

Organization of Personal Music Playlists

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Overview

Much study has been done on automatic organization and feature extraction of music for the purposes of classification, but the habits of users in the organization of their personal playlists and how these behaviours may impact software designed for organization is one that is comparatively little studied.

Cunningham et al. (2004) examines, through interviews, the organization of personal music collections, encompassing primarily physical collections but also touching on digital collections. Other studies involving user organization typically involve user evaluation of software packages. (Pauws & Eggen 2002, Corthaut et al. 2006). Torrens & Hertzog (2004) explore using visualizations to support user playlist creation. However, there is a lack of experimental knowledge of user's music information seeking and organization behaviour.

Emergent Structures

Since most user's collections are organized in way that is inherently personalized, we must examine emergent structures in human behaviour to be able to generalize a music organization behaviour.

What Cunningham et al (2004) found is that there are a number of important facets. The first is that users typically organize in a number of sub-collections. The first is that there are often small, frequently-used collections that usually reside near their stereo equipment and are heavily used. The second is dispersed collections in appropriate physical locations based on tone and temperament of the music: quiet music for study spaces, upbeat music for workout or driving, etc. Finally, these collections are usually derived from a larger collection base where less-frequently used items reside.

Within these collections, some organization may be present such as broad categorization (Jazz, Pop, etc.), alphabetical, chronological (by purchase or acquisition date), preferential (favourite first) or haphazardly. It is also interesting to note that, while a collection may have an imposed order to begin with (i.e. alphabetical), collections tended to move towards a newest-purchased first ordering.

These organizations are based around an album-level organization of music collections and are limited to physical locations. With the popularity of digital music and the ensuing

freedom this medium brings to organization of personal music collections, there are several other emergent structures.

Perhaps the most notable organizational block is by intended use or occasion. Playlists such as “Gym music”, “programming music”, etc. were frequently reported as broad categories of playlists.

Finally, the study highlighted the social nature of sharing music and that many people may share and contribute to a music collection, either through trading selections or by nature of cohabitation. As well, an important aspect of music collections that was noted by users was the image the contents their music collection projected to others, and what their selections of music ‘said’ to people browsing their collections.

Related to this idea of personal music collection organization was also the idea of how people experience their music. Because, as Cunningham et al. shows, people tend to organize their collections based on mood or intended use, this denotes a highly personalized and experience-driven reasoning behind personal music collections. Bull (2005) presents a fascinating look at how the iPod culture is changing the way people associate with music, and how this changes a person’s view of the world and the way having their music with them affects their view of their environment. In his study, users often use music to ‘mediate’ between themselves and society. By expression behaviours such as imagining themselves in a film, with their music as a soundtrack and strangers as actors in the film, Bull considers that music allows people to create a space in which they can manage in the midst of environments that they may not be able to control.

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