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Live music performance in virtual worlds: Six musicians’ experiences

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Introduction

Numerous platforms for the online presentation of music currently exist and many companies seek to capitalise on the opportunities presented by the digitisation of the music industry. These include a vast range of music and video streaming sites with varying degrees of social media capabilities, marketing, and sales functions inbuilt. Examples include YouTube, Spotify, Last.fm, Soundcloud, Grooveshark, Gogoyoko and Myspace. Major record labels and the artists represented by these labels feature prominently on these sites. Online virtual worlds such as Second Life (SL) currently present a less popular means for artists to present their music to a global Internet audience. After a brief flurry of activity in 2006 – 07, major artists and labels have not pursued activities in SL. However, as Rogers (2012) and Gagen (2012) document, the live music performance scene in SL is vibrant, with performances in a range of music genres occurring on a daily basis. This paper seeks to explore the online communities that have emerged around the live SL performance scene by examining the experiences of both performers and audience members from regional and metropolitan areas in Australia who have participated in these performances.

Background

Virtual worlds are computer mediated 3D simulated environments in which users, depicted as avatars, can interact with objects, surroundings and other users. SL is a client based software system with users required to download the free viewer application in order to connect to a server. There are over 200 existing commercially available virtual worlds with SL having 37 million currently registered accounts (KZero, 2013), although these could represent multiple accounts of individual users. A key difference between virtual worlds and other channels of online communication are the distinguishing features identified by Dalgarno and Lee (2010) that they categorise as representational fidelity and learner interaction. These include the user representation (in the form of an avatar), spatial audio, kinaesthetic and tactile force feedback, embodied actions, embodied verbal and non-verbal communication, control of environment and behaviour, and the construction of objects and scripting of objects. Such features are not apparent within other online communication channels such as Facebook, YouTube and such where interactions are largely text based with audio, video and image content presented on screen.
Rogers (2012) describes three basic types of live concerts in SL: 1) music streaming with avatar animation; 2) video streaming; and 3) multi-media. The focus of this paper is on the first type. For the performer, the basic requirements to perform in SL are a computer connected to the Internet and the means to run an audio signal into SL. The most basic means of getting audio into SL is via the chat function, i.e., using an inbuilt microphone or USB microphone to pick up an audio signal and for it to be heard by other users in SL. To gain higher fidelity sound one needs to stream a digital audio signal into SL via a streaming software program such as Broadcast Using This Tool (BUTT) or Nicecast. Users within a certain area in SL then hear the streamed audio although some streams rented in SL may only have the capacity to be heard by a maximum number of avatars within an immediate SL area. In the course of this research numerous technical setups have been investigated and trialled, ranging from the most basic, where a USB microphone was placed in a room with a band and the sound transferred into SL via the chat function, to a multi microphone studio setup with a 16 channel live to stereo mix being fed into a computer running the streaming software to be fed to SL. Most of the performers discussed in this paper had technical setups falling in between these extremes, with many performing from small home studio setups.

Individuals can design and modify the appearance of their avatar and collect and/or buy (using the currency of SL, Linden dollars) objects to use in performance such as 3D depictions of instruments that can be ‘worn’. These instruments can have a range of pre-scripted animations which can be activated by the user, such as dance moves, guitar strums, drum sticking patterns, keyboard playing motions and such. Avatar animation presents a challenge to performers as they are invariably bound up in the actions required to make music rather than having hands free to manipulate an avatar. Some performers get others to animate their avatars for them (Rogers 2012) whilst the researchers’ own method was to set their avatar into action and perhaps change avatar actions between songs.

The SL live music scene has numerous parallels with the physical live performance scene inasmuch as there are venues, venue owners, managers and performers with similar roles. A range of venues exists in SL, with the depiction of typical stage environments common, although opportunities exist for the creation of idyllic and fantastical environments. Venue owners pay rent to Linden Labs, the company that runs SL, to own an area of land (a ‘sim’). At performances encountered in this research many venues seek tips (in the form of Linden dollars) from patrons to contribute towards this cost. The musicians also seek tips during performances and there was also debate around the topic of musician fees within SL (discussed below). Musicians and managers advertise upcoming performances within SL and also via other social media channels such as Facebook. The researchers’ also performed on SL sims managed by the regional university with which they are associated.
Virtual worlds are synonymous with the separation between the actual and the virtual (Boellstorff, 2008; Boellstorff et al., 2012), yet the practice of live music within a virtual world challenges the assumption that activities taking place in SL are less real or inconsequential (Gagen, 2012). The live musician decreases the gap between the virtual and the actual by transporting music performed in the actual world into the space of the virtual world (Pence, 2008). As Lysolff (2003) points out, virtual communities challenge traditional definitions of field sites for this kind of ethnographic research as they are not physically tangible and are only ‘visited’ in a metaphorical sense. As Lysolff (2003) states, virtual worlds are a previously unimagined method of ethnographic enquiry prior to the advent of technology. The level of belonging associated with online communities in the absence of any physical co-presence is one of the main elements that make these communities possible (Boellstorff, 2008). SL affords the utilization of technology to play live music to each other, to formulate intimate friendships via chat logs and collaborative projects and to build fan bases within SL, redefining the way we have traditionally understood the boundary between the ‘virtual’ and the ‘real’ (Gagen, 2012).

Method

This paper is part of a larger research project involving ethnographic and autoethnographic approaches. This paper specifically draws on case studies of experienced musicians in SL as well as results from a pilot study into the use of SL as a performance platform for staff and students at a regional university. Interviews with four experienced SL performers (two of whom are also SL venue owners) were conducted with respondents selected who had at least 6 months experience performing in SL. Further data was gathered from participant-observation and performances by the researchers themselves. One of the researchers performed over 90 gigs in SL in the period from February – October 2013. The other researchers organised performances by staff and students from a regional university on the SL sim managed by university staff and interviewed participants about their experiences afterwards. Unless otherwise stated all quotes included in this paper are directly from interviews conducted either in person, via email or chat within SL or Facebook.

Why play music in SL?

The experienced SL performers identified a number of reasons why they were attracted to continue performing in SL. One reason was the relative ease in comparison to a physical gig, including the lack of a need for transport and lack of gear setup and pack up if you were performing from an already functioning home studio. Respondents also spoke of the relative ease in attending SL gigs, simply by logging in at the appropriate time. The participants in the research who were residents of regional areas also mentioned that a lack of ‘real’ gigs in their area played a part in their attraction to SL in addition to the potential for reaching a global audience.
Whilst the audio of a live stream in SL is at present mp3 quality only, and at times patchy (depending on the user’s bandwidth and connection speed), SL performers commented that there was a much greater focus on the performer and the music and a lack of distraction in comparison to a physical venue. For example one respondent suggested that:

...in RL [real life] a rowdy few people can destroy the listening pleasure of the other audience members. In many RL gig situations the music is not what people are there for – they’re there to drink or eat or gamble and the music is secondary. It therefore has to compete to be heard with all other noises in the place.

For performers comfortable with mixing their own music in a home studio, the control of audio quality for an SL performance was welcomed when compared to the hit and miss sound reinforcement provided at many physical venues.

All the experienced SL performers spoke of the supportive community and how participatory an SL performance was. Small’s (2008) notion of musicking is particularly relevant here, encapsulating any person who partakes of a musical performance such as audience members, dancers, composers or the musicians or performers themselves. The SL viewer program provides the opportunity to chat with those in your vicinity (local chat) and/or instant message (IM) others. This channel of communication is used frequently and helps to keep audience members engaged. Figure 1 shows a screen shot with the local chat window displayed.

![Figure 1. Screen shot including the local chat window from an SL live performance](image-url)
When performing, one of the researchers found that complementing a particular avatar on their appearance or their avatar name would often generate a tip and would help maintain audience numbers at a venue. One of the respondents also expanded on how the IM and local chat channels facilitated a greater sense of intimacy between the performer and audience member than at a real life (RL) performance:

In SL it’s easy to talk to them in IM’s, but because there’s no line of sight, you don’t engage in the same way. In RL you only really engage when you’re at the front, but in SL because everything ends up in IMs or local chat, you can be anywhere in the venue and still engage just the same. I suppose I would say ultimately that SL is more intimate. You can make friends with the performer more easily too, particularly because there aren't hundreds of people at a gig - only a dozen or 50 at the most, on average.

Audience engagement with an SL performance can take a variety of forms and one respondent discussed how there are many aspects that are exclusive to a virtual worlds experience:

Audience participation in SL is constrained only by the limitations of the interface, but on occasion this encourages creativity and a sense of fun-ness [sic] among the audience and they tend to come up with great ways to participate. Audience engagement and participation ranges from logged on and AFK (away from keyboard) with the music volume turned up - essentially listening to the radio - to real time chat and gesture collaboration including dancing (in the form of single, couple or group dances). These dance gestures are available at nearly every live music venue and are in the form of a series of poses making up a whole dance routine. Avatars who are dancing look a whole lot better than a group of avatars just standing around at a gig.

It is arguable that some of the audience avatar gestures, local chat and IMs could become distracting for the performer in the same way that poker machines, plasma screens and generally disruptive punter behaviour can be at real life venues. However from an audience perspective it is always possible to turn off local chat and orient your avatar view to avoid unwanted intrusions.

For both performers and audiences the anonymity associated with SL can lead to more open and candid interactions. One respondent suggested, “it’s a big generalisation but SL musicians are overall much chattier, intimate/honest/revealing and funny than their RL colleagues”. Whilst performing, one of the researchers found that she would often receive IMs after or during a performance with some sort of critical comment or song request. This willingness to put opinions forward is in contrast to a physical gig where it is usually only a few bold or beery punters who are keen to interact with the performer. However, participants monitor the boundaries for openness in interactions. For example, one venue owner asked performers to agree to terms and conditions, with an extract included here:
NO DRAMA - NO NUDITY - NO PROFANITY - NO CHILD AVIES - NO BDSM - NO BITING

NO POOFERS [Scripted objects that are made for decoration or celebration, similar to virtual fireworks or streamers. Poofers can also be used when grieving in order to create lag and slow down the sim] - PARTICLES - LAGGY SCRIPTS - We are hiring you to sing not put on an animated Las Vegas show.

Anyone on stage with the performer must be discussed and approved by owners in advance. We prefer not to have bands or dancers as we feel this is a live show and not an act. The more people on the stage take tips away from singer, the host, and the club.

One of the researchers also experienced being chastised by a participant for commenting on microphone about what was said in a private IM. At that moment she understood that IMs are an intimate and more private channel to communicate within a show.

Challenges for Live Music performance in SL

As previously mentioned, live music in SL lacks popularity in comparison to other online platforms for music. As part of this research students at a regional university were introduced to SL and given the opportunity to perform and participate as audience members in SL. In discussing their initial experiences, students commented that the performance didn’t have the same energy they associated with a physical gig where they could “feed off the crowd”. Some students commented on how they couldn’t really see the point and that live video streaming, already a well established technology, was more attractive if the goal was to reach a global Internet audience. Some students could see more potential for opportunities such as novel promotion strategies or the creation of fantastical stage environments; however this was countered by the need to learn more about a new technology, something they were openly resistant to. One respondent saw this as an opening for someone to provide a ‘SL for musicians’ type service:

Maybe someone could come along with a service like Bandcamp or Soundcloud that was like the Second Life thing, that was specifically for bands and musicians to stream live... I found that trying to get into SL itself there were not many options for customising your character [sic] and you’d have to be invested in the game [sic] to get the most out of it, whereas bands are lazy.

Whilst references to character as opposed to avatar and to SL as a game would indicate a lack of experience with SL, the underlying sentiment, that the technology itself represents a significant hurdle, is borne out in research on the use of virtual worlds in education settings (Warburton, 2009). The first time users commented on
the detachment they felt with their avatars’ animation not matching their actual movements. All the first time respondents agreed that the mapping of physical gestures to an avatar (augmented reality) was a way forward for the technology. One respondent commented on a perceived lack of immersion, however “as soon as it is an augmented reality thing I’d be there all the time”.

Another challenge for venue owners in SL is griefing, where an avatar or group of avatars purposely set out to disrupt an event or interfere with a sim. This can vary from the release of poofers, or flattening a whole sim by hacking into the system and deleting all the objects. To counter this phenomenon the venue owners spoken to in this research presented the following accounts and strategies:

My venue had a series of noob [new people to SL] griefers that it has gotten to the point where we have to auto ban any noobs that come to a music event. This is from a sim that would give noobs 5 weeks accommodation till they got their feet under them.

That’s why I have my stage bouncer; only people with the proper venue membership tag can even get near the stage. And my land rights are set so they really can’t do any more damage then to be annoying, that still happens, but it’s not that often.

Future

Based on the small sample of experienced SL musicians included in the research to date, live music in SL currently provides an outlet for older musicians in regional areas who see opportunities to reach a global audience, enjoy the supportive community, and have perhaps grown tired of the logistics and realities of doing physical gigs. These musicians are not necessarily seeking fame and fortune but are passionately pursuing a hobby. However the issue of artist fees remains contentious with some musicians seeking more than just tips for payment and venue owners resisting having to pay musicians themselves or have a venue cover charge. As one SL venue owner responded:

Just like it is for a musician, it takes time and money to run an SL venue and that should be respected as well. I don’t know of any SL venue owner who makes a profit, or is really into running it as a business. SL live music relies/survives on people (venues owners/performers) on putting in their own money. So the relationship between the performer and venue is symbiotic, and I wish more of the SL audience would realise this.

The proliferation of online music sharing and access to free music streaming makes it difficult to introduce some sort of pay wall in SL. This is certainly not an issue for just SL with the music industry still grasping to find a model that meets the needs of all industry stakeholders within the digital music environment. However the absence
of major label artists in SL suggests that the virtual reality environment is currently well outside the business model for these artists and their vested commercial interests whereas YouTube, Soundcloud, Last FM and such are all currently brimming with major label content. The rapidly evolving technology of massively multiplayer online role playing games (MMORPGs), the success of games such as Grand Theft Auto V and the popularity amongst under 12 year olds of online virtual worlds such as Club Penguin (220 million registered accounts) and Poptropica (292 million, Kzero, 2013), the commercial imperative to overcome some of the barriers identified here may not be far away. With this in mind, the current SL live music practices described here may change rapidly in the coming years.

The possibilities for geographically dispersed musicians to collaborate have long been a promise of the Internet age and have been explored via a number of different technologies including Jam2Jam, (Dillon, 2006) or eJamming (Greene, 2007). In SL this occurs in the process known as dual streaming, where one musician plays and their live stream is then heard and added to by another musician before being streamed to an SL audience. In this way only one musician hears the end product and thus it is not a truly interactive process. However some of the respondents in this research thought that dual streaming was a worthwhile pursuit, adding to the diversity of practices in SL.

This paper has examined the activities of a small number of experienced and novice performers and participants involved in live music performances in Second Life. Existing literature around current practices in live SL music performance has been discussed but further research is required in order to gain a more comprehensive picture of the SL live music scene and the online live performance scene generally. In addition to contributing to an understanding of music scenes, future research is also intended to explore how this research can contribute to knowledge in relation to the concepts of community and identity.

References


