

Some Issues in the Creation of Music Online.*

Andrew Hugill

Professor of Music
De Montfort University
The Gateway
Leicester LE1 9BH
U.K.

This paper explores both web and non-web approaches to internet music-making. It puts forward the idea that internet communities can make internet music. It imagines a spiral rhizome, or infinite sound lattice, and analyzes a test case: Symphony for Cornwall (1999). It compares the various forms of musical experience and explores the nature of mediated experience, online identity, internet relationships and internet sound. It also examines MUDs, MOOs, MUSHes and other forms of synchronous or asynchronous online interaction, and suggests some possible models for future internet composition.

Keywords: messageboard, forum, newsgroup, IRC, flamewar, troll, spam, emoticon, MUD, MOO, MUSH, avatar, rhizome

Tuesday, May 01, 2001
Web and Non-Web.

Music on the web these days usually takes the form of a user 'visiting' a site. There are numerous types of site involving music or sound: resources; information and support; education; composition; commercial; broadcasting; audio handling; wired spaces and performers; e-operas, e-symphonies and e-instruments; and many more. The user's experience at these sites is generally fairly passive, mainly focusing upon listening or some kind of shopping. Some more interactive sites have started to appear over recent years, often with a strong game-playing feel, but these are still relatively rare.

Although some of these sites do allow for some limited textual interaction between users, the emphasis on the web tends to be put upon the auditory experience. One of the great things about music, however, is that it is a social activity as well as a sonic experience. The internet has many non-web modes, which might provide a more productive model for future making music. Although these may be hosted on the web, they embody the traditional internet values of discussion and community. Usenet newsgroups, e-lists and forums, message-boards, Internet Relay Chat (IRC) all provide means of social interaction which are peculiar to the net. More self-consciously creative are Multi-User Domains (MUDs) and Object-Orientated Multi-User Domains (MOOs). These originated in role-playing games and so far little has been done with them musically, although the Rocket Network's 'resrocketsurfer' project has made a preliminary attempt.

A hybrid version of these, called a Multi-User Shared Hallucination or MUSH, provides perhaps the best analogy for how netmusic might be. In a MUSH, certain characteristics or principles within the virtual world are accepted in advance by the users. This gives an opportunity to build upon shared previous understanding in a way that might be useful for music-making. The avatars would presumably be sound-forms or sound-objects, and the virtual environment some kind of reverberant space (the MUSH programme could include a simple reverb application). Interaction between sound-forms would follow user-defined laws in much the same way that the Tolkien-esque characters in a typical MUD behave according to pre-defined attributes.

The netmusic made in this MusiMUSH would be shared by all the participants and therefore inherently social. However, taking into account the current technical limitations of the internet, MusiMUSH play would presumably require an acceptance that:

- a. something is missing from the sounds themselves;
- b. the listener's monitoring setup is likely to be variable at best;
- c. an originator has no real control over the way a listener experiences the music;
- d. the structure of the music cannot be fixed.

[Posted by Andrew Hugill at 11:20 AM]

Friday, April 27, 2001

Internet communities make internet music.

Internet communities do not necessarily share geographical location, or cultural inheritance, but rather *a common interest*. The analogy with folk music is perhaps awkward, but the ethnography of the net is defined by ideas and interests rather than race or geography. So, one might have a group of Chinese traditional music enthusiasts, none of whom is Chinese. Indeed, the word 'Chinese' starts to lose its meaning, because the internet conception of China is different to the 3D conception. And what is 'Chinese traditional music' online? Just a shared enthusiasm of this group of people, or their avatars.

People's motives online are generally a mixture of greed and curiosity. If they can get something out of a particular site or group, then they will return. Likewise, if the site has a peculiar or intriguing feature, they

Wednesday, April 04, 2001

A spiral rhizome, or an infinite sound lattice.

Onscreen a graphical representation of a distributed network. Each node is a piece of recordable cyberspace, rendered as a spiral. Users can record anything into these spirals, using the built-in microphones on their machines, or by uploading soundfiles (drag and drop). There is a toolbar, which enables various functions, ranging from 'random play', which wanders along the lattice in a continuous sequence, to 'select play', where the user draws a box around a group of nodes and has them play simultaneously or in a selected order.

What is being created here is a massive database of sounds, which can be searched according to tagged criteria input with the sounds. A user could call up all his/her own sounds, or all those created in New Zealand, or whatever. Perhaps a spectromorphological categorisation could also exist, in which sounds are grouped according to spectrum; pitch; rhythmic content; or any other parameter. A composer might then plunder the lattice for more or less related sounds.

When the user logs on, a click can take them to their last entry, or some free space, or they can configure the database. The interface must be as intuitive as possible, so the programming implementation of this idea is challenging, involving perl scripts, java (presumably), databases, and so on.

The structure of knowledge online is rhizomatic, or non-hierarchical. Whereas a library represents a hierarchical system, since experts have already travelled along all its shelves classifying the information, the internet is not so classified. The search for information and data retrieval does not suggest a superhighway so much as a sea full of fish and flotsam.

Can one transcend the rhizome (asks Simon)? I believe we will one day find a way, but the currently familiar solution of creating ever-grander and more over-designed websites seems to invite a law of diminishing returns. For now, I feel like the two-dimensional inhabitant of Edwin Abbott's classic text 'Flatland' (1888), who can only infer 'Spaceland' and looks forward to the day when he can eventually get there.

[Posted by Andrew Hugill at 8:29 AM]

From an electroacoustic perspective, therefore, the internet presents a vastly unappealing prospect: uncontrollable listening, degraded sound quality, and materials which signify by reference rather than by content. The sampling culture tends to suggest that the internet points to what is missing from its sounds.

On the other hand, the net is a communications technology and offers possibilities that perhaps do not exist elsewhere in electroacoustic music. For example, acoustic ecology presents opportunities to hear places, which may be an interesting area of development online. I already feel I know Vancouver well, for example, without ever having visited the city. I have become an acoustic tourist. Acoustic ecology also presents us with models for human communication which might be relevant on the internet as well as in 3D. These models, especially those which filter 'noise', can perhaps be translated into an internet listening

Thursday, March 08, 2001

The internet in society.

The

Thursday, March 01, 2001

True internet confessions.

I should confess that I am an internet romantic. I met my wife-to-be, Louise, online several years ago, when connecting to the net was rather more of a technical challenge than it is today. I was living on an island at the time, St. George's Island, Looe, off the south Cornish coast, where I was composing a large piece called 'Island Symphony'. In fact, it's not strictly true to say I was composing the piece on the island. Owing to the

7. Emoticons and acronyms

The importance of these apparently childish typographical games in successful internet communication cannot be underestimated. In high-volume text-only communication forums such as Usenet, the lack of verbal and visual cues can otherwise cause what were intended to be humorous, sarcastic, or ironic comments to be badly misinterpreted, resulting in arguments and flame wars. They can make the difference between being understood and all-out warfare. Here is a comparative example, from IRC:

Me: Hi Jim, you've left your brain behind today I see.

Jim: Who the hell are you to call me stupid?

Me: Hi Jim, you've left your brain behind today I see :-)

Jim: <snigger> nope, I just borrowed yours ;-)

An emoticon is literally defined as "an ASCII glyph used to indicate an emotional state in email or news". Hundreds of emoticons have been proposed, but only a few are in common use. Look at these sideways-on to understand the symbology:

:-)

'smiley face' (for humour, laughter, friendliness, occasionally sarcasm)

:-(

,

::)

,

9. Avatar

The word comes from Hindu mythology, where it refers to the incarnation of a god. Among people working on virtual reality and cyberspace interfaces, an avatar is an icon or representation of a user in a shared virtual reality. In roleplaying forums, MUDs and MOOs, the avatar has become a kind of alternative persona, and there are many people online who argue that every internet presence is an avatar in some sense. Indeed it is possible to manufacture an internet persona for oneself even using email alone, and it is not uncommon in offices or on intranets to find people saying things in email which they would never dare say face-to-face. In general, these kinds of avatar tend to be less agreeable than the 3D person, because of their inexperience in online projection.

10. Rhizome

In 'Mille Plateaux' (1980), Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari draw up an imaginary blueprint for a 'rhizome' which opposes 'smooth' and 'striated' space. The internet might be seen as an example of such a rhizome,