**Why Cytus is more than a rhythm game**

I would like to discuss the mobile rhythm game called Cytus. Cytus is a collection of rhythm games developed by Taiwanese game developer Rayark, with the initial installment for mobile phones released in 2011. I started playing Cytus in 2012 (6th grade!) after watching my friend play it after church. I had played a lot of rhythm games before, but Cytus was special. It was unlike Guitar Hero or Dance Dance Revolution, which had a pretty sizeable community in America, due to its easy learning curve and popular songs. Cytus was a game that was big in the Japanese and Chinese online community, and it was very much on its way to make its mark in the East Asian rhythm game community. Because I would spend most of my time on the Japanese internet and forums, and I would constantly see talk on Cytus as well as videos, images and gameplay, I was more interested in the game. Not going to lie, a part of myself just wanted to catch up to my friend, who was ranked 7th in the world on Apple Games (at the time). I now can proudly say that I reached top 0.1% globally on Google Play games in 2016. Since then, Rayark has released a (much more popular) sequel to Cytus and the original has long since been overshadowed. However, the original will forever have a place in my heart. It combines several things that I enjoy: rhythmic and syncopated music, high intensity tapping and focus, flow, visceral reactions (and bragging rights). The game's inherent requirement of intense focus as well as the added electronic, instrumental music evokes a physiological as well as emotional response from the player.

Cytus, being a rhythm game, is unlike other games typically brought up when talking about games. It relies heavily on UI rather than a playable environment with a sprite. When you open the app, it brings you to the home screen, which contains an illustration of a cyborg/robot with shattered metal surrounding her. One thing you will notice is the colour scheme: white, silver, and blue. This colour scheme is consistent throughout the UI; in fact, the only other colours that are in the game are only in the album art for each playable song. There are 10 story chapters, each with 12 songs, save for a few extra chapters. What also sets Cytus apart from other Asian rhythm games is how bare-bones of a rhythm game it is. There are no flashy characters floating around, there isn't a heavy push from the game to get a high score, the game doesn't rank you, and there aren't any "power-ups". The animations are minimal, and the UI forces you to focus only on the music and the gameplay.

The gameplay involves a line (called the "Active Scan Line") that moves up and down the screen in a regular rhythm. This rhythm is usually the song's BPM. (This differs in Cytus II, the speed of the ASL can increase and decrease, but still follows the rhythm changes in the music.) The player taps notes with their finger, the circles that pop up on the screen, as the line passes through it. What makes this difficult is that you need to discern which notes are the ones where the line is going up and which ones are for the line going down. There are accuracy ratings for when the player hits the notes: if the player doesn't hit the note by the time the line fully passes the circle, it is considered a "Miss". If the player hits the note right when the line is at the center of the circle, it is a "Perfect". There are "Perfect", "Good", "Bad" and "Miss" ratings, in order from most accurate to least accurate. If the player consecutively gets a "Perfect" or "Good" rating, their combo goes up, which gives an increasing score boost as the combo increases.

There isn't really an objective to the game, but the game does score you. It uses a very objective scale, no power ups; the score reflects your actual performance. The maximum score a player can receive is 1000000, also known as "Million Master", and requires an all-perfect full combo. In order to clear the song you need a minimum score of 700000. Any score below that is given an F rating, with scores of C starting at 700000, B at 800000, A at 900000, and S at 950000. (Wikipedia) A lot of dedicated players try to get as many MMs (Million Masters) as they can, or at least close. Most players focus on the letter grade given, but there is also a secondary scoring system called TP, or "Technical Points". This is a percentage score based on your note accuracy. There are two types of "Perfect": Rainbow Perfect and Regular Perfect. Rainbow Perfect has a stricter, smaller timing window. Hardcore players will strive to get 100% TP Million Masters, and it is extremely difficult to get that score.

In the beginning of the semester we went around and talked about what games we like to play, and the term 'hardcore games' was brought up in the context of games like Touhou and rhythm games. We very briefly discussed what makes a game a 'hardcore game', and things such as technical skill, fandom, and lore were brought up. Cytus is a game that requires a lot of technical skill. It is something that can be improved with time, but it has a very steep learning curve. It requires a lot of hand-eye coordination, a short reaction time, a good sense of rhythm (hence rhythm game) as well as limb independence. It definitely helps if you play an instrument, specifically the piano. It comes to no surprise that a lot of Cytus gameplay Youtube channels also tend to post piano covers of Cytus, Deemo and other rhythm game songs. The high amount of technical skill needed to be a master at this game may seem daunting to a lot of new players, and it might seem as though the point of the game is to get as high of a score and TP as you can. That is an aspect of the game you cannot ignore, but there is actually a story to the game that I personally believe is a metaphor for the gameplay itself.

Cytus is set in a post-apocalyptic world in which all living humans are killed by a virus. The only remaining sentient beings are robots with human memories. These memories are stored in the form of music due to limited memory space, and by playing these songs (levels) the robots relive their human memories. The story is actually only very vaguely implied in the game, and a lot of people actually don't even know that there is a story to Cytus. Although it isn't necessary to know the premise of Cytus in order to get the most out of the game, I believe that knowing the story has made me appreciate the game even more.

Before I get into what meaning I get out of this game, I have to explain my relationship with music. I have an extreme inclination towards instrumental music, and especially those that focus on rhythm and syncopation. It is partly due to the fact that I can't really hear lyrics (I recognize that things are being sung, I just cannot make out the words regardless of the language being sung) nor do I feel anything when I read lyrics. Which means that words don't really transmit much emotion or story to me.

The music in Cytus covers a wide variety of genres including R&B, pop, rock and some things adjacent to jazz and bossa nova, but is primarily electronic. A lot of the electronic music doesn't contain vocals at all, let alone lyrics. Tosin Abasi (guitarist of Animals as Leaders, an instrumental progressive metal band) said that "You can't hear the emotion in the human voice (talking about not having a vocalist), and that is such an easy conduit to convey emotion". (Tosin Abasi, Guitar Power) A lot of that might make the music seem surface level or without meaning, but I don't think that music has to have a "message" in order to be meaningful. I also think that electronic music is even more special and central to Cytus because it is produced with synthesizers and machines, yet we can feel such emotion in the music. And that juxtaposition is what makes this game great. By removing lyrics from music, it forces the player to really just experience it instead of trying to deduce a meaning. I find it much easier to sit down, close your eyes, and *feel* the music. When there are no lyrics and the music relies on chord changes, synthesizer choices and more, it forces a visceral reaction from the listener, which (in my opinion) is stronger than lyrics will ever be. The combined experience of just listening to the music and getting into the zone, or flow, as we have discussed in class, adds to the games premise: "relive human memories through music". The player is hitting the screen to the rhythm continuously, and it adds a further layer to the experience. By having an intense and focused concentration on the present moment and present time, by removing thought and just relying on visceral reactions or reflex, it makes playing the game intrinsically rewarding. There is no need to try and find a meaning to the game that you can add to your life, but just by playing it you are having some kind of internal experience, even if you don't perceive it.

An added note: I am also quite sure I’m on the autism spectrum (currently getting tested) and tapping things rhythmically is a form of stimming for me. I know it is the same for other neurodivergents - Reddit user dbgr says, “...that pattern matching and controlled hyper-stimulation is like crack to me” on a post asking about people on the spectrum who play rhythm games as their special interest. (Reddit) Continuously tapping hard, getting that rebound tactile feedback on my fingers right on the beat is just so incredibly satisfying to me. I don’t think I would even need a good score in order to enjoy the game, just the experience playing it is enough. But I do currently pride myself in being incredibly good at rhythm games.

**Bibliography**

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