GAMER

Percussion & Electronics

LUKE CARLSON MUSIC

Gamer

Percussion & Electronics

(2023)

Duration: c. 38–40 minutes

Commissioned by Diego Alfonso

Dedicated to Diego Alfonso

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PROGRAM NOTES

The primary source of inspiration for *Gamer's* structure and form is the archetypal narrative of a classic role-playing video game. The story spans seven acts, but the musical action is continuous. The narrative, intentionally nostalgic, follows the events of an average gamer transported to a quasi-medieval world where they train, fight battles, encounter mysterious characters, and face formidable foes.

The percussionist presents the musical drama in three ways: acoustic performance with tape music, notated and improvised material with live/interactive electronics, and physical motion/action on stage. The percussionist embodies the performance and brings an equal measure of visual and aural impact to the story.

Synopsis

An average video-gamer is mysteriously transported into a quasi-fantasy role-playing game. The gamer (i.e., percussionist) journeys across various landscapes, discovers instruments (i.e., weapons), trains with an electronic tutor, engages in battle, dialogues with a mysterious bird, and challenges a menacing dragon. With each encounter and experience, the gamer grows in strength and skill, eventually triumphing over every challenge and basking in epic victory.

Act I: Novice

On a rainy Saturday morning, a video-gamer turns on their system to play a favorite game—but something is wrong. The system malfunctions and transports the gamer into the machine. The gamer explores the new surroundings, discovers new instruments, and excitedly plays with the retro theme music.

Act II: Training

Suddenly, the music stops. The gamer is confused and frustrated. But gradually, new sounds emerge, and the gamer improvises alongside the cyclic, arcade-type music. The gamer gains confidence while exploring new grooves and rhythms.

After a while, the electronics insist on intensive training. The gamer mimics the gestures with focus and precision. The gamer is then surprised by a loud noise which hints at approaching danger. The tension builds until…

Act III: Mini-Boss

A formidable opponent appears and engages the gamer in battle. After exchanging jabs, the gamer delivers a powerful blow—the enemy falls with a crash.

Act IV: The Journey

Victorious but exhausted after the battle, the gamer sits to rest. The gentle breeze and sounds of nature are punctuated by sounds from a mysterious electronic bird that descends from the sky. It opens a dialogue, conversing with the gamer through music. The bird explains that a fierce dragon in a nearby cave must be defeated. The gamer agrees to help and follows the bird as it flies toward the dragon's lair.

Act V: The Cave

The gamer arrives at the dark, mysterious cave then cautiously explores the rocks and echoing surfaces with quiet improvisation. The gamer finds a sword and sharpens it on a nearby rock. A distant growl freezes the gamer with fear. As the gamer continues to sharpen the blade, the growls become more and more prominent until…

Act VI: End-Boss

A massive dragon suddenly appears and attacks. The gamer dodges the attack and fights back with fierce intensity. As the battle progresses, the dragon makes a series of charges. The gamer deflects each blow with a well-placed shield. However, the dragon eventually unleashes its most fierce attack, knocking the gamer to the floor. The wound is mortal—the gamer swoons…

As the gamer lies motionless, the mysterious bird returns, descending from above. The bird's singing revives the gamer, who slowly rises. The gamer, with newfound strength, reengages in battle with the dragon. The gamer eventually lands a significant blow—the dragon's heart starts pounding, and its breathing becomes labored. The dragon becomes weaker and weaker, then collapses as if dead. As the relieved gamer walks away, the dragon rises and attacks again. The gamer retaliates by pouring every ounce of energy into an ultimate attack. With a tremendous growl the beast collapses—dead.

Act VII: Postlude

The gamer exits the dark, damp cave by climbing into the bright, green landscape. The gamer, now a hero, struts with confidence and happiness. The bird returns and joins in the celebration. As the music swells to a climax, the gamer is suddenly transported out of the game. Confused and disoriented, the gamer looks around cautiously. The gamer notices a buzzing sound and slowly approaches the game console. Then, with a sense of wonder, bewilderment, and wistful contemplation, the gamer turns the game off.

TECHNICAL NOTES

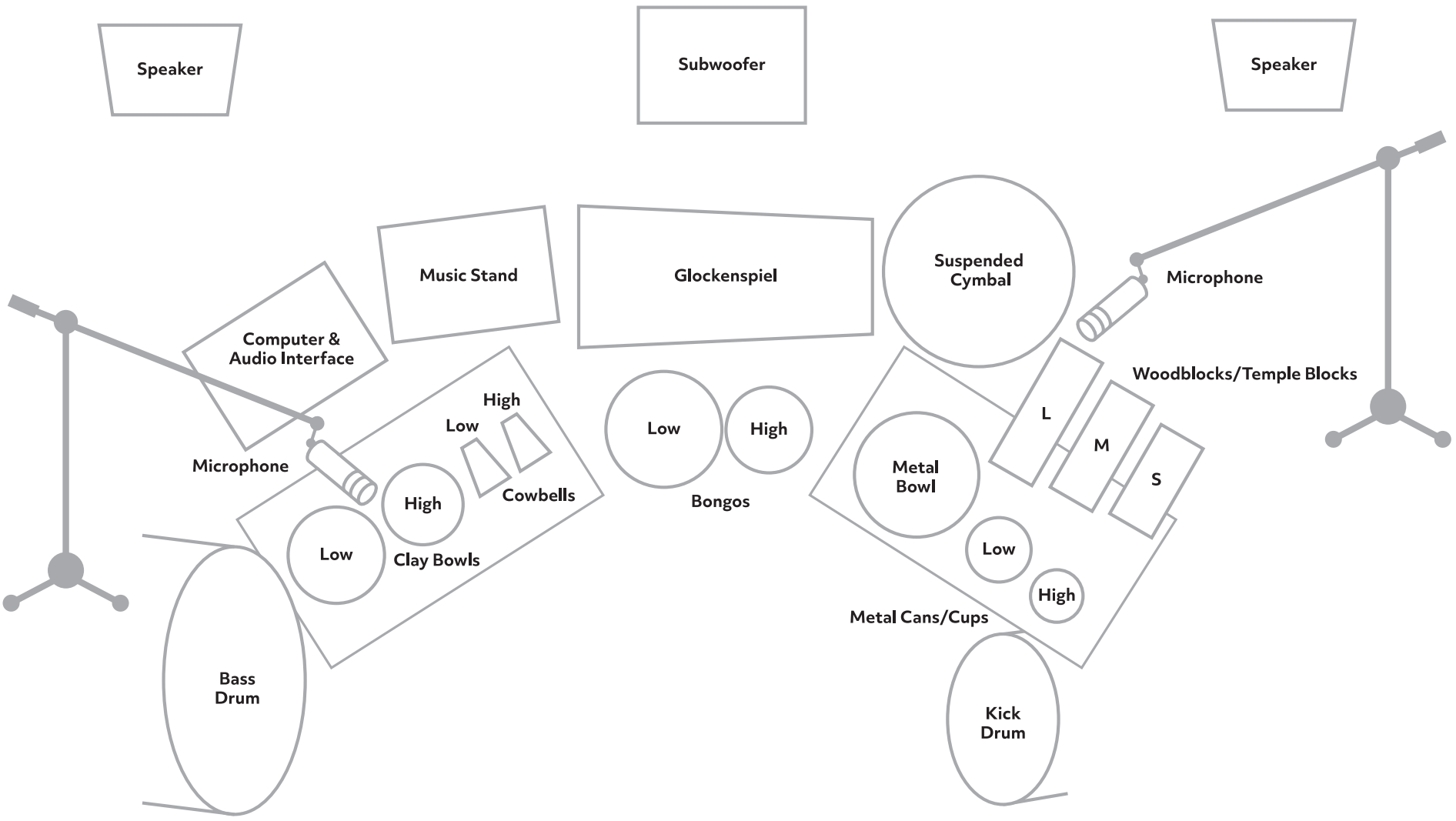
The following are required for the performance:

1. A computer with an audio interface. If using the optional click track for in-ear monitors, an audio interface with a 3-4 channel output is required. Connect the microphones to inputs 1-2, the speakers to ouputs 1-2, and the monitors to outputs 3-4. A mixer may also be used in tandem with the audio interface to connect the speakers and monitors to the computer.
2. Max/Msp Patch (available from the composer: www.LukeCarlsonMusic.com)
3. Max/Msp Runtime (available for free from: www.Cycling74.com)
4. Two microphones on stands (Sure SM57 Dynamic Mics are recommended)
5. Two loudspeakers and one subwoofer

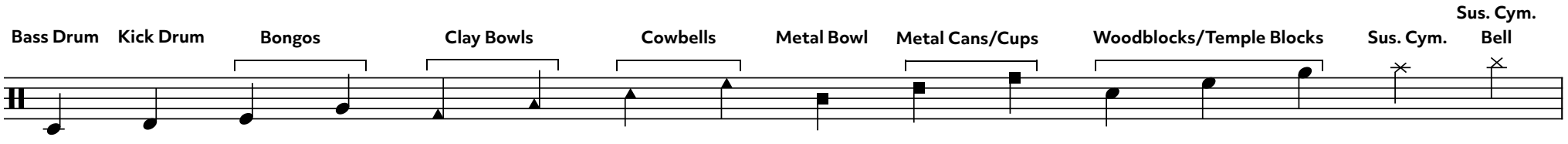
The speakers and subwoofer should be placed in front of the percussion setup pointing toward the audience, away from the microphones. The distance and layout may need to be adjusted for optimum performance and avoidance of feedback from the mics. One microphone should be placed directly above the clay bowls. The other mic should be placed near the wood blocks, metal bowl, and metal cans/cups.

The percussion setup below is a recommendation. The performer is encouraged to adjust as necessary for ease of accessibility and playability. As indicated in the score, a few instruments should be strategically placed on the stage prior to the performance so that they can be “discovered” in due course. Allow enough space between the percussion setup and the speakers for the performer to execute the actions described in the script.

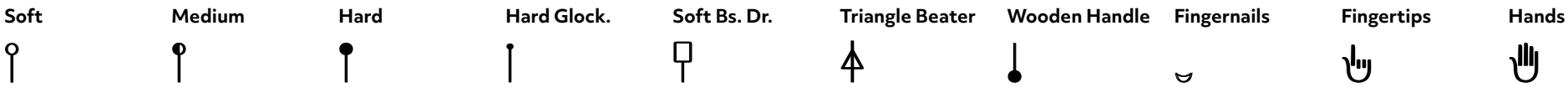
STAGE SETUP



PERCUSSION KEY



MALLETS & PERFORMANCE TECHNIQUES



*Mallet specifications in the score are only suggestions. The performer is encouraged to choose materials (e.g., plastic, rubber, yarn, etc.) that best suit the musical material and overall balance with the electronics and performance space.

SCRIPT

SYNOPSIS

An average video-gamer is mysteriously transported into a quasi-fantasy role-playing game. The gamer (i.e., percussionist) journeys across various landscapes, discovers instruments (i.e., weapons), trains with an electronic tutor, engages in battle, dialogues with a mysterious bird, and challenges a menacing dragon. With each encounter and experience, the gamer grows in strength and skill, eventually triumphing over every challenge and basking in epic victory.

ACT I: NOVICE

Cues [1–2] set the patch audio.

BARS [3] Plays the sound file for Act I.

1–13 Entrance

Enter the stage as a typical video-gamer. Turn on the system and move through the game menu. The game malfunctions and button presses produce error sounds. You mash the buttons in frustration to no avail then give up on the game, switch the machine off, and walk away.

15–30 8-bit hero theme/metal bowl

A beam of light radiates from the game system. As you turn to investigate, you're suddenly transported into the game's opening sequence. You look around in wonder at the fantastic surroundings. You notice a metal bowl on the ground. You pick it up, investigate it, and place it on your head as if it were a helmet and you were a some kind of heroic knight. You strut around stage confidently, bopping in time to the music.

31–48 First electronic interruption

The "hero" theme is interrupted by a flurry of electronic sounds. You freeze at the sonic explosion and slowly lift the bowl from your head. You look inside the bowl with wonder, gradually realizing it is no ordinary item. The electronics produce a metallic sound and you imitate with a single strike on the bowl. The live electronics produce an echo effect.

[4] Rising echo effect.
[5] Turns echo effect off.

49–52 Second electronic interruption

The mood is broken by the abrupt reentry of the "hero" theme. You set the bowl down and start to return to your strutting as though awakened from a dream. You notice a woodblock and touch it exactly in time with the start of the electronic woodblock sound in m. 55.

53–62 Woodblock

As before, you imitate the electronics by striking the blocks, producing an echo effect similar to the electronics.

[6] Echo effect.
[7] Turns the echo effect off.

63–73 Third electronic interruption

The mood is broken again by the electronic outburst. You imitate the wavy electronic sound by scraping the side of the large clay bowl with a metal mallet.

[8] Reverb effect.

74–88 Return of the 8-bit theme

As the music fades in, you stop playing the clay bowl. Invigorated by the music, you play in time as notated and also "air-play" some of the electronic rhythms.

[9] Turns the reverb effect off.

ACT II: TRAINING

1 Electronics stop

While playing in time with the electronics, the sounds suddenly drop out. Confused, you look around, wondering why the sounds stopped. You assume the sounds will return and play the next figure confidently, but when the sounds don't return, you look puzzled. You try even harder, aggressively playing the rhythms, but the electronics do not return. Frustrated, you smack the instrument, expecting nothing to happen. However, to your surprise, the interactive electronics return.

[10] Sets the patch to react to the subsequent attack. Cue 11 is triggered automatically by detecting sound—*avoid making any noise other than the bongo strike.*
[11] Rising echo effect. *Wait for the sound to completely fade away before striking the next note.*
[12] Rising echo effect. *Wait for the sound to completely fade away before striking the next note.*

2–3 Electronic cypher

The electronics pick up your strike in m. 2 and repeat it as indicated in the score. You look around, wondering where the sounds are coming from.

[13] Records and repeats the single strike.

4–78 Improvisation

Improvise freely using all the available instruments. The electronics gradually shift from manipulations of the single percussion strike to purely synthesized sounds. This section of "soft training" is meant to be free, fun, and somewhat relaxed. The electronics are meant to recall the classic tracker video game music of the early 90s.

[14] Initiates a sequence of sound files that are each looped a specific number of times. From mm. 4–17, the bongo strike (captured by cue 13) undergoes several rhythmic manipulations. In m. 18, the bongo figure fades away as the synthesized sounds continue.

79–122 Intensive training

After the improvisation, the electronics begin a more structured training regime. You imitate the rhythms and gestures with precision and exuberance.

[15] Plays the sound file for Act II, m. 79–Act III.

123–136 Approaching enemy

Ominous sounds signal an approaching enemy. You stop playing and put down your mallets. You look around in fear, crouching behind instruments to hide from the approaching menace. The enemy suddenly appears and charges at you.

ACT III: MINI-BOSS

1–69 Battle

You fight the enemy with various weapons (instruments). You deliver the deathblow with the bass drum in m. 68. The mini-boss collapses in a heap.

ACT IV: THE JOURNEY

[16] Plays the sound file for Act IV.

1–8 Victory and rest

Exhausted after the battle, you sit down on stage in front of the percussion instruments and lean back as if against a tree. The warble of birds and gentle breeze lull you to sleep.

9–14 The messenger

While you rest, a mysterious bird descends from the sky, chirping what seems to be an important message. You slowly rise, trying to understand what the bird is saying.

15–20 The conversation

You dialogue with the bird, playing the glockenspiel as though it can communicate in bird language.

[17] Adds reverb, harmonization, and ringmodulator effects.
[18] Turns off harmonizer and ringmodulator. Reverb stays on.
[19] Turns on harmonizer and ringmodulator.

21–29 Plea for help

The bird explains that a fierce dragon is lurking in a cave and that your help is needed to find and slay the beast. You respond affirmitavely to the bird's request by playing more intensely.

[20] Ringmodulator sweep effect.

30–31 Departure

The bird flies off quickly in the direction of the cave. You follow the bird by walking across the stage, there, you encounter the entrance to the ominous cave.

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ACT V: THE CAVE

[21] Plays the sound file for Act V, mm. 1–28.

1–19 Walking in the dark

You cautiously enter the cavern, then work your way through the dark and damp corridors.

20–28 The rock

You notice a rock (i.e., clay bowl) and strike it with a metal mallet which produces a cavernous echo.

[22] Turns on reverb.

29–35 Improvisation

The fixed electronics fade away. You begin experimenting with the echoing acoustics, tapping the instruments with your fingers and hands. You improvise freely, using the notated gestures as inspiration.

36–43 Effects

You continue improvising during a sequence of interactive effects.

[23] Bitcrusher distortion effect.
[24] A five second clip is recorded then played back in reverse. *Recording loud and rhythmically active attacks works well.*
[25] Slides down the pitch of the reverse recording.
[26] Fades out the bitcrusher and reversed recording.
[27] Glitch chorus effect that mimics sloshing water.
[28] Reverse recording again, same as before.
[29] Slides down the pitch of the reverse recording.
[30] Fades out the reverse recording.
[31] Fades out the glitch chorus.
[32] Fades out the reverb and plays the sound file for m. 44–Act VII.

44–67 The sword

You fade out your improvisation as the sound file enters. Soon after, you notice a "sword" (i.e., triangle beater or other appropriate object) on the ground. You pick it up and inspect it closely. You test the blade by scraping it on a rock (i.e., clay bowl) which produces a reverberant echo (m. 58).

[33] Adds reverb.

You test the "sword" by striking nearby rocks (i.e., clay bowl). The strikes echo in the cave.

[34] Adds delay and reverb.
[35] Turns off the delay.

67–74 The growl

You hear a distant rumble and freeze in place with fear (m. 68). You hear a second, more intense rumble and realize it is a growl from an immense beast. You begin looking around for the source.

75–92 Sharpening the sword

You gather yourself and slowly move toward the dragon's lair. You decide to sharpen your sword on a nearby "stone" (m. 79). The sound reverberates throughout the cave. You periodically inspect the edge with your finger. After working for a while, you admire your sharpened blade (m. 92).

[36] Adds reverb.
[37] Turns off reverb.

93–101 The dragon's footsteps

Suddenly, you hear the sound of approaching footsteps, distant but thunderous and ominously heavy. The footsteps get nearer and louder. The final grouping of steps are nearer still and the dragon appears with a fierce and horrific growl.

ACT VI: END-BOSS

1–4 The dragon charges

The dragon charges and takes a swing at you. Dodge the attack and prepare to fight back.

5–49 Battle ensues

You trade blows with the beast, dodging, jabbing, and attacking ferociously.

50–57 Fire breath

The dragon rises up, spreads his wings, then comes crashing down in front of you while breathing fire (m. 53). The impact knocks you backward.

58–65 The battle intensifies

You shield your face from the fiery blast of the dragon's breath (mm. 56–57) and quickly make your way to the bass drum to deliver heavy blows (mm. 58–61). The dragon retreats a small distance to gather itself (mm. 62–64).

66–76 The dragon attacks

The dragon rushes toward you and delivers a deadly swipe with its arm. You protect yourself by picking up a "shield" (i.e., suspended cymbal) and raise your arm to cover your face. You defend against the dragon's attack by hitting the suspended cymbal (m. 68). After the impact, you scamper for cover behind the instruments.

77–83 The dragon attacks again

The dragon rushes you again and delivers another powerful attack. You shield yourself then scamper for cover.

84–92 The decisive blow

You shield and counter-attack the dragon's third attempt, but this time, you're severely stunned and stagger in pain.

93–96 Swoon

As you stagger, the dragon attacks yet again; the incredible impact knocks you to the floor. You drop your weapons (mallets) and smack the shield (cymbal) on the floor. Feebly, you raise your arm in defiance but then swoon; your arm drops to the floor and you lie there, as if dead.

97–106 The return of the bird

Time seems to stand still. The atmosphere changes and the bird appears inside the cave, beaming light as it descends on your lifeless body. The bird imparts energy to you and your eyes open (m. 100). The bird vanishes and you begin to slowly rise (m. 101). As the music builds, so does your strength. Flex your arms with new-found vigor.

107–138 The battle commences

You freeze with the sudden silence then launch into epic battle once again.

137–141 Fire breath

Like before, the dragon rises up, spreads its wings, then comes crashing down in front of you while breathing fire (m. 137).

142–144 The battle intensifies

You shield your face from the fiery blast of the dragon's breath (mm. 140–141) and quickly make your way to the bass drum to deliver heavy blows (mm. 142–144).

145–150 The dragon is injured

You deliver a series of deadly attacks (cymbal rolls) and severly wound the dragon.

150–181 The dragon staggers

The dragon staggers about in pain and its breathing becomes labored. It slumps lower and lower to the ground, its heartbeat slows. Every so often you jab and scrape at the dragon. It exhales in pain at each attack.

[38] Turns on reverb.
[39] Turns on echo effect.
[40] Fades out the reverb and echo.

182–184 The dragon collapses

The dragon falls to the ground and lies motionless, as if dead. You begin walking away, assuming it's dead.

185–202 The final attack

With a guttural roar, the dragon raises up. You slowly turn around to face the beast. You attack with an incredible swell in the suspended cymbal, mortally wounding the dragon (mm. 192–201). The dragon recoils from the pain, staggers backward, and collapses with a mighty bellow—dead.

ACT VII: POSTLUDE

1–6 Victory & escape

[41] Plays the sound file for Act VII.

You slowly exit the dank, dark cave by climbing up into a bright, green landscape. The warm sun soothes and calms your battered body.

7–21 Return of the hero theme

The theme and your aevian guide return. Encouraged and emboldened, you joyfully play with the electronics.

22–45 Transport home

As you continue playing, the music becomes more and more exciting. You play with great exuberance and happiness until you're suddenly transported from the game world (m. 44).

47–55 Game over

The music stops. You hear a faint buzzing and look around. You realize you're back home. Suddenly, you hear the sound of the game console. You cautiously walk over to it and then turn the game off.

THE END

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