At the Push of a Button: Player/Avatar Fusion and the 'Gestural Potential' of Video Game Music

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ABSTRACT

Videogame music engages players, summoning us into the magical, virtual world it soundscapes, encouraging us to adhere to the ludic parameters at play. In this paper, I outline a new gestural analytical framework better suited to the playful audiovisual individualities of videogame design in order to reveal how players might become immersed in games and their virtual playgrounds.

I will present a new analytical theory, graphically mapping gestures so as to determine the ways in which videogame music can successfully engage players to feel part of the ludo-narrative journey through a concept I term the 'gestural potential' of music. This paper presents a remapped recontextulisation of musical gesture theories presented by Robert Hatten (2004; 2018) in combination with a further fusion of scholarship, synthesising concepts from film and media studies, dance pedagogy and art research that have, so far, been marked by their limited contact. By exploring ideas of design (Isbister, 2017; Bódi, 2023), culture (Kassabian, 2013), and analysis (Summers, 2016; Middleton, 1993), we can identify how best to examine videogame music to reveal how players engage with games.

Music is as much a visual-kinetic art form, a vessel for the translation of spatial and virtual shape into sound, as it is a purely aural one. Musical shaping—be that through phrases and the rise and fall of melodies for example—is analogous to the gestures of humans and those we find in our interactions with the virtual avatars we can embody in videogames. Prior theories of musical gesture pose problems in the context of game music. Firstly, the idea of the listener as recipient is problematic. Video game players are multiple things: listeners but also performers with agency over game play as they move within the virtual land- and soundscape. Players are creators of a sort, and a remapping of musical gesture would need to take this into account and consider the role of the player at the heart of such a framework.

Secondly, not all players play in the same way. Players, as humans, are not the same, each bringing their own biographical individualities to the games we play, just as we bring them to the music we listen to. Significantly, this analysis will highlight a framework for visualising individual player movement and audiovisual gesture. Graphs and gestural shapings will illuminate a method of understanding the way a

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player moves within the game in relation to audiovisual stimuli and cues. The framework presented has the possibility for expressing individualism and yet conversely collective experience as we engage with game music in a visual kinetic manner, just as we do an audio one.

The focus of this paper will address a vital aspect of video game culture, namely how music can involve players on a deeper level, leading to their extended engagement in a game's virtual playground. The application of this theory can be extended to genres including MMOs, thus presenting an exciting potential use for analysing extended player immersion. In a post-Covid world, where player engagement experienced a surge in numbers (Barr & Copeland-Stewart, 2022) understanding the ways in which we can become absorbed in game playgrounds we perform within through a new analysis of musical gesture is contemporarily apt.

By analysing the juxtapositional ludomusical content of the videogames Super Mario World (Nintendo, 1990) and Super Metroid (Nintendo, 1994) side by side, this paper reveals how musical gestures can immerse players in disparate game worlds, leading to an audiovisual phenomenon I term 'ludomusical cocooning.' When a player is tuned into the musical gestures and gestural potential of the music whilst also feeling embodied through the tactility of the game controls in combination with the virtual self-expression they experience, players move towards new levels of immersion. We can argue players become cocooned in the virtual playgrounds they perform within. Both the aforementioned 2D side-scrolling platform games, released on the Super Nintendo Entertainment System, present a curious example of diverse game feel and experience due to both game design implementations and unique musical gestures. The mechanics of games, when combined with their aural dimension, feed into the concrete gestural tactility all players engage with. By combining analysis of tactile inputs, player performances and musical gestures, the analysis explored will reveal how we move within and can be moved by the games we play.

This research presents a new analytical form and potential model for game analysis in the performative context which engages with players, playfulness, and the audiovisual virtual playgrounds they inhabit and explore. In a rapidly altering world, in which primarily audiovisual technologies of virtual entertainment and escape are

competing for our attention, this paper's analysis of how that very attention can be grasped is a timely one.

Keywords

Ludomusicology, music, gesture, playfulness, play, engagement, immersion

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