

Silent In-game Concerts: Text-Based Musical Performances in MUDs

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ABSTRACT

In 2020, popular rapper Travis Scott's Fortnite in-game concert attracted (according to data provided by Epic Games) 12 million simultaneous players, gathering widespread attention from both gaming and music specialized media as well as fans (Brown, 2020). As this event happened during the Covid-19 pandemic, a time in which online forms of sociability were being put in the spotlight, there was a perception that music concerts placed inside gaming worlds were a brand-new development. This paper intends to argue that in-game concerts are a frequent and spontaneous form of musical self-expression from gamers, and that their origin can be traced to the first online gaming experiences: MUDs (Multi-user Dungeons). This affirmation is based on literature review and data collected by the author between 2023 and 2024 through semi-structured interviews conducted over Discord with one former gamer of MUDs (Druidfire, she/her, USA) and one game developer (Axxa, he/him, Finland) of *BatMUD* (Balance Alternative Techniques, 1990); as well as e-mail correspondence with Richard Bartle, co-creator of *MUD1* (Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle, 1978); and *BatMUD*'s gaming records dating from 2001 provided by Axxa.

I start from the assumption defended by Grimshaw and Garner (2015, p. 31) that "the thinking of sounds, the imagining of sounds, and all forms of what are typically described as auditory illusions or hallucinations are in themselves sound". My attempt to put forward this exercise is also inspired by the writings of Nicholas Cook (2021) and Carolyn Abbate (1991), when they acknowledge the role of music as text in performance; as well as the developments of Blake and Van Elferen (2015, p. 65) on Actor-Network-Theory (2005), as they state that "In the case of a technomusical network, these actors are human and non-human as in any ANT network, but also musical and non-musical". Focusing on the materiality of these musical social experiences anchored in online gaming worlds will allow me to shine new light on how they develop, and which inspiration and cultural references are being activated by the choices encompassing play styles.

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I place at the center of my inquiry the structures of virtual worlds and their history¹. These online spaces, which accompanied the development of the internet itself, have provided the infrastructure necessary to host the sociability surrounding games that would eventually expand to include music and songs in its routine. These earlier examples illuminate how technology and games evolved to allow for contemporary digital music performances.

The genealogy of virtual worlds is disputed, and there are many statements in literature regarding which virtual world was the actual first. Out of all of them, it was *MUD1* that inspired today's generation of virtual worlds, which is why Downey (2014) compares it to Ardi, the oldest known human fossil. *MUD1* was initially written by Bartle and Roy Trubshaw while they were students at the University of Essex in England during the autumn of 1978. *MUD1*'s contribution to the history of virtual worlds lies in the fact that it showed players it was possible to coexist in the same digital space, to interact and join efforts toward completing a single task together. The game was so influential that its name came to represent a whole genre of virtual worlds, and MUD itself became known as *MUD1*. As MUDs in general were text-based, there were no possibilities to afford in-game concerts in the way that we understand them today. However, I would argue that text descriptions of music performances in MUDs are the precursors of in-game concerts in online multiplayer digital environments.

This realization came to me during my interview with Druidsfire, a player active in the *Lord of the Rings Online* (Turbine, 2007) music scene who has been playing online games since she started studying at Penn State University in 1990. About her playing practices at the time, she said:

There was a group of people called the Harpers and they were musicians and so we had to role play music in the setting that people couldn't hear, because there was no audio, there was no video for the most part, it was all strictly through text. So you had to write and express your musicality through text form. (...) I was brand new in the game, didn't really know the rules. I was expressing my music as I was playing a song and in my head, I knew what song I was playing, and I was saying which notes I was playing, the actual notes like B minor, C flat or whatever and that's not what they were looking for. They were looking for something that's more like reading a story in a book. They don't really care what note you're playing, they're trying to say: OK, so and so plays a plaintive chord on their guitar or is playing a doleful beat on their drum or something like that. So it's less about the nitty gritty of the music and more about the emotion (...) (Druidsfire, interview, 14/09/2023)

Inspired by Druidsfire's testimony, I emailed Richard Bartle to inquire on whether he still had records of similar experiences in the 1970s. He answered:

Bartle [16/11/23]: Well, it definitely happened, sometimes with people taking turns to "sing" each line, sometimes making up lines for comic effect. Sadly, I have no logs of games in which this happened. We did have logs, but they were ephemeral. Basically, if we didn't print them off on paper, they were deleted after a while for taking up too much space. [...] This did happen in game worlds. It wasn't formal, like it sometimes was in social worlds, but more of an impromptu event. Someone would shout out a song lyric, then either they or someone else would follow it up with the next line, and so on.

As these testimonies suggest, musical performances in online gaming worlds were present since their very inception. This paper traces the associations between text-based virtual gaming worlds and their possibilities for digital performance (Dixon, 2007), tracking platforms, gamers and game mechanics as actors and actants that shape the materialities of early in-game concerts. Even in the absence of sound, online gaming worlds provided space for musical digital performance that at times became an intrinsic part of the gameplay itself.

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ENDNOTES

¹ For a comprehensive history of virtual worlds and MUD's, see Aarseth (1997); Bartle (2010); Consalvo (2011); Crawford et. Al. (2011); Downey (2014); Taylor (2006).