Otogarden: exploring musical improvisation in digital games

ABSTRACT

Fig. 1 – Otogarden illustration

This paper presents the ludomusicological research associated with the development of a digital game: *Otogarden* (Oliva, 2021). If "making an actual game […] is useful to materialize the design question [or] aesthetic issues […] that are being addressed" (Khaled, Lessard, & Barr, 2018), *Otogarden* is intended as a playable support to research on musical participation with digital games. Specifically, this paper understands digital games as a contemporary venue for technologically augmented musicking (Borgo, 2007; 2013), potentially allowing access to forms of musical improvisation to a variety of users and players.

While digital games afford a remarkable variety of possible musicking (Oliva, 2017; 2019a; 2019b, 2019c), examples related to musical improvisation remain few and underexplored, with most games favoring score-based interactions, as made popular by titles such *Guitar Hero* (Harmonix, 2005) or *Rock Band* (Harmonix, 2007). In similar examples, music is presented as "a task to be achieved, a disciplinary activity in which the player should "play" again and again until the game (and thereby music) is mastered" (Kassabian & Jarman, 2016). Crucially, in these examples "music" is understood as pre-recorded compositions performed with the aid of simplified notation (Biamonte, 2011). Notable exceptions, such as the experimental music game *Electroplankton* (Nintendo, 2005), have been criticized by reviewers specifically for their lack of composition-oriented functionalities (Pilchmair, 2007), indicating an underlying set of expected qualities which constitute a barrier to the emergence of improvisatory musical practices in digital games.

Otogarden challenges this understanding of "music game", by focusing on musical improvisation, "an activity of enormous complexity and sophistication, or the simplest and most direct expression" (Bailey, 1993, p. 83, 84). Players of *Otogarden*

are able to repeat short phrases through the use of a "loop" mechanic, musicalizing potentially extra-musical (Kahn, 1999, p. 103) acoustic juxtapositions. While retaining the "intimate and reactive musical bond" (Grimshaw, Tan, & Lipscomb, 2013) typical of the music game genre, *Otogarden* does not feature canonic game characteristics, such as a winning condition, compatibly with recent understandings of game definitions (Juul, 2019, p. 224). The conclusions show that it is possible to deliberately stimulate the players' perspective (Aarseth & Calleja, 2015) on the game towards an improvisatory musical direction, rendering manifest the extemporaneous musical possibilities connected with digital game engagement (Oliva, 2019c).

Fig.2 – Otogarden screenshot.

Fig. 3 – Otogarden screenshot

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