

# The Musicking of *Electroplankton*

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## ABSTRACT

*Electroplankton* (Nintendo, 2005) is the most elaborate and rich digital game designed by the Japanese media artist Toshio Iwai. Released for the Nintendo DS console, it comprises ten musical vignettes, inviting players to a range of diverse interactions.

This paper analyzes the multiple modalities of musical participation afforded by *Electroplankton*, inscribing its analysis within the theoretical concepts of musicking (Small, 1998) and ergodicity (Aarseth, 1997; Aarseth & Calleja, 2015). The resulting concept of “ergodic musicking” is presented as a comprehensive analytical tool in order to assess the multiple musical roles explored within the game.

*Electroplankton* is first contextualized as a cybermedium, understood as a class of media objects to be traversed or reconfigured by means of a nontrivial, ergodic effort (Aarseth, 1997; Aarseth & Calleja, 2015). While digital games are in general considered as a cybermedium, the paper emphasizes that *Electroplankton* does not necessarily show some of the archetypal characteristics of games, such as winning/losing conditions.

Rather than as a conventional digital game, Toshio Iwai designed *Electroplankton* as a compendium of previous artworks, expanding it with a set of new pieces. Huhtamo recalls a conversation with Iwai about this aspect: “Iwai once surprised me by stating that *Electroplankton* was his version of Duchamp’s *Boite en Valise* (1941). After some reflection it made sense: the tiny game cartridge indeed contained many aspects of his career as a “miniature museum” (Huhtamo, 2016, p. 92).

The possibility space of this miniature museum is certainly playful in nature, but it also maintains a consistent focus on different musical aspects. Across the various vignettes, players can record their voice, re-arrange a musical table, or tap on the screen to structure extemporaneous sound loops.

The different musical forms of *Electroplankton* are understood under the umbrella concept of musicking. Musicologist Christopher Small warns against elevating the analysis of musical objects, such as musical compositions, to the primary subject of musicology. Small argues, “music is not a thing at all, but rather an activity” (1998, p. 2). As such, it should be understood as a verb: “to music”. “To music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (composing), or by dancing” (1998, p. 9).

*Electroplankton* explores these forms of participation, bringing unprecedented musical opportunities to the medium of digital games. This paper will focus on aspects related with musical improvisation, identifying in the musicking of *Electroplankton* a form of idiomatic improvisation (Bailey, 1993). Subsequently, the player’s interventions will be contextualized within Eco’s “open work” paradigm, and described “not [as] an amorphous invitation to

indiscriminate participation, [but rather as] an oriented insertion into something which always remains the world intended by the author” (Eco, 1989, p. 19).

Finally, the ergodic musicking identified will be applied to address the problematic critical reception of *Electroplankton* (Pilchmair, 2007), emphasizing the innovative and idiosyncratic nature of Iwai’s musicking.

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