, the marvelous solos that tend to change every time the battles are reset, and the extraordinary way he mixes Jazz with other elements such as Latin, Dixieland and Ballads are some of the most notorious characteristics Maddigan used for this project. Following the idea that he is playing Jazz and that he has a whole Big Band Orchestra to work with, he experiments with sound to recreate an accurate reproduction of the music and the way it sounded, during the 30's cartoons and decade.

The music, in these cases, is not meant to describe the action or what is happening visually on the screen, what the music seeks is to help the player get into the mood of what he is about to face, and at the same time give him the sensation that what he is seeing and interacting with is a cartoon and not a video game.

Most of the theme songs are built over a standard Jazz structure, Theme - Solo1 - Bridge - Solo2 - Theme, and in some other cases they add or re-arrange this form (but for the most part they follow the one mention above). Also, we can find some piece such as Floral Fury, that demonstrates the talent that Maddigan has to blend Jazz with Latin music, in this case, Samba. Same happens with Botanic Panic, that mixes the sound, the instrumentation, and the feel of old Dixieland music with Big Band orchestration techniques, sound, and mood, generating a wonderful, powerful and exciting piece.

In the technical field we can find that the songs fit perfectly because each one of them is over 3:30 minutes long, and having Boss battles that are indented to last, approximately, between 1:30 and 2:30 minutes, the pieces can be played almost entirely. To solve the problem of cutting the song at the middle, or at any given point after the battle has finished they use a narrator that yells: Knock Out, and immediately that boss defeat animation starts to play and the theme starts to fade until the game moves to a black screen, and immediately after the score screen is display and the Victory Tune starts to play. This helps feel the music transition between the boss theme song and the Victory Tune more fluid, organic (natural), and less noticeable. Finally, each one of the bosses' theme has variation in the solos that were recorded on top of the original pieces at the end of the recording session of each song so that the game engine can randomly change the solos of each piece every time the battle is reset. This was a perfect addition to the overall music because it helps keep the music fresh and interesting, and that is important when you know that players are going to be replaying each battle for a period of at least an hour or so before defeating the boss and advancing to the next one.

These are the most Up-beat piece in the whole game and tend to be the more complex ones if compared to the Inkwell Isles theme songs and the Main Theme. Also, is important to notice that the only Boss Fight that does not have its theme song is the King Dies Boss Battle, in which the theme Kings Court is a "variation" of the Introduction theme song that plays during the first cutscene of the game. This song plays during the whole King Dies Boss Battle, including the mini Bosses that you have to fight before facing him.

Run n Gun Levels

Cuphead is a game that also has you play through some Platform levels to collect coins you can spend at the shops that are located in every Isle (except for Inkwell Hell). These levels, even though they are optional, are still part of the game and have their music. As they are platform levels and not Boss Battles, the music used in these is more of a traditional video game OST. This is because in these levels you can spend any time you want, even though they are supposed to be completed in approximately 2:30 to 4:30 minutes. The theme songs for these tend to be more descriptive about the visuals, still referring to the cartoon influences, but are composed of small fragments that are randomized by the game engine to play and loop for the necessary time. Also, we can hear that they are the less orchestrated one, having mainly a piano and some other rhythmic and or harmonic instruments, and they are the shortest, each one lasting (OST CD) roughly 3 minutes.

King Dies and The Devil

The last two Bosses of the game are King Dies and The Devil, and their music is a little bit different to that of the other Bosses in the rest of the game. The first of the two Bosses that you encounter is King Dies, and with his music happens something very particular. Even though King Dies has its Theme song that tends to play each time you talk to him to advance to the next aisle, during his Boss Fight that theme song is not present. The music we tend to associate King Dies with is, by obvious means, *Die House*, and not only because it's the theme song you hear each time you want to advance to the next aisle and talk to King Dies, it's because it is one of the only music in the whole game that has lyrics, and the one who sings this piece (even though it is a woman) is King Dies himself. The lyrics are pretty easy to understand and helps create this idea of who King Dies is. The piece is a mid-tempo Swing and as said above is one of the only songs in the entire OST to have lyrics and represent a specific character.

On the other hand, we have the music that sounds during his Boss Battle and is here where we can see, once again, the genius of Maddigan in the way he uses music, this time to communicate a message. The piece that plays during the King Dies encounter is the same *Introduction* Theme without the Drums intro. Though it is strange to see this, the idea to use that same piece for this Boss Battle is very genius and unique. This tells the player, the same way it did at the beginning of the game, that the game is coming to an end. In this case, the music still works and helps give the battle the idea of you controlling and seeing a cartoon, but at the same time, it communicates, in a subliminal way, the message that the game is near its end, making this a very interesting, unique and wonderful choice.

Finally, we have the music for The Devil himself. Both the music that sounds during his Boss Battles, as well as the ones we hear during the previous and post-battle cuteness (or just the cut scene if you choose the BAD ending) are just Dark and heavy tunes. The music of the previous cutscene *Chief Evil Office* uses long notes and closed up 4way chord harmonizations to generate tension before the player chooses to fight or not The Devil. If the Player Choose not to fight, the music they shift to a sad tune, *The End*, played in piano and with marching drums in the back while the visuals show a demo version of Cuphead and Mugman. If the player chooses to fight The Devil, the chords and long note resolve to a major chord and the Battle begins. The Music for this battle is an up-beat Swing that adapts well to the sensation and feeling of being in the last fight of the game. Also, the music for this battle is divided in two. The first part is named *Admission to Perdition* and right after the end of the first face animation and a short musical cue, *One Hell of a Time* starts to play letting the second, third and fourth face of the battle to continue. Both songs are upbeat Swing, but the second song has some musical quotes that are taken from some of the boss battles the player has already encounter giving this second piece a sensation similar to the King Dies Boss Battle music by making you remember some of the encounters you had during your playthrough and giving, musically, a kind of big ending to the whole fight and game.

Lastly after you defeat The Devil, the last cutscene of the game plays and a marching song, *Winner Takes All*, start to play, a very happy and kind of Dixieland tune that helps end the game, and right after that cutscene finishes, the credits start to roll and a piece called *Closing Credits* start to play. This *Closing Credit* theme is a Ballad Swing that tells the story of Cuphead (in a very summarized way) in its lyrics. Also, the song as itself gives the sensation of a cartoon ending or a concert finishing; it has that feeling that tells you that this is over and done.

There is one last cliffhanger at the end with the singer telling us there might be more to come, and we hope that's true because this game and it's music is awesome. (If you leave the track *Closing Credits* to continue to the end of the seven (7) minutes, right at the end you can hear the last fragment, a Free Jazz small piece that kinds of resembles the twisted mind of The Devil and Hell).

Bonus Music

The Tutorial, the Cutscenes, *Elder Kettle* (and *Elder Kettle piano* version), *Victory Tune*, *High Score Tune*, *The Mausoleum*, *A Quick Break*, *Porkrind's Shop*, *All Bets Are Off* (Die House Instrumental) and the piano arrangements of the Inkwell Isles, are all additional music that we can hear in the game but are not as frequently heard as the rest of the music in the game, and play a more secondary role. *The Tutorial* music is used in the tutorial and also appear in one of the cutscenes. The *Elder Kettle* is the music that describes the guardian of Cuphead and Mugman, as it only sounds at the Elder Kettle's house. The *Victory Tune* and the *High Score Tune* sound at the end of each battle showing the score you got for defeating the boss. *The Mausoleum* track plays during the mausoleum levels and has a goofy and spooky old cartoonish style that is lovable. *A Quick Break* is a track that the barbershop quartet sings after you help them find their fourth lost member. *Pork rinds Shop* music sound during your visit to the shop and is an old piano tune that plays a kind of ragtime tune. Finally, *All Bets are Off* plays during the transition to the third isle cutscene and is the *Die House* theme without lyrics. The piano versions of the Inkwell Isles are part of the OST but does not appear in the game.

Conclusion

The music from Cuphead is marvelous and all the work that went into recreating the sound of the cartoons of the 30' is amazing. Maddigan was the right composer for this OST and the brothers, based on the final product, did know this; as well as the Big Band Orchestra and guest musicians that played the music, and Canterbury Music Company. Toronto, Canada that recorded and mixed it. The music, as already said, works because it accomplishes to mirror the music that was used on the cartoons that influence the game, and its decade, helping resembles the idea of playing and seeing a cartoon instead of a video game. This soundtrack also brings new types of approaches that other video games should take into account to create their OST, and definitely, Cuphead wouldn't be the same without its music.

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