

Can We Dance? Considering the role and meaning of music in videogames through "thinking in movement"

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Disciplinary background A. Ludomusicology. Videogame music is typically experienced as embedded in the game and activity of gaming. However, the research on videogame music, or ludomusicology, has mostly adopted approaches from traditional musicology, treating music fundamentally as a text with certain function and meaning in accordance with the narrative and mechanics of the game (e.g., Summers, 2016). While the interactive and crossmodal nature of game music has also been acknowledged (e.g., Collins, 2013) there is still a need for theoretical perspectives to account for the integration of game and its music in the experience.

Disciplinary background B. Human-computer interaction (HCI). In the field of HCI a crucial concern has been the development of approaches that take into account the bodily engagement involved in the interaction with technology. One proposal is the choreography-based approach to interaction, which foregrounds the dynamics of the movement as the source of meaning and the way our actions are organized by technologies (Parviainen et al., 2013).

Abstract

The aim of this presentation is to provide a theoretical analysis of the gameplay experience following the choreography-based approach outlined within HCI and to consider the role and meaningfulness of videogame music in accordance with this perspective of gaming as dancelike participation in the game.

Videogame music describes a category of music in which music is not the sole focus of attention but rather embedded into a particular context of game and activity of gaming. With respect to this embeddedness, an important question is how to investigate videogame music in a manner that approaches the experience of videogame music as inherently entwined with the gameplay. We suggest that one problem is a lack of overarching perspective that taps into the common ontological framework underlying both music and games.

In this paper, we aim to provide such a common framework by considering music and gameplay fundamentally as activities. We begin by framing the gameplay through the metaphor of dance (see Kirkpatrick, 2011) and applying the choreographic-based approach to interaction in order to analyze the implications of such reframing. This movement-oriented view presents a third option for thinking the pleasure and meaning of videogames alongside the traditional rule-oriented (ludological) and story-oriented (narratological) views: the gameplay is seen as being about rhythms, embodied action and being involved in choreography set and regulated by the game. We then move on to consider how this perspective of technologically co-constituted choreographies frames the role and meaning of videogame music, suggesting that music is not merely accompanying the gameplay but rather an integral part of the choreography of the participation in the game, which is made meaningful, in a manner of "thinking in movement", through bodily capabilities for sense-making.

To further the analysis, we utilize perspectives and conceptual tools from HCI to understand the experiential dynamics of interaction with both music and games. Following the choreography-based approach, we discuss phenomenological theories highlighting the primacy of movement for human

understanding (e.g., Sheet-Johnstone, 1999) as well as the distinction between objective space and experienced lived space. As more specific conceptual tools, we consider the concept of vitality affects (Stern, 2010), that aims to approach the “liveness” inherent in the movement qualities, and the idea of different levels of movements ranging from most miniscule touches of Micro-level to more large-scale systems of movement on Macro-level (Parviainen et al., 2013). The discussion is also related to the research paradigms within both music (e.g., Leman, 2008) and game research (e.g., Collins, 2013) that consider the embodiment and activity as the ground for meaningfulness.

Interdisciplinary implications. While our main goal is to present the choreography-based approach as a way to investigate videogame music we see it as an equally applicable framework for considering music more generally. Due to its focus on inherent meaningfulness of bodily movement, this perspective could be especially relevant for those interested in considering music in terms of embodied interaction. Moreover, as videogame music may be taken as an example of everyday musicking, the presentation points towards a perspective on music as necessarily contextual activity. Finally, the proposed way of focusing on choreographies and movement qualities of interaction may be helpful in unveiling the experiential similarities between different kinds of media.

References

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