

Virtual and Imagined Worlds: The Musical Communities of Interactive Gaming and Their Implications for the Music Classroom

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Abstract:

Today children, youth, and adults are as connected to virtual communities as they are plugged into the “real world”. This in-progress research study has focused on the virtual and imagined musical communities surrounding the gaming phenomena of “Guitar Hero”, an interactive game which allows players to simulate guitar playing and compete against each other in person and online.

In recent years there has been an increase of interest in musical “happenings” that occur outside the school building, both in terms of life long musicianship and in alternative approaches to music making and formal music education. Among these inquiries have been multiple ethnographic studies of communities in the realms of world and popular musics. Despite the ever-increasing popularity of musically related technology games, there has been little-to-no research in music education that explores virtual or imagined musical communities. Similar to the approach taken by Green in the text *How Popular Musicians Learn* (2001) this study examines the virtual community of Guitar Hero in the attempt to answer the following questions:

- (1) What does it mean to be musical in these communities and what is the nature of their individual and collective musicality?
- (2) How similar or dissimilar are these musical communities from those typically encountered in the “real world”?
- (3) Do these gamers view their participation as being “musical” and to what extent do they foster personal and collective musical identities through participation?
- (4) Is it possible or even appropriate to blur the lines between “real world” and “virtual” musical engagement? What are the implications for music education in regards to the possible inclusion of interactive gaming or the approaches of this form of *musicking* in formal music education?

This project has drawn from multiple qualitative forms of inquiry. In order to investigate individual subjects a multiple single-case study approach was implemented. In order to evaluate community beliefs and structure an ethnographic approach was utilized. In order to draw a rich description of these phenomena a combination of this mixed methods approach is present throughout the data analysis and conclusions. Gamers from age seven to adult from the Central PA area and from around the world have been interviewed and observed. The interviews and observations have taken place both in “real life”, in which the researchers were present and engaged in face-to-face interviews and observations, and “virtually”, in which the researchers have observed game play through online *interactives* and interviews were conducted via game text, e-mails and website *blogs*.

The results of this study question what it means to be *musical* and will explore how previous definitions of musical interaction are being challenged by technology. The role

of music in virtual communities may lead to new approaches for music teaching and learning in music education.