NIME 2020 - Workshop

Play Make Believe: Exploring Design Fiction and Absurd Making for Critical NIME Design

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Abstract

While making musical interfaces, NIME practitioners draw influence from many diverse disciplines, skills and aesthetic perspectives. New musical artefacts and interactions are shaped by cultural values as much as research concerns and methods. The NIME community embraces a broad range of ''ways of knowing'', and researchers are often engaged with an inclusive and critical discussion of technology. We propose a workshop based on hands-on making of unconventional artefacts to advance the debate around the complex and versatile nature of contemporary musical instruments. Our proposal exploits design fiction and absurd making to engage with critical NIME discourses and practices. We aim to question the role of technology in creative practice through make-believe, fragile and contradictory artefacts and playful design explorations.

Workshop proposal

Research communities concerned with the design of musical artefacts and interactions are often engaged with an inclusive and critical discussion of technology (e.g. [6,7,8,9,10,11,13,17,18]). In particular, while making new instruments, NIME researchers rely on the mediation of many diverse disciplines, skills and ethos[1]. The development of a new music technology entails the materialisation of both technical knowledges and cultural values [3]. These might vary depending on the specific community, culture and research context in which that technology is created [14,16].

We propose an original and unconventional workshop approach to advance the debate around the complex, interdisciplinary and multifaceted nature of contemporary musical instruments. This activity is based on a speculative instrument craft workshop that attempts to engage with critical discourse through practical and creative design explorations.

Our workshop draws on a small but growing body of work that challenges technology ideation and development through absurd and playful artefacts. These include the work of Kristina Andersen on the Magic Machine workshops [4] and John Bowers and Owen Green which exploited the notion of hijacking as a way to question existing music technologies [12]. We also refer to the workshop facilitated by Paul Stapleton Simon Waters, Nick Ward and Owen Green for the exploration of intersubjective relationships between networks of human and non-human actors in the context of artistic performance [15]. Moreover, we build on the recent Absurd Music Hackathon[2] held at Queen Mary University in which the making of intentionally silly, absurd and provocative instruments allowed participants to generate a critique of current technology, illustrate future musical visions, and sketch ideas for not-yet-existing interfaces.

The workshop aims to generate critical discussions on new musical interfaces through playful devices such as absurdity, magic and make-believe[3]. Our conviction is that through the combination of play and making it will be possible to create reflections that would be difficult to earn with more traditional methods, while avoiding overly theoretical and formal discussions. The exchange of concepts and ideas will be therefore facilitated by actual artefacts that, even if non-functional, can be first physically experienced and then critically discussed.

All the debates around the design, use and interpretation of new musical instruments will be welcomed, these might include philosophy of technology, music sociology, situated music practice, music and disability, material culture, media archaeology, organology, critical engineering and research through design. Through the making and sharing of imaginary musical instruments we aim to expand our understanding of the following questions:

- How can absurdity and humour be helpful to stretch and critique conventional ideas of what is useful, appropriate and sensible in (music) technology research and development?
- How can the exploration of make-believe, fragile and contradictory artefacts convey future visions beyond the paradigms imposed by current music tools?
- How can we question the role of technology in creative practice through embodied practices such as play and making?

By moving away from classical design methods and looking at more subversive approaches we hope to question both our own practice and the routines we sometimes encounter in academic and research areas. The designed artefacts and the considerations around them might then contribute to generate guidelines, methodological intuitions or critical statements to be shared with broader design domains. However, we propose this activity also as a way to generate critical/dissident outcome that might not necessary answers the questions previously sketched but rather leave space for open discussions and eventually create more questions related to critical approaches to NIME practices. One of the workshop's outcome will be a public document which collects participants' contributions, impressions and takes based on their annotations, sketches, pictures and videos. These materials might than contribute to the debate around critical instrument design practices as a shared archival knowledge available to future NIME communities.

[1] On this topic, see for example, the Practice-Based Research Workshop at NIME 2014.
[2] For an overview of the project see the Absurd Music Hackathon documentation.
[3] Make-believe play requires a ludic representational structure and it is a skill attained during early childhood. It entails a creative use of the object(s) of play whereby people are invited to think outside the box and stretch their imagination by using items in ways that were not originally intended [19]

Finally, with this workshop we hope to support those NIME sub-communities with similar concerns to those expressed in this proposal. Our impression is that, within strongly technocentric contexts, researchers interested in this kind of work can feel quite isolated, if not surrounded by scepticism. Our goal is to build on existing networks and initiatives over which researchers can draw on for confidence, ideas and inspiration.

Workshop structure and resources

The duration of the activity will be 3h. The workshop will be divided in three 'takes' make, share and discuss) with a short break after the first take. All the materials required will be provided by the organisers. Max 15 participants will be accepted. A quiet working space with chairs and tables for 20 people (attendees + organisers) will be required. Below a short description of the workshop's structure.

Take 1: Make believe - 1.15h ca.

The workshop will start with a hands-on activity in which participants are invited to build a not-yet existing musical instrument "as if by magic" responding to both the available materials [14] and absurd brainstorming prompts. Within the first 10' each participant will choose a prompt: an absurd concept to stimulate the creation of absurd instruments and therefore enable participants to break away from traditional music making practices and approaches. This process will be facilitated by the organisers that might provide suggestions for unworkable music designs[4]. This activity is based on established design methods exploring embodied making processes such as "physical sketching" [1] and "thinking with the hands" [5]. This first crafting adventure is conceived as a playful, open-ended and exploratory experience and it is characterised by a fast pace: the actual making should take between 30' and 45'. By the end of this take each participant (organisers included) will have a fictional instrument/interface to be presented to the rest of the group.

Take 2: Instrument presentation - 45' ca.

During the first 10' of take 2, participants will be invited to take annotations describing the machines developed. Annotations will be written on record cards that the organisers will distribute at the beginning of the event. Based on the annotations collected, participants will be asked to gather the fictional instruments in order to form sub-groups for the following steps of the workshop. Once the artefacts are grouped in different tables, participants are invited to present their machines to their sub-group (e.g. explain their functionalities - how should the machine be played?). In order to elaborate on the absurd interactions developed, attendees are strongly encouraged to "perform" the artefacts, this to communicate in an embodied and generative fashion the critiques and musical implications conveyed by the objects. Based on the specific instruments, different methods might be exploited to identify key musical and technological issues. These might include collaborative scenario, improvised role-playing games as well as more traditional brainstorming techniques [2]. Participants will be free to navigate the tables and share comments and impressions over the artefacts related to the different sub-groups.

Take 3: Discussion - 45' ca.

The final group discussion will take place in the form of a co-publication, as a roughly organized collection of artefacts, concerns and conversations emerged during workshop. These contributions (e.g. annotations, pictures and videos) will be gathered by participants in a shared online document and they will be afterwards made public by the organisers as webzine-like format. This on-line pamphlet will then gather a variety of shared resources and materials which might be helpful to stimulate future debates around NIME critical thinking including methods and expected outcomes. During the last 15' of the workshop, all attendees will review together the shared document as final round of discussion. Participants will have the change to share remarks on the contents emerged during the activity, propose methodological suggestions for future workshops and, eventually, discuss ideas to advance NIME critical discourses through unconventional methods such as those explored during the event.

Workshop materials

The workshop materials (Figure 1) were selected according to one of the referenced methodologies [5]. The selection of materials provided is driven by the intention of outlining an open-minded and playful context. By using mundane and everyday objects we aim to provide an informal and non-intimidating setting, thus preventing design tasks stresses and pressures. Moreover, avoiding tool kits, electrical components, sensors and software units we aim to bypass paradigms, uses and discourses linked to existing technology. We will also encourage participants to bring a provoking or absurd item of material with them to pool with the group's resources. As well as sourcing a wider selection of material this will get people thinking before the start of the workshop. The materials brought will be considered as "gifts": participants will donate their items so that they could be integrated in the project of someone else.

Figure 1. Workshop materials and tools: cardboard, disposable cups, paper plates, masking tape, a roll of twine, scissors, wire cutter, paper clips and pins, a roll of metal wire, plastic ball, straws and toothpick.

[4] For instance, see Pete Bennett's random generator absurd music ideas

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