

Towards Orchestrating Game Creativity Facets: A Case Study Fusing Audio, Visuals and Gameplay

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Abstract. Computer games are unique creativity domains in that they elegantly fuse several facets of creative work including visuals, narrative, music, architecture and design. While the exploration of possibilities across facets of creativity offers a more realistic approach to the game design process, most existing autonomous (or semi-autonomous) game content generators focus on the mere generation of single domains (creativity facets) in games. Motivated by the sparse literature on multifaceted game content generation, this paper introduces a multifaceted procedural content generation (PCG) approach that is based on the interactive evolution of multiple artificial neural networks that orchestrate the generation of visuals, audio and gameplay. The approach is evaluated on a spaceship shooter game. The generated artifacts — a fusion of audio-visual and gameplay elements — showcase the capacity of multifaceted PCG and its evident potential for computational game creativity.

1 Introduction

Computer games are creative domains of multiple facets including audio, visuals, gameplay, narrative, level architecture and game design [8]. For the vast majority of game genres the interplay between audio (e.g. character themes, sound effects, foreshadowing) and visuals (e.g. object and level design) is of critical importance for the creative expression of game designers and, ultimately, for the immersion of players via gameplay [8]. As *nonlinear games* surge in popularity, game composers and designers are increasingly challenged to design a meaningful player experience for players who are dynamically constructing their own game experiences. While traditional composers and designers are adapting to this new practice [2] approaches for procedurally generating assets for games are emerging to enhance game personalization, increase game replayability and alleviate some of the additional demands on designers, musicians, and artists [16].

Procedural content generation (PCG) methods as employed in games have traditionally been used to either fully automate aspects game development such as asset creation or as assistive authoring tools for designers [18]. The dominant focus of PCG until recently has been on generating single game creativity facets (domains) — such as visuals or levels — into the standard game development pipeline [15] with a few notable exceptions [3, 11].

In this paper, instead, we introduce a *multifaceted* PCG approach for the simultaneous generation of audio, visuals and gameplay. The generation of the game domains is multifaceted in that the creation process on one domain informs and is informed by the creation process on the others. Our approach relies on *implicit* interactive evolution [16] where human input (gameplay) determines the fitness of the generated artifacts: in our case the fusion of audio, visuals and gameplay. Both audio and visuals are represented by compositional patterns producing networks (CPPNs) [12] which co-evolve throughout gameplay (i.e. real-time) and are both interlinked with gameplay. The proposed methodology is tested in the AudioInSpace game, a spaceship shooting game, where both weapons trajectories (gameplay, visuals), their color (visuals) and their sounds effects (audio) are orchestrated and interlinked with (and affected by) the gameplay.

2 Background

While there are many approaches to procedurally generating content or facets for video games (e.g. visuals, audio, narrative, game design, level design and gameplay), the focus is often on the single facet rather than how they can combine to create a complete game experience. For instance, world maps in *Civilization V* (Firaxis 2010), dungeons in *Diablo* (Blizzard 1996), racing tracks [14], petal colors and shapes in *Petalz* [10], and weapons in *Borderlands* (Gearbox 2009) are all procedurally generated to provide the player with increased personalization and replayability. Similarly, *Audiosurf* [9] generates visual game play elements depending on the sound file provided by the player. While these generated elements may increase replayability and alleviate the art and design requirements on developers, these approaches serve as means to an end rather than celebrating the creativity of procedural content generation itself.

Other approaches aim to interweave procedurally generated elements to enhance the game experience. For instance, *Galactic Arms Race* [5] encourages players to interactively evolve weapon visuals and bullet trajectories to their aesthetic and gameplay preferences, while *Game-o-matic* [17] helps players visually construct the topic of their game and then procedurally generates the rules and visuals. *A Rogue Dream* [3] is 2D maze game that gathers and parses internet data to discover relationships between natural language concepts and create game facets from them, challenging players to interpret the designer’s intent on topics like religion or politics. While *Proteus* [7] is a completely procedurally generated pixel-art world where users can spatially and sonically explore their environments, the sonic output does not affect the previously generated landscapes. Even in these integrated environments, the output of one procedurally generated facet has little affect on the output of the other.

A notable exception is that of *AudioOverdrive*, a side-scrolling space shooter where players compose music by progressing through the game. It has bidirectional communication between enemies, gameplay, and level visuals [6], but the approach requires heavy human initiative by the developers. The approach in

this paper extends ideas from AudioOverdrive by creating a game environment called AudioInSpace with closely coupled audio and visuals that requires minimal hard coding (initiative) from the developers. In this testbed space shooter, the audio, visuals, and gameplay are integrated to generate the appearance of the spaceship’s weapons (e.g. color), gameplay effects (e.g. whether it hit an enemy), and the game soundtrack. The soundtrack then influences the firing rate, color and movement patterns of the weapon’s particles, thus ensuring a bidirectional communication across three creative facets. While both AudioInSpace and AudioOverdrive explore similar goals, themes, and creative game facets, AudioInSpace specifically uses information on the spaceship’s gameplay behavior and on-screen visuals rather than treating gameplay events such as firing a weapon solely on account of its sound effect.

3 Approach

While many approaches to generating content focus on single game facets to augment the developers’ creativity, the approach in this paper is to explore mixed initiative co-creativity [8] in a multifaceted fashion, where the machine and the player create and collectively augment the player’s experience across several facets of creativity. In particular, the machine’s creativity is enhanced through a conceptual blending of the audio and visual modules in Figure 1 where audio outputs inform the visual module, which in turn is input to the audio module. Both audio and visuals are affected by gameplay as players exercise their own creativity through selecting preferred weapons and audio for the soundtrack in AudioInSpace (see section 3.1 for details). Because it is fundamental for the individual audio and visual domains to interact, each PCG module bases decisions on information gathered from both domains.

The relationships between the domains and generated outputs are represented by a special type of artificial neural network (ANN) called a compositional pattern producing network (CPPN; shown in Figure 2) [12]. Like traditional ANNs, each CPPN is an interconnected network of nodes and connection weights that when provided input, calculate an output value that can theoretically approximate any function [4]. However, unlike traditional ANNs that only compute sigmoid functions at the hidden nodes, CPPNs can compute any function (e.g. Gaussian, sigmoid, sine, ramp, etc.), effectually making them pattern generators biased toward the particular regularities indicated by the hidden node activation functions. Through this representation, the aim is that both weapon visuals and audio are represented as patterns of each other.

Each PCG module is represented by a separate CPPN that inputs domain information and outputs instructions for generating either audio or visual patterns that not only affect player immersion but also gameplay. To personalize the relationship between audio, visuals, and gameplay, these CPPNs can be evolved through a process similar to animal breeding called interactive evolutionary computation (IEC), wherein the human use rather than an explicit fitness function rates candidate individuals. CPPNs are evolved through the NeuroEvolution of

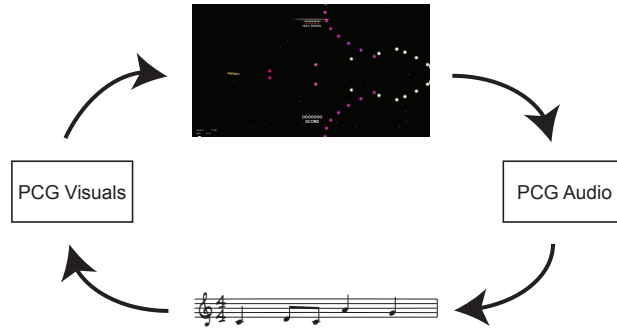


Fig. 1. Mixed-initiative co-creativity across multiple facets. In AudioInSpace, weapon visuals and audio are represented by two separate modules that each provide relevant domain information to the other (i.e. the visual module is not only informed by current visual elements in the level, but also by the concurrently generated audio and vice versa). The human initiative in AudioInSpace comes from gameplay and the selection of weapons.

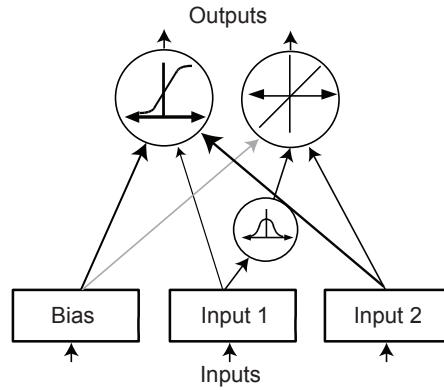


Fig. 2. Compositional Pattern Producing Network (CPPN). In each CPPN, the outputs for each node are calculated as a weighted sum of the inputs that are connected to it. The hidden nodes in the middle of the network and the outputs at the top can theoretically compute any function, but in this implementation can be one of nine different functions that in effect bias the CPPN toward certain regularities including bilateral symmetry, repetition, and repetition with variation.

Augmenting Topologies (NEAT; [13]) algorithm which was originally developed to solve control and decision tasks but generates audio and visuals in this paper. Through (NEAT), each CPPN can start minimally and complexify as necessary over evolutionary time. By adding hidden nodes and connections, and changing activation functions and weight values, each new individual can expand the relationship between inputs and hidden nodes. Thus, player selection is an important aspect of this approach and toward facilitating mixed-initiative co-creativity.



Fig. 3. AudioInSpace. In AudioInSpace, the user controls the spaceship on the left side of the screen while moving through each space level. The health of the ship is shown at the top of the screen as “hull strength” while the weapon score is displayed at the bottom. Two mirrored visual beams project from the player’s spaceship shooting patterns directed by the current visual CPPN. The rate of fire and the pitches heard result from the audio CPPN’s outputs.

3.1 AudioInSpace: The Game

The multifaceted PCG approach is evaluated in a space shooter, called AudioInSpace, which extends approaches by Hastings et al. [5] for weapon particle generation through the integration of an audio component. Shown in Figure 3, the player moves through levels in an outer space environment attempting to avoid obstacles and shoot enemies while simultaneously evolving weapon trajectories and visuals with the generated accompanying audio. By directing the two CPPNs to create patterns from information gathered from both domains, this approach incorporates mixed-initiative co-creativity while combining two different PCG modules.

Upon launch, the colors and trajectory of the first bullet are calculated when a random note from the C Major pentatonic scale is played and input to the visual CPPN in Figure 4a. Together with the pitch information from the initially random MIDI note, this CPPN also inputs the $(\delta x, \delta y)$ position between where the bullet was fired and where it is currently located with respect to where it was fired, and the time t since firing. Note that before the bullet is fired, the initial $(\delta x, \delta y) = (0, 0)$ and $t = 0$. Outputs of the visual CPPN determine the red, green, and blue (RGB) color values for each bullet, and the (x', y') outputs dictate the bullet’s new position (i.e. its trajectory). The color and trajectory of each bullet is calculated every time a new note sounds.

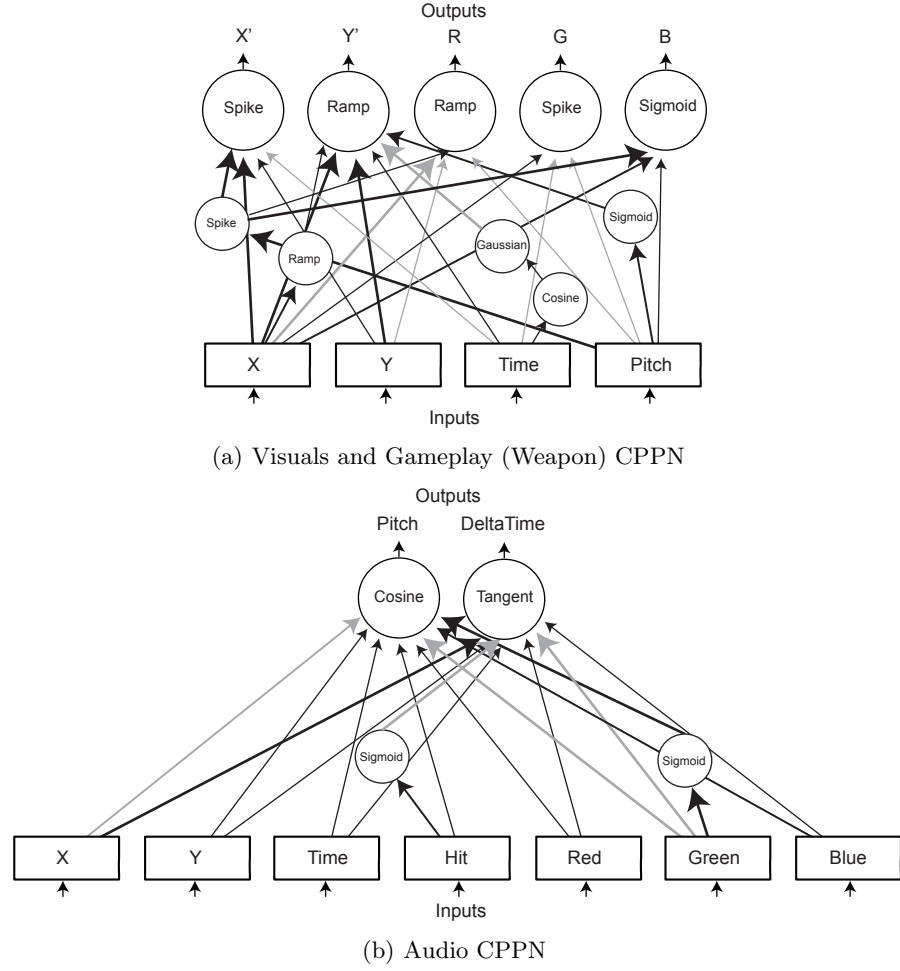


Fig. 4. CPPNs for AudioInSpace. Each PCG module is enabled by its own CPPN. Darker connections represent a positive weight while lighter connections are a negative weight. The magnitude of each weight is represented by the line width where thicker lines indicate a higher absolute value. In (a), the inputs to the visual CPPN are the (x, y) coordinates from where the bullet is initially fired, the time since firing, and the current pitch being input from the CPPN in (b); it outputs a new (x', y') coordinate for the next frame and RGB values. On the other hand, (b) inputs the outputs from (a) as well as whether a bullet has just struck an enemy.

New notes are fired when the bullet hits an enemy or otherwise at the end of the current note's duration. As seen in Figure 4b, the music CPPN determines the pitch and the note's duration through the respective Pitch and DeltaTime outputs. These values are based on the (x, y) position of where the last bullet

was fired, time since firing t , whether the bullet struck an enemy h , and its RGB values.

As the game progresses, the player moves through different levels encountering obstacles and hostile enemies. large rocks to avoid, and small rocks to avoid and shoot, preference ratings are given to weapons for every bullet fired and the audio CPPNs fitness is increased for every new note. The longer each weapon and audio network are in play, the higher that CPPN is rated. It is assumed that the longer weapons and visuals are in play, the more preferable they are to a particular player. Therefore through IEC players evolve the visual and audio networks toward their aesthetic preferences.

4 Experiments

Experiments in this section illustrate the potential of this multifaceted PCG proof-of-concept by exploring the impact of the audio and visual CPPNs on the game and on each other. In AudioInSpace, each CPPN module is evolved separately by the player. That is, the audio network is held constant while the weapon network is evolved and vice versa. The first set of experiments explore each network, one at a time. To start, three weapon CPPNs are evolved with a constant, simple audio input (i.e. a repeating eighth note at a pitch of MIDI value 72). After exploring the weapon effects with this repeated input, the audio CPPN is evolved for each of the weapon CPPNs. The results of the new and varied MIDI inputs are then explored through the weapon visuals. To further explore these effects, ascending and descending MIDI notes between MIDI values 20 and 90 are also input to the visual CPPN.

The second set of experiments explores the complete interaction between the two networks when evolved by players. In these experiments, a note in the pentatonic C major scale is sent to the visual network. The visuals are then generated in loop with the MIDI notes.

In each of the experiments, tournament selection occurs amongst a population of fifty individuals, ten of which are rated by the player through IEC. Players can switch the current weapon or audio representation by pressing a button to activate a different CPPN chromosome whose effects are immediately heard and seen in AudioInSpace. The evolutionary parameters are set through preliminary testing, and the probability of adding a new node or connection is 30% and 15%, respectively. Similarly, the activation functions at any node can be replaced by one of the following with an even chance: Hidden Node Functions: Sigmoid, Hyperbolic Tangent, Sine, Cosine, Bipolar Sigmoid, Gaussian, Ramp, Step, Spike [5]. However, the activation function of any particular node is only changed with a 20% chance. Weights are real values between $[-3, 3]$ that are mutated with a uniform 90% chance. Occasionally (1% chance), connections are disabled.

5 Results

Due to space constraints we will only present a number of indicative audio-visual patterns generated through the experiments conducted. For the interested reader several videos of the results presented in this section (and beyond) are available at <http://music-ai.org/musicgame/>.

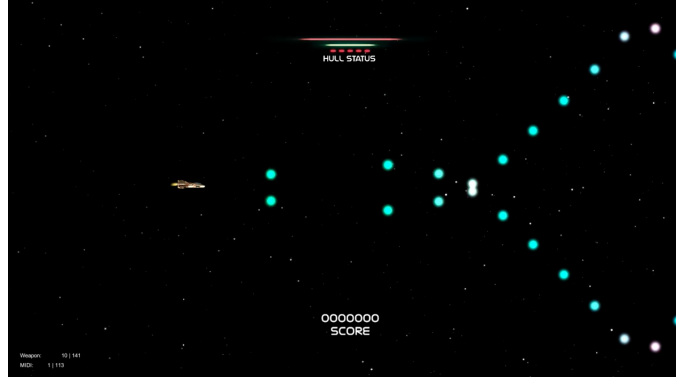
The first set of results explores the combination of visual and audio CPPNs by first examining the weapons with a predetermined MIDI pattern. MIDI note 67, or G, is input to the visual network in eighth note quantization. As shown in figure 5 and accompanying video, visuals generated from this single repeated note create a constant visual stream with a predictable trajectory dictated by the repeated eighth note inputs. Each visual CPPN has four inputs, five outputs, and in this result, which was evolved in fifty generations, also has six hidden nodes as shown previously in Figure 4a. As these weapons are patterns created by human evolved CPPNs, many different colors and trajectory shapes are possible. As already noted, several additional examples are available at the website for the reader of this paper.

Once the audio CPPN is evolved by the player for the same weapon CPPN, the bullets still maintain much of the blue color present in figure 5a, but as shown in Figure 5b also start shooting red colored bullets throughout the level progression. The trajectory from the CPPN in 5(a) results in a predictable repetitive pattern. However, once the MIDI network is evolved in 5(b) the varied audio inputs impact the original path in 5(a). In fact, with this MIDI network, the bullets are fired with a slightly backwards trajectory that at times allows users to build posterior bullet defenses against potential upcoming enemies. In this way, players can simultaneously evolve networks suited for their individual game experiences.

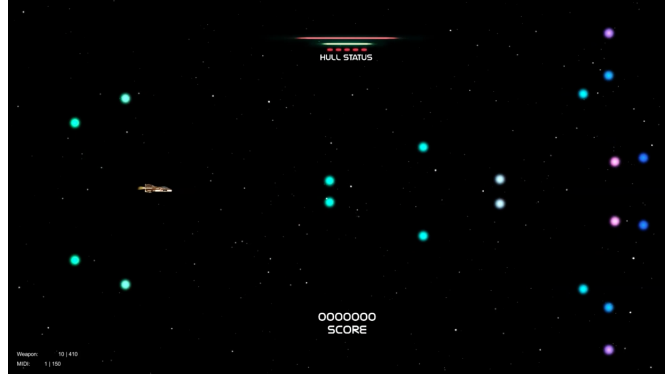
Figure 6(a) shows a weapon CPPN that is evolved with a repeated MIDI input like figure 5a. However, 6(b) shows the same weapon from 6(a) but with MIDI notes that are input in ascending and descending order between 20 and 90. Over time, the overall trajectory shape of 6(a) is maintained, but the length of time between bullets increases and decreases according to the MIDI input. Videos of the complete system interaction are available at <http://music-ai.org/musicgame/> where the player cycles through several different weapons and MIDI CPPNs.

6 Discussion and Future Work

While this paper is a proof-of-concept of multifaceted game creativity as influenced by the player (mixed-initiative), it is important to investigate whether players actually enjoy this new mixed-initiative experience. Future work aims to explore and evaluate players' appreciation of the visuals, audio, and gameplay, and whether the mixed-initiative interaction enhances the overall experience. The question is whether players prefer the sound of the additional audio and the control that it provides over the weapon visuals. AudioInSpace can be play tested — with the work by Cachia et al. [1] as a control — examining average



(a) Weapon with Repeated Single Eighth Note



(b) Weapon with Repeated Variable Eighth Note

Fig. 5. Evolved weapon with repeated and variable notes. While the weapon in (a) maintains a steady trajectory due to the repeated eighth note input, the same weapon in (b) deviates in bullet timing, color, and trajectory once the MIDI network is evolved, thereby illustrating the influence of the MIDI CPPN.

game time, perceived enjoyment, generations per audio and visual CPPNs, and complexity of the relationships between inputs and outputs of each CPPN.

While it is currently assumed that the number of times a gun is fired and the length of time an audio network is heard reflect player preference, another interesting question is why players choose certain weapons and audio. For example, do players focus more on the look of the weapon or the rate of fire determined by the audio? Answers to these questions could help identify player styles and optimize potential development areas.

There are also many different avenues for increasing the quality of the visuals and audio, and the cooperation between the two. Like Galactic Arms Race, for instance, the initial generation of weapon and audio CPPNs could be pre-selected for quality and gameplay. Furthermore, more constraints on the audio output (e.g. restriction to key) could enhance the sound of the output. An-

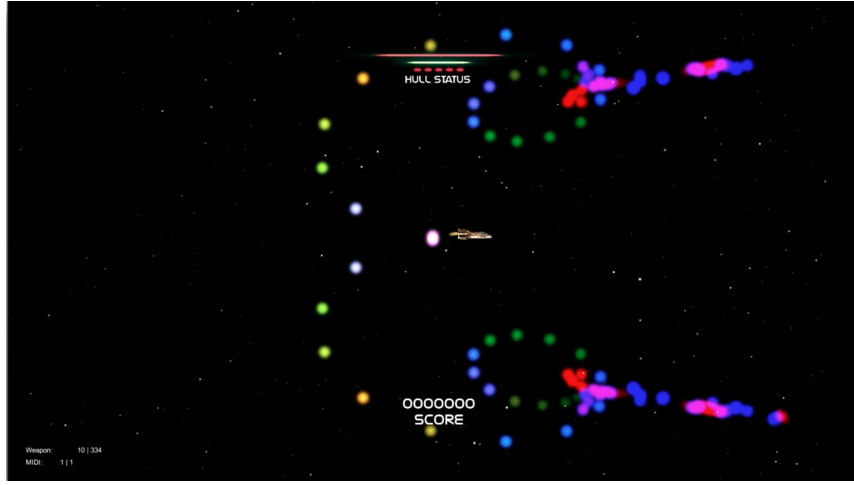


Fig. 6. Ascending and descending pitches When ascending and descending notes between MIDI values 20-90 are sent to this weapon network, the smooth transitions between colors and trajectories are evident. The corresponding video is available at <http://music-ai.org/musicgame/>.

other interesting area of research is in adding “listeners” to generated audio and spawning monsters depending on the pitches and durations of note patterns. For instance, when low pitched long notes play, a larger more important and difficult boss could appear, whereas higher pitched notes could signal intermittently approaching comets.

Future work includes the addition of more facets of game creativity into the existing multifaceted PCG approach to explore the capacity of the approach in harder creativity problems. The obvious next addition is level architecture. It is worth noting, however, that the more creativity domains are added the more complex the interlinking across all domains becomes. Evidently the final orchestration of those facets as a game that enhances player experience (and possibly player creativity) depends on more factors that would require more thorough experimentation.

7 Conclusion

This paper introduced a multifaceted approach for procedural content generation in games which is achieved collectively by the initiatives of both computational and human creators (mixed initiative co-creativity). Through a space shooter game called AudioInSpace, players evolve their own weapons and audio to suit their aesthetic tastes and tactical demands of the current level. Results from this proof-of-concept game illustrate that a significant impact is made on the visuals when combined with simultaneously generated audio patterns. While obtained results are already encouraging, there is room to improve the overall interaction

between the player and the game and the generated audio in future version of the game. These initial results, however, already suggest that the multifaceted PCG approach presented has a great potential towards realizing computational game creativity.

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