

Aesthetic Conflict in the Musical Role-Playing Game Runic Soundscapes

Abstract: This essay discusses the concept of aesthetic conflict in the musical role-playing game-piece *Runic Soundscapes*. A general discussion of the concept of aesthetic conflict and its significance in avoiding larger cultural conflicts through the active resistance to creating aesthetically uniform idiocultures (Fine 1983) is followed by a general overview of aesthetic conflict in the fields of role-playing games and in improvised music. The field of improvised music and its ludological aspects are summarized for those unfamiliar with the field, and the advantages of studying aesthetic conflict in purely aesthetic musical situations are addressed. A brief description of the rules of Runic Soundscapes leads to an analysis of the specific aesthetic conflicts it presents. Finally, the essay concludes by encouraging role-playing game designers to incorporate aesthetic conflict to prevent the development of closed, inflexible idiocultures.

Keywords: aesthetic conflict, agent-author, role-playing games, idiocultures, game-pieces, collaborative creativity, musical improvisation,

Tom Blancarte

Danish National Academy of Music in Esbjerg and Odense

tblancarte@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

Social conflicts (Bowman 2013) are inherent in all socially constructed games (Montola 2012) but are not necessarily negative aspects of play (Montola 2011). This paper introduces Jiaxuan Yu's concept of *aesthetic conflict* (Yu 2022), a subset of social conflict, to the field of role-playing game studies, and continues with a discussion of how aesthetic conflict is experienced and designed for in the role-playing game for improvising musicians, *Runic Soundscapes*. The paper introduces the term *agent-author*, combining Latourian agents (things that can influence their environments) with Jessica Hammer's taxonomy of primary, secondary, and tertiary authors (game designer, module designer, game master, player). This term can be contrasted with typical Latourian agents, which influence their environments, but about which actor-network theory is agnostic about their capacity to consciously determine their creative actions. Focusing solely on sonic behaviors of author-agents and their implementation in musical identity construction, the game provides an ideal lens for studying aesthetic conflict, as its non-diegetic aspects lack semantic content, avoiding confusion that can occur in semantically-based conflicts, where sources of conflict can lie elsewhere than in aesthetics.

2. AESTHETIC CONFLICT

Not to be confused with Meltzer's psychoanalytic concept (Meltzer and Williams 1988), *aesthetic conflict* occurs when people with differing aesthetic stances are tasked with a collaborative creative project (Yu 2022).

Yu argues that aesthetic conflict requires a postmodern, multicultural experience; without exposure to multiple cultures, participants may only perceive and accept a singular aesthetic framework (Yu 2022). In this way, aesthetics in Yu's definition are assumed to be culturally

determined, and conflicts occur when people from different cultures work together. As most individuals have multiple cultural identities, this prerequisite is redundant, and we can safely state that aesthetic conflicts can occur in *any* creative project, even when just one person is involved. Furthermore, Yu's concept of aesthetic conflict invites us to consider agent-authors involved in collaborative creative projects to be representatives of various cultures, with this representation manifesting through their respective aesthetic values.

Moving beyond Yu's concept, aesthetics can be examined in relation to broader cultural conflicts. Aesthetic markers help individuals form distinct social groups, ultimately creating new cultures (O'Neill 2002; Folkestad 2002). In this way, cultural conflicts on larger scales are often enabled by aesthetic conformity. This essay seeks to demonstrate that a focus on aesthetic conflict in the controlled environment of role-playing games allows for the opportunity to *expose* (Stenros and Montola 2010) the aesthetic/cultural assumptions of the participants, thereby avoiding broader cultural conflicts in the future.

3. AESTHETIC CONFLICT IN ROLE-PLAYING GAMES

From the outset, it is important to clarify that aesthetic conflict in role-playing games is distinct from diegetic narrative conflicts, and is found rather in the exogenous goals (Montola 2008) of the agent-authors. Role-playing games function as spaces for cultural interaction (Ilieva 2023), fostering aesthetic conflict at meta-levels where agent-authors introduce their unique aesthetics, generating potential tensions. There is a tendency in current role-playing game practice to avoid any non-diegetic conflict, in particular to use tools such as Session 0s to ensure that aesthetic conflicts are avoided in game play. For example, it is frequently assumed that everyone should be in agreement about the genre of story to be explored (horror, adventure, etc.) at the beginning of play. In this way, players and designers of role-playing games, by delineating and prescribing aesthetics of the role-playing games, create their own aesthetically bound cultures based around a particular game and/or playing group. Gary Alan Fine, in his study of role-playing games in the 80's, termed these small cultures *idiocultures* (Fine 1983).

Jessica Hammer has explored how the agency of the various authors (designers of rules and modules, game masters, players, and audiences) in role-playing game activity interact with each other (Hammer 2007), leading to the creation of what Stricklin (2021) refers to as a *convergence culture*, but their arguments are primarily couched in a positive, collaborative sense. Again, potential aesthetic conflicts are ignored in these considerations in favor of the search for an idealistic environment of mutual affirmation.

This essay argues that there are benefits to focused invitation to aesthetic conflict, and that by actively engaging in aesthetic conflict between all agent-authors of role-playing games, we make these cultures of convergence more resilient and capable of adaptability.

It is important to note that identifying aesthetic conflict in role-playing games can be a complicated process, as aesthetic values can be easily confused with other cultural values of more semantic character. It is therefore useful to study aesthetic conflict in musical settings, where semantic elements are not present, thereby better illuminating the aesthetic conflicts therein.

4. AESTHETIC CONFLICT IN IMPROVISED MUSIC

Improvised music refers to a set of practices coming out of intersections between jazz and modern art practices in the 1950's in North America and Europe, whereby musical artists spontaneously create musical works in collaboration with each other, typically drawing from a set of vocabularies of sounds that have been practiced in advance. Today, so-called "free improvisation" is a genre

unto itself, with its own thriving subculture, with labels, festivals, and educational institutions around the globe.

While role-playing games often aim to mitigate aesthetic conflict, improvised music embraces it through divergent, individualistic approaches to artistic creation (Fadnes 2015). This, however, is not the case for all practitioners of improvised music, as the practices of many improvisers seek to avoid discussions of the music so that awareness of these conflicts never reaches the surface level of consciousness (Banerji 2023).

As a non-semantic semiotic practice, musical free improvisation can be viewed more clearly through an aesthetic lens than other language-based artistic practices, where semantic, seemingly objective content often takes center-stage over aesthetic aspects. Despite its lack of semantic content, Georgina Born (2017) argues that free improvisation often serves as a platform for mediating broader cultural issues. Born places these issues across four planes of social mediation, with the first or lowest plane containing the “microsocialities of musical interaction.” It is here where the sounds made by improvisers can act as signifiers of culture and the potential for aesthetic conflict is high. For example, in African-American jazz improvisers, “sonic symbolism is often constructed with a view toward social instrumentality” (Lewis 2002). The musicians use their musical identities as avatars of culture (Meadows 2008) to interact with one another. In this way, both performers and potential audiences are engaged in “ethical encounters” (Warren 2014) with one another through these sonic avatars.

It is important to note that aesthetic conflict in musical improvisation is distinguished from performative conflict (Walker 2010). Different from the diegetic conflict of role-playing games, performative conflict is a way of demonstrating to an audience that several musicians are in some form of conflict with one another, for example in the so-called “cutting contests” in jazz improvisation.

5. RUNIC SOUNDSCAPES: A ROLE-PLAYING GAME FOR IMPROVISING MUSICIANS

5.1. Overview

Musics from a wide swath of global cultures possess ludological elements (Mosely 2016), perhaps best exemplified by John Zorn’s game-pieces (Zorn 2017). Improvised music itself possesses clear ludological agential aspects, as musical improvisers navigate their decision-making using a menu of options from their vocabulary (Fadnes 2015; Wilson and MacDonald 2016). Though the history of musical games is beyond the scope of this paper, it is sufficient to note that *Runic Soundscapes* is not unique for being a musical game, but for being the first musical *role-playing* game.

Runic Soundscapes was created at the intersection of compositional ideas of Zorn’s game-pieces (Schyff 2013), notational and agential techniques of composer Anthony Braxton, in particular his *Ghost Trance* and *Falling River Musics* (Dicker 2016), and role-playing game-design techniques. The game was designed primarily to challenge the essentialist notions of musical identity of musical improvisers,¹ with a secondary purpose of affording an opportunity for musicians to have *first-person audience* experiences (Stenros and Montola 2010). It is worth noting that the notion of first person audience has a corollary in improvised music, with Anthony Braxton privileging the experiences of performers through his designation of audiences as “friendly experiencers” (Lock 1989).

¹ For researchers challenging essentialism in music, see Eidsheim (2018) and Hood (1960).

5.2 Rules Summary

Players create musical identities based on material and behavioral elements. Unlike traditional tabletop RPGs, they must physically embody and enact these elements. In this way, the game asks players to “Do what you can do,” in contrast to the typical larp dictum of “do what you can represent.” This means that the game is intended to be played by more advanced musicians who have the ability to embody multiple musical identities. The players’ purposes in creating their alternate identities can be mapped to Bowman’s 9 identity alterations (Bowman 2010). They must also choose from a list of eight classes (called “currents” in game terms) which give the players access to unique abilities which are not normally afforded in typical musical improvisational practice.

After constructing their identities, players interact with a gamemaster (a Rune Sage in game terms) who enacts various environmental aspects — including other musical identities and notation provided by the module designer — and instructs the other players through cards, hand signs, or sand timers. While graphic notation designed for improvisers is not unique, the navigation of the notation in *Runic Soundscapes* is unique in that it is designed to allow multiple interpretations according to unique musical identities in a more often than not asynchronous manner, and with specific rules for navigation. For example, a certain type of notation might mean that they have to play in a particularly creative manner or even refrain from playing while they mentally navigate the notation.

In addition to this, players encounter various special bits of notation that have particular effects. Some are enacted by the game master, while others give certain abilities, in particular the 13 runes which give certain effects according to their class. Most effects affect either the materiality of sound aspects of their identities or the behavior of their identities. Many effects are regulated with the use of sand timers, with each player having three sand timers of different time lengths (30 seconds, 1 minute, and 2 minutes) for particular effects.

6. TYPES OF AESTHETIC CONFLICT IN *RUNIC SOUNDSCAPES*

All musical improvisation affords opportunities for aesthetic conflict, but the rules of *Runic Soundscapes*, by encouraging players to explore *alter biographies* as musical avatars (Calleja 2011), giving the players *alibi* (Deterding 2018) for engaging in conflict rather than avoiding it. Just as importantly, the reduction of the content of musical free improvisation to a non-semantic level allows us to focus on aesthetic elements, and thus makes *Runic Soundscapes* an ideal prism through which to study aesthetic conflict in role-playing games.

Through informal debriefs (Montola 2011) and personal reflections conducted during the playtesting and development stages over two years, seven types of aesthetic conflict were identified in *Runic Soundscapes*. To clearly see where these conflicts occur, we can use actor-network theory (Latour 2005) to identify the various human and non-human agents involved in the creative process that comprise *Runic Soundscapes*. The human agents, which also happen to be the authors named by Jessica Hammer (Hammer 2007) are game designer, module designer, players, audience, while the non-human agents are the rules, scores, and instruments. We can then proceed to place the various types of aesthetic conflict along nodes of interaction between the various non-human agents and the human agent-authors in the network.

Building on the broader discussion of aesthetic conflict, we can categorize its manifestations in *Runic Soundscapes* as follows:

- 1) **Aesthetic Conflict of Identity:** Here, the aesthetic conflict tends to be internal, in particular when musicians harbor essentialist concepts of identity. This type of conflict is often combined with one of the other types of conflicts, meaning that there is the potential for a wide variety of aesthetic conflict even in solo play. *Runic Soundscapes* asks players to take on alternate identities to their “own,” inviting them to play contrary to the manner of play that their aesthetics would typically suggest. (For more on the types of alternate identities that role-players can take on, see Bowman 2010).
- 2) **Aesthetic Conflict of Interaction:** Musicians come from musical cultures with norms of interaction (e.g., jazz): some specified (one musician should be soloing while the others support), and some more general (it should “feel” like there is communication). When musicians have different aesthetic backgrounds for rules of interaction, conflict occurs. The rules of *Runic Soundscapes* can make this explicit, as many of the special abilities players may use invite them to interact (or avoid interaction) in particular ways. (For potential improvisational behaviors in role-playing games in general, see Fatland 2006).
- 3) **Aesthetic Conflict of Materiality of Sound:** Musical cultures are most often built around the materiality of sounds, that is, by the instruments and the sounds they make. This can be general (electronic instruments lack the “soul” of acoustic instruments) or specific (any sounds not made on gamelan percussion instruments are not “music”). By performing elements of a musical culture on instruments not native to this culture, musicians invite aesthetic conflict, either within themselves or with others.
- 4) **Aesthetic Conflict of Interpretation:** This conflict deals with notation and interpretation, but also with interpretation of rules. Some players may have a “loose” interpretation aesthetic, while others may be more strict in their interpretation. As the scores in *Runic Soundscapes* are graphic,² they invite a variety of choices for interpretation, as graphic scores “can become a site for asserting affinities with, or articulating fealty to, a received tradition” (Lewis 2006). It is often here that aesthetic conflicts between the various agent-authors (rules designer, module designer, game master, players) take place.
- 5) **Aesthetic Conflict of Ineptitude/Virtuosity:** Some players may have an aesthetic where they expect high competence or virtuosity on their instruments, while others may enjoy the feeling of ineptitude when playing an instrument a player has not mastered (Hegarty 2010). In *Runic Soundscapes*, players may choose to play in a virtuosic manner they do not typically feel permitted to, or they may attempt to play things beyond their technical ability (either on their primary instrument or on a secondary instrument), thus affording this type of aesthetic conflict. In more typical tabletop RPGs, this type of aesthetic conflict might relate to questions of voice acting. In larp, it may relate to the quality of costumes or other props.
- 6) **Aesthetic Conflict of Complexity/Simplicity:** One of the more common aesthetics for musicians revolves around density of information, with some musicians favoring “simplicity” and “clarity,” and others preferring the sense of vertigo that comes with density of information that is not immediately comprehensible. In *Runic Soundscapes*, this can occur at the level of alternate identity creation, where they may choose to role-play with an avatar that makes use of the opposing aesthetic, or it may occur at the level of the ensemble sound, as clashing aesthetics may result in a complex sound.
- 7) **Aesthetic Conflict of Form (Endings):** While many tabletop RPGs have rules encouraging players to remain together in the same diegetic space, practical concerns of coordination mean that in *Runic Soundscapes*, players may navigate the notation separately. This creates a design

² Even when traditional notation is used in a *Runic Soundscapes* score, the player may choose to use the material as graphic information rather than specifically encoded information, according to how they choose to role-play their avatar.

problem for how to coordinate endings, something more easily accomplished in semantically narrative tabletop RPGs. The solution in *Runic Soundscapes* is to allow individual players to exit the notation at their own pace, signaling their action by a simple wave. This design issue highlights the thorny issue of negotiations of form in tabletop RPGs in general, which likely exists as an unexamined source of aesthetic conflict in much tabletop RPG practice.

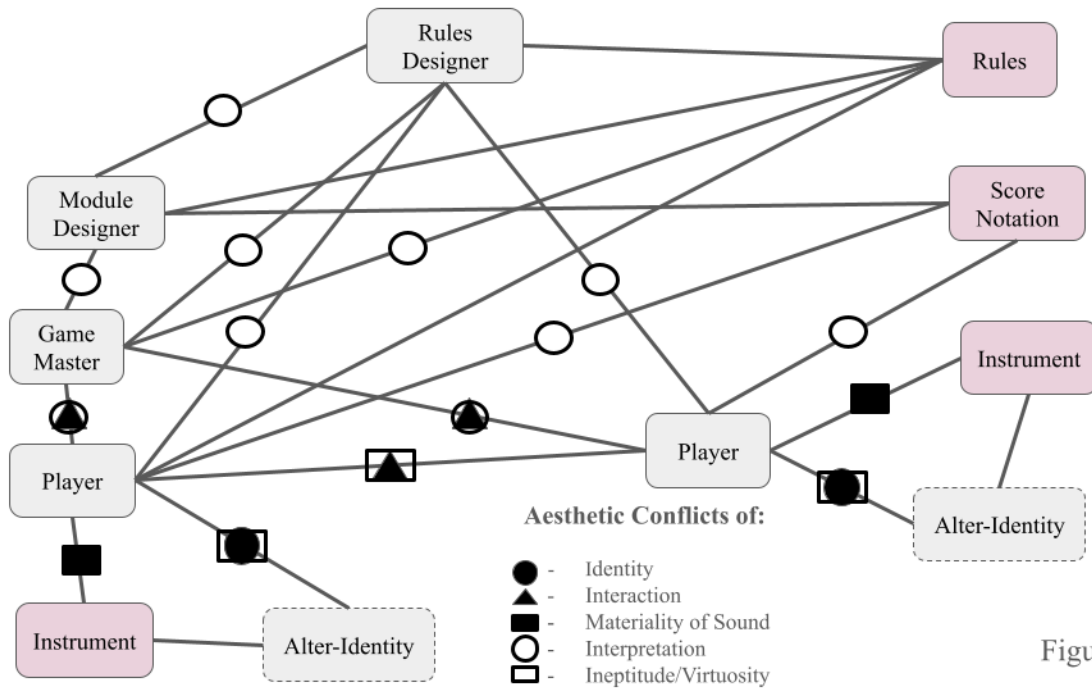


Figure 1

Figure1: Aesthetic Conflict in Role-Playing Games

While the first 5 conflict types are easily visible in a visualization of the actor network of *Runic Soundscapes* (see Figure1), the final 2 relate to larger conglomerates not easily visualized. It is important to note that this taxonomy of aesthetic conflict categories is particular to *Runic Soundscapes*; other role-playing games will see conflicts converge around other aesthetic categories. Future research can perhaps lead to a fuller taxonomy of aesthetic conflict types.

7. CONCLUSION

Avoiding aesthetic conflict can lead game designers to foster cultures of conformity, which may later clash on a larger scale. By designing to encourage aesthetic conflict, we allow game agent-authors to “evaluate their aesthetics and the corresponding conflicts [thereby building] more concrete understandings of these abstract aesthetics to both make sense of and address the aesthetics in the interactions” (Yu 2022). The unique aspects of musical free improvisation affords the study of these aesthetic conflicts without the need to differentiate between other types of cultural conflict, and the musical role-playing game *Runic Soundscapes* points to some categories of aesthetic conflict that can be studied in other more typical role-playing games. This essay hopes to encourage designers of role-playing games to focus anew on the pure aesthetics of their games in the search for opportunities for incorporating aesthetic conflicts into their games, albeit with the appropriate safety tools (Bowman et al. 2025). While it might seem on the surface to be quite contradictory, we can use aesthetic conflict in our game designs to responsibly build more resilient cultures that can avoid more consequential conflicts on larger scales later on.

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Tom Blancarte is an experimental musician, artistic researcher, and educator based in Denmark. An integral part of the experimental music scene in New York City for over a decade, he has toured throughout North America, Europe, and Japan with a variety of ensembles, and has appeared on over 40 albums both as a sideman and as a leader. In both his research and musical practice, Blancarte's focuses are free improvisation, musical translation, and game design in music. He is a lecturer in artistic research at the Danish National Academy of Music in Esbjerg and Odense, and is also a part-time lecturer at Aalborg University.