Coursework commentary 2017–2018

CO3346 Sound and music

Coursework assignment 2

General remarks

This unit is structured on a topic basis through the subject guide. The coursework assignments this year were designed to allow students to explore concepts of randomness and chance in more depth, and to produce a sonic artefact as the outcome of their investigation.

The first coursework assignment involved exploring background material in the area of randomness, within the context of sound and music, as well as making use of the material about swarms and developing a practical implementation. The second coursework assignment required finding out about the work of John Cage, a significant figure in music and chance.

At level 6, examiners expect a higher quality response to questions, as this is the final level of the degree programme. Students are also expected to perform more independent work in order to achieve the requirements of the assignments, and to be able to submit reports and essays of high quality. This year, there were a handful of excellent submissions for both coursework assignments, but there were also a disappointing number of mediocre ones, especially in the first, where it seemed that students did not make the effort to read broadly. This resulted in essays that were very narrowly focused, and correspondingly, for the second, in artefacts that were not especially creative. It is extremely important that students investigate the subject matter in depth, especially at level 6, and do not simply follow what seems to be the easiest path to submitting work.

A large number of students submitted essays that had a list of references, but no citation in the essay at all. It is not sufficient to simply note your sources at the end. Proper academic writing has to ensure that claims made and arguments posed, as well as information given, are clearly linked to the sources from which they are derived, and this needs to be done in the body of the essay.

This year, examiners were pleased to note that the required submission format was well adhered to.

Comments on specific questions

John Cage and the use of chance in composition

At level 6, in the Creative Computing degree, we expect students to be able to develop a brief, and to respond to a brief. Additionally, students should be able to critically evaluate their own and others' work. This coursework assignment required a brief development in the form of a description of motivation for a sketch in the context of the work of John Cage, from the previous coursework assignment. A second written part of the submission was a critical evaluation of the sketch developed from the initial brief.

Most students were able to provide a reasonable brief, though some of the weaker submissions were just essays about Cage, and did not contain much in the way of motivation. Another weakness was the lack of clarity about what was to be attempted and how it linked with specific aspects of chance.

The main sketch development, for Part B, saw a handful of interesting and creative submissions. One student's work took account of very specific aspects of Cage's work. In particular they focused on anarchy and order, as well as collaboration and complement, and made use of the poetry aspect of Cage's creative outputs. This particular submission included very clear aspects in all of the written work. The motivation included a description of the focus of the work, as well as the process the student planned to take and the intention. A clear description of the implementation was given. The evaluation was extremely strong, and included an evaluation of intention (how successfully this was achieved), effectiveness and relevance. A technical evaluation was included too, and improvements in terms of both the technical aspects and the creative and impact aspects were presented.

Another student submitted work based very clearly on Cage's "Water Walk", broadened to include sounds from animals and household objects. Again, the links between Cage's original work, and the sketch developed by the student, were discussed very clearly. This student included, as part of their evaluation, a number of well formulated experiments in which they varied specific parameters of the sketch's conceptual structure.

Many of the submissions, however, were weak on either the creative concept and its links to chance, or had a good creative basis but were lacking in technical development. Some of the weaker submissions simply implemented a random changing of variables, with no principled approach to the variation. Not all students understood the relevance of the I-Ching in Cage's work, especially with regard to the concept of randomness and the use of dice.

In general the critical evaluations were done reasonably well, though some students simply focused on the technical challenges and did not discuss impact or efficacy. Many also did not evaluate their own work in terms of creative depth; it is important to show understanding of one's own outputs. While not all pieces or work produced will always show large amounts of innovation, having a sense of the extent of this in an artefact you have developed is important.

Finally, as with the first coursework assignment, it is always useful to include at least some sample outputs when this is possible; not all students did this but some did. Seeing the submission as the way you communicate with the examiners about your own understanding, the process you took, and what you have achieved, is a helpful stance; and some outputs can often highlight the latter. However, simply submitting outputs as part of the zip file, with no discussion of them, may show a lack of understanding. It is equally important to comment on the particular outputs you've included, and what you feel they demonstrate.