

Abstract

Reassessing *Otocky*: a forgotten classic in digital games history

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What makes a digital game a “classic”, revered by players and studied by academics? Different aspects like technological innovations, design features, or commercial success contribute to this status.

Otocky, designed by Japanese media artist Toshio Iwai in 1987, predated in a number of ways so-called *music games*, connecting music generation with the established tropes of the *shoot'em up* genre. It anticipated not only contemporary examples of music-centered gameplay, but also explored the boundaries of games' formal properties, juxtaposing traditional game characteristics with extemporaneous musical creativity.

This paper addresses the innovation of *Otocky*, and aims to position it in the current academic discourse surrounding game history, which according to Huhtamo is in its “chronicle era” (Huhtamo 2005). Available journalistic writings about *Otocky* consider it a curiosity, and a proper historicization process never took place, possibly due to the fact that the game has never been published outside of Japan and was only available for the *Famicom Disk System*, an add-on for the original Nintendo Famicom.

Interacting with sound is arguably *Otocky*'s main affordance. Analysis of sound and music in digital games is the topic of numerous academic writings; Collins (2008) defines dynamic audio as “sounds that reacts to changes in the gameplay environment and/or in response to a user”, and identifies different degrees of dynamic activity, taking as examples games such as *Grim Fandango* (Lucas Arts 1998) and *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo 1998). *Otocky*, however, structures a simple interaction with its musical content, preferring bizarre improvisations rather than well timed sound cues. This musical system hardly fits Collins' categorization, and constitutes a relevant example that is currently absent from game sound analysis literature. This paper argues that the game can be addressed as an “open work”, as discussed by Eco (1979) in relation to composition systems such as *Klavierstücke XI* by Stockhausen.

Even if Otocky is an example of creative freedom awarded to players, it is firmly rooted in the tradition of the shoot'em up: for a contemporary sensibility, it is arguably a very punishing game. Rigid competition and free performance are two polarizing elements in Otocky, which lives out of their sheer incompatibility.

Finally, this paper will position Otocky in the discussion about game genres and forms. With its comedic look, Otocky reassesses the shoot'em up genre tropes, arguably offering a parody version, amplified by the unclear nature of its winning condition. In this sense, the game is akin to contemporary examples such as *Jostle Bastard* by game auteur Pippin Barr (2013), a satirical take on the popular game *Hotline Miami* (Dennaton Games 2012).

Conclusion shows that current academic tools in use to analyze digital games can be used to reposition relevant games, rendered little known due to contingencies, positively contributing to the available academic discourse.

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