

Debates in Music – “Are Video Games Musical Instruments?”

In courses like ‘Contemporary Debates in Music’, we develop our understanding of music by discussing some provocative statements or ideas. This year, one of our questions was whether video games can be considered musical instruments.

We use the same word ‘play’ to describe the action of engaging with games as playing instruments. Is this a linguistic anomaly, or is there more going on? We know that both games and instruments are interactive. A game responds to the player’s actions, and that usually means that the player is able to control the music in some way (even if that’s just to a very limited degree).

Obviously, there are ‘music games’ like *Guitar Hero*, where the gameplay is based on the conceit of musical performance. In others like *Ocarina of Time*, playing an instrument in the world of the game is an important aspect of the game’s story and action. But are these explicitly musical moments the only times games can be considered like instruments?

In other games, like many stealth games, music reacts to the player’s actions as they play the game. When players take actions, musical changes occur. So even outside ‘music games’, we could argue that gamers are performers because they cause the arrangement of the musical material during the gameplay. Since the game plays out differently each time, perhaps players are even a little like composers.



Of course, we need to be careful not to over-state the case. Musical interaction in games is normally very restricted. The possibilities are highly confined by the game mechanics. Similarly, playing a game with the purpose of making music is not normally the way players interact with the games – it’s a secondary aspect of ‘winning’ the game. That’s not to say, however, that even winning-focused players don’t listen to the music: After all, music often gives players hints about the action.

The bigger question is ‘What does thinking about music and games together tell us?’ Does it emphasize the

role of interactivity and participation in music, or the significance of fun, reward, and success? What about the idea of playing within particular rules and structures, and even ideas of virtuosity? In any case, even if they are not instruments, perhaps games still provide musical experiences to the billions of people who play them.



Chiptune

Apart from the music written specifically for games, there is a genre of music called 'chiptune', which uses old video game technology as instruments to make new compositions. Either this music uses hacked original hardware and soundchips of old consoles, as in the picture to the right, or it emulates (copies) the sounds using modern synthesizers. We can also find chiptune elements in modern pop like Charli XCX and Drake. Chiptune is more than just a style, it's a community of musicians and modders. Part of the appeal is the sharing of tips and techniques between musicians, as they find new ways to write music for old technology that can be very challenging to use. This community and online culture is an important part of why people continue to make music using old video game technology. Even if we don't agree that video



games are normally musical instruments, we might say that they can be *adapted* into instruments in situations like this. The Nintendo console in the picture has been adapted into a MIDI interface.

Your Turn....

1. 'Video games are musical instruments.' Do you agree? Make a short list of ways in which you agree, and disagree, and then write a couple of paragraphs to explain your conclusion.

2. This cartoon is called 'The Ultimate Combo' It's by an artist called David Soames. What's the joke at hand here? What is being made fun of, and what point(s) do you think the artist is trying to make?

We'll discuss this more in the Contemporary Debates class in the Year 1 at Royal Holloway, but if you'd like to learn more, email your materials to tim.summers@rhul.ac.uk and we can explore the ideas in more depth!

Extension

Watch: *Reformat the Planet* (2008 film about chiptune music, clips on YouTube).

Read: Michael Austin, 'Taking Note of Music Games' from Austin (ed.) *Music Video Games* (Bloomsbury, 2016). [Here](#).

Play: *Chime/Chime Sharp* (free demo); *Crypt of the Necrodancer* (free demo).

Listen: *Video Games Live* (2015).

