Reviews

[Editor's note: Selected reviews are posted on the Web at http://www.computermusicjournal.org (click on the Reviews tab). In some cases, they are either unpublished in the *Journal* itself or published in an abbreviated form in the *Journal*.]

Events

Demos and Late-Breaking Session of the Thirteenth International Society for Music Information Retrieval Conference (ISMIR 2012)

Maus Hábitos, Porto, Portugal, 12 October, 2012. Documentation of the event is archived at http://ismir2012.wikispaces.com/.

Reviewed by Amélie Anglade, Eric Humphrey, Erik Schmidt, Sebastian Stober, and Mohamed Sordo
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Boasting over 200 attendees from around the globe, the International Society of Music Information Retrieval (ISMIR) concluded its 13th annual conference in Porto, Portugal in October. Although light rain early in the week ostensibly ensured that attendees would remain inside the stunning São Bento da Vitória Monastery, better weather would later indicate the conditions had nothing to do with it. The seemingly unanimous sentiment at the close of the conference deemed this captivating event a great success. Congratulations to the conference co-chairs, Fabien Gouyon and Carlos Guedes, and their entire organizing team.

One of the advantages of being a young and evolving community is the ability to adapt easily to new ideas.

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Manifested in terms of program content, the 13th ISMIR Conference saw an increase in attention to non-Western music, the role of humans in MIR systems, and meta-analyses of evaluation methods. The community was also able to explore different approaches to organizing the conference itself, experimenting with an exciting new format for the now annual Demos and Late-breaking session (D&L).

The original intent of the D&L, first organized in 2008 at the Ninth ISMIR Conference, was to provide a forum for research that either had not coalesced in time to be considered for the main conference, or would be better suited to a show-and-tell format. Smaller in scope and attendance, previous iterations of the D&L consisted of peer-reviewed submissions treated with as much flexibility as a poster session. The event was usually scheduled on the final day of the conference, which, because of travel itineraries and general conference fatigue, made it somewhat difficult to generate significant buzz about the session.

This year, to shake things up a bit, the organizers decided to try something slightly different. In lieu of a more orthodox approach wherein presenters present to an audience, they created an "unconference," which emphasized discussion, interaction, and the spontaneous flow of ideas. Stemming from the first BarCamp held in Palo Alto, California, in 2005, the "unconference" format contains several antithetical characteristics to the traditional conference mentality of by-few-for-many.

First and foremost, there is no true central organization at any scale, but rather there are individuals who facilitate the organic growth of the event. As a result, there is no formal review prior to the session. Instead, a public wiki is used beforehand to compile ideas and possible topics of interest that groups might discuss. The wiki for this event was launched about one month before the conference, and was by and large maintained by its users. Much like a garden, however, it was useful to intervene in the sheer organic growth of ideas, at one point clustering disparate thoughts

into several distinct groups. This had two direct outcomes for the event: It gave interested parties an idea of who might, or could, assume the role of facilitator, and it connected individuals beforehand with shared interests.

Probably the most crucial aspect of planning a BarCamp, however, is in the selection of the venue itself. In recent years, ISMIR conferences drew approximately 200 attendees, so a reasonable upper attendance limit for the D&L session seemed to be around half of that number. The ideal space for a BarCamp is one that offers several rooms of different size, to appropriately accommodate the needs of different groups, while offering a sufficiently large common area to serve as a hub of activity. In Porto, the Maus Hábitos restaurant and bar matched these needs exactly, while additionally serving refreshments in a hip, casual atmosphere.

Building from this preliminary coordination, the actual session only began to take shape on-site, arranged by the participants themselves. Consistent with common BarCamp practice, the D&L session materialized in the following manner: Someone would propose a topic, offering to be the facilitator for that session, and attendees were polled to determine their level of interest. The session was then assigned a space in the venue commensurate to the estimated size of the group. This process, which took place within a 30-minute time limit set for the initial program-building phase, repeated until there were no more would-be facilitators. It is worth noting that not all the possible time slots were booked, in order to allow for the spontaneous follow-up sessions that might arise afterward.

Once underway, the organizers used a few rules to ensure the D&L session would run smoothly. A strict 30-minute time limit was imposed to keep the activity level high and progress moving. To make sure this was followed, a timekeeper, armed with cowbell and drumstick, would circle the venue in regular intervals to announce the end of each session and disperse the group as necessary. Additionally, facilitators were discouraged from presenting slides or lecturing, rather than motivating a fruitful discussion. Concurrently, in the main atrium of the venue, there was an ongoing series of demos, showcasing a variety of interactive projects produced by the community. Participants were encouraged to go back to that room during the 15-minute breaks between sessions to update the schedule, decide on their next session, and view the demos.

By the end of the afternoon, 25 sessions (out of 28 possible time slots) were organized in seven rooms, and 15 demos ran continuously in the main room. The participants quickly adapted to the "unconference" format, leaving two rooms empty for the first time slot (perhaps waiting to see how others would moderate their sessions), and one for the second. As the day progressed, the later sessions found all time slots entirely filled while the moderators were busy negotiating space requests.

We identified three main kinds of sessions. Some, mostly hosted in small rooms, were initiated by new or upcoming projects. These projects included Music Imagery Information Retrieval (MIIR), Semantic Media project, Shared Open Vocabulary for Audio Research and Retrieval (SOVARR), and The Roadmap for Music Information ReSearch (MIReS). The goal of these sessions was mostly to gain insight, measure interest, and find collaborators in the community. Other sessions focused on coaching others on methods (e.g., Deep Learning) and tools (e.g., Python) that part of the research community had already been using. Lastly, more established topics such as Music Recommendation, Ethnomusicology, and evaluation in MIR were also covered during larger sessions. These sessions were often used to review the current state of affairs, and also to define the road maps for research in the coming years. We refer the reader to the wiki for the event for a full list of the sessions and their reports.

The greatest lesson learned from this experiment is that a BarCamp session can offer sparks of excitement, particularly among junior members of the community (new faculty, recent graduates, and doctoral students). It seems that this provides a forum well-suited to those who are inclined to become more involved with the conference, but are only beginning to establish themselves. Academic merits aside, a BarCamp has the potential to serve as a community-building exercise in a way that receptions and social events come up short.

As independent reviewers we would like to offer several of our own observations and recommendations for future organizers of BarCamp sessions.

First, the facilitator's role is a nuanced one, and it is necessary that those individuals who rise to the occasion understand it well. As previously stated, mediating a successful BarCamp session is rather analogous to maintaining a garden. Given proper preparation, it will, by and large, take care of itself with minimal intervention. This means, however, that although the facilitator should be mostly hands-off during the session, the onus falls on that person to adequately arrange it. We found that this could be something as simple as showing a few preliminary diagrams or pictures in the case of Deep Learning, or giving a brief introduction to frame the topic and ensure

that all participants have a common understanding. Additionally, the facilitator should, at the onset, identify two items: a goal, be it a list of action items or questions the group might try to answer, and the intended format of the session. This gives the discussion both a shared sense of direction, as well as a consistent bearing to which to return, should conversation meander off course.

Given the specific emphasis this kind of event places on discussion, there are also a few techniques that should be used by all so as to not impede healthy discourse. As a participant in a session, if you recognize that you are knowledgeable in that field, it is advisable to restrain yourself from accidentally dominating conversation, allowing others to interact and ask novice questions that arise naturally as part of the learning process. As a facilitator, it is quintessential to internalize the role of an invisible guiding hand, rather than that of orator. In general, a well-moderated BarCamp session is one where it becomes less evident over time who exactly the facilitator even is.

More pragmatically, there are also aspects of event planning that need to be considered. The schedule was displayed on a large table about a foot off the ground, so that attendees could gather around it from all sides. Although it achieved its desired effect in this regard, it also made it difficult for everyone to see the schedule at the same time. Perhaps a wall display, projector, or even a viewable online spreadsheet, ideally integrated with the same system for reporting results and feedback for each session, could have been used. Though it ultimately worked out well, assigning topics to rooms by a show of hands, was, in our experience, a bit chaotic and could be improved upon in future editions.

As mentioned previously, the choice of venue is extremely important, as well as the resources contained therein. Whiteboards and drawing surfaces proved more useful than projectors, which had the somewhat undesirable effect of leading some to present prepared slides. We also found that the venue doesn't need to be particularly large, as more time is preferable to more space. Too many concurrent events can result in conflicts of interest, causing participants to choose between competing sessions. This was also a problem with the demos, which did not have a unique time of their own, so attendance required skipping other sessions. Additionally, the presence of a camera team documenting the whole ISMIR was very much inconsistent with the goal of encouraging broad participation in the discussion, especially from members that are new to the field. These events should provide a relaxed, pleasant environment, where new students feel comfortable presenting any question to any group. Cameras might be more appropriate for capturing the overall thrust of the event.

Finally, if scheduling this session at the end of the conference encourages retrospection and planning (two activities which go well with the BarCamp format), it also discourages attendance. This first edition was well attended, with over 100 participants, so we recommend including the D&L inside the program of the ISMIR conference, possibly as an evening session.

To conclude, the D&L session was a great success, acting as an exclamation point to a fantastic ISMIR. The "unconference" format was able to inject an unprecedented level of activity and excitement into the session, providing an opportunity for participants at various stages of their careers to interact in a casual academic setting. As an initial experiment, it allowed us to gain further insight into what makes a good BarCamp and how to achieve it, both within and outside of the ISMIR community.

Publications

Two Reviews of Hannah B. Higgins and Douglas Kahn (Eds.): Mainframe Experimentalism: Early Computing and the Foundations of the Digital Arts

Hardcover, 2012, ISBN 978-0-520-26837-1, softcover, ISBN 978-0-520-26838-8, 376 pages, edited volume with introduction, 24 essays, 30 illustrations, and index; University of California Press, 2120 Berkeley Way, Berkeley, California 94704-1012, USA; telephone: (510) 642-4247; electronic mail orders@cpfsinc.com; http:/www.ucpress.edu/.

1. Reviewed by Hubert Howe Flushing, New York, USA

Mainframe Experimentalism is a big book, with several different sections and chapters by different authors covering work done in many of the arts in the early days of computing. Music is only a small part of the book, and there are only three composers and activities that the book focuses on: James Tenney at Bell Labs in the early 1960s, John Cage and Lejaren Hiller and their collaboration in the production of *HPSCHD* at the University of Illinois in the late 1960s, and Alvin Lucier's *North American Time Capsule* from 1967. The book includes extensive footnotes and has clearly been well researched.

The early days of mainframe computing are so far past us at this time that much of its history

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