Musicking with Digital Games

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ABSTRACT

This paper applies the concept of "musicking", introduced by musicologist Christopher Small, to the analysis of digital games. According to Small, "music" should not be considered as a noun, but rather as a verb: "to music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (composing), or by dancing" (Small, 1998, p. 9).

If that is the case, what constitutes "to music" in digital games?

This paper provides an answer to this question, situating it within musicology and game studies. Digital games are considered for their cybernetic qualities (Aarseth & Calleja, 2015) as objects that can be traversed and reconfigured by means of ergodic effort (Aarseth, 1997). The intersection of ergodic effort and musicking practices manifested in digital games generates a new musicking form: *ergodic musicking*. Ergodic musicking is identified as a modern form of musicking, capable of deconstructing established musical roles such as composing, improvising, or dancing. Ergodic musicking, however, is not just a mixture of previous forms: it is instead a unique musicking, only available to digital games. Thanks to their cybernetic qualities, digital games have provided music with an unprecedented platform, actualizing a new form of musical participation.

Ergodic musicking is defined as a form of ergodic effort, in which the non-trivial act of traversing the media text involves degrees of musical participation. At the same time, ergodic musicking is also a form of musicking, in which participation in a musical performance involves the exertion of ergodic efforts.

Musicking is debated as a new paradigm for musicological enquire of digital games, challenging critical perspectives that have predominantly considered "music" as compositions included in digital games. For example, Whalen states: "by "videogame music" I generally mean the parts of the soundtrack that are pre-composed and recorded for playback to accompany specific locations or events in the game" (2004). Also, other resources have also focused on the dynamic or adaptive characteristics of such compositions (Collins, 2007; Kaae, 2008). While it is certainly relevant to focus on the aforementioned topics, this paper will argue that this perspective is not neutral, but rather it is a specific way to analytically structure the relationship between digital games and music.

As such, this paper aims to re-center musicological studies of digital games, arguing that the subject matter of the musicology of digital games is to be understood as the study of musical forms of participation in digital games.

Examples of ergodic musicking are considered in relation to game examples that are ostensibly musical, such as *Guitar Hero* (Harmonix/RedOctane, 2005) or *Rock Band* (Harmonix, 2007). Performances with these games have previously been considered as "schizophonic performances […], as players become live performers of pre-recorded songs" (Miller, 2012, p. 15). This paper, instead, will focus on ergodic musicking and aspects related to simulation, as the examples "clearly remediate a "real" world activity" (Apperley, 2006).

By contrast, these examples are then compared with musical games that do not remediate known musical situations, like *Thumper* (Drool, 2016) or *Tetris Effect* (Enhance, Inc., 2018). In these cases, the ergodic musicking performed explores different musicalities, which do not necessarily simulate previous musicking forms. In all these examples, however, ergodic musicking is in effect, since traversing these media involves degrees of participation to a musical situation.

Ergodic musicking is presented as a modality also available in digital games that feature sparse and occasional musical content, detailing an "experimental" modality drawn from theories of indeterminate musical compositions (Khan, 1999; Gottschalk, 2016). Finally, ergodic musicking is situated within the larger frame of transmusicking (Borgo, 2007; 2013), a grouping of contemporary musicking forms mediated by digital and networked technologies that are destabilizing previously established conventions and expectations.

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