

# Identifying musical situations in digital games

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This paper aims to offer a theoretical tool to identify musical situations in digital games. Ethnomusicologist John Blacking posed at the center of his enquiry the “musical situation”, considering his discipline as “an approach to understanding all musics and music-making in the context of performance and of the ideas and skills that composers, performers and listeners bring to what they define as musical situations” (1987, p. 3). The musical situation is identified for its cultural relativity, rather than for its structural components.

Compatibly, digital games determine a variety of musical situations, generated by the plurality of participants active within their musical discourse. Such situations are not limited to games that present an explicitly musical scenario, but are instead found in a much larger number of cases. In order to structure a comprehensive understanding of “musical situations” in digital games, this paper focuses on their cybernetic qualities, identifying four constitutive elements: “the representational (or surface) sign, the mechanical system, the material medium, and the player” (Aarseth & Calleja, 2015). Musical situations will be discussed in relation to these elements, with examples ranging from music games such as *Guitar Hero* (Harmonix, 2005) and *Thumper* (Drool, 2016), to non-music games such as *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo, 1985) and *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo, 2017).

As described by Blacking, “it [is] clear that musical things are not always strictly musical” (1973, p. 25); this understanding will be applied to the ephemeral, non-totalizing musical situations determined by digital games.

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