

Artificial Dancing Intelligence: Neural Cellular Automata for Visual Performance of Music

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Abstract

We present Artificial Dancing Intelligence (ADI), an interactive neural music visualizer that is accessed through a web app, but performs inference entirely on local devices. Our approach enables anyone to create music-driven visuals while leveraging the expressive and sometimes unpredictable dynamics of self-organized systems. ADI uses an audio stream’s average energy (known as RMS) to modulate a neural cellular automata (NCA) that produces visual patterns that move and ‘dance’ along with the audio stream in real-time. Through the web interface, users can adjust the relationship between the music’s energy and the NCA system to create unique visual performances out of any music audio stream. ADI achieves smooth, real-time responsiveness on modern consumer devices.

Keywords: neural cellular automata, interactive visualizations, music visualizations, real-time systems, web-based applications, generative media

1. Introduction

Despite their expressive potential, most AI models used for synthesizing music visualizations tend to be computationally intensive and therefore operate offline (Klemke, 2025; Liu et al., 2023; Ng et al., 2024; Revid.ai, 2025) or require specialized hardware (Kraasch and Pasquier, 2022). This first limitation restricts the opportunity for real-time experimentation and exploration between the AI and the human during artistic creation. The second restriction — requiring dedicated GPUs — limits the number of people who can interact with these creative systems. We argue that real-time interactivity and accessibility are of paramount importance for fostering *collaborative*, rather than *substitutive*, relationships between people and creative AI systems.

The system we present, Artificial Dancing Intelligence (ADI), creates interactive music visualizations while running locally on consumer devices, enabling constant and responsive iteration in live artistic performances. We evaluate our system under the framework of Performance-Based Research (Skains, 2017). That is, we provide qualitative detail as to what the system responses are when collaborating and performing with it, rather than evaluating it with extensive numerical metrics which might not capture nuanced notions like visual creativity and ease of expression. Additionally, in the *Methods*, and *Results and Evaluation* sections we present the technical reasoning behind the implementation of ADI along with web-rendering metrics (average fps, input delays, etc).

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2. Related Works

2.1. VJ Software

The system we present enables the creation of live music visuals, making its most immediate application as VJ software. Video Jockeys (VJs) specialize in creating and performing music visualizations for live music performances (Pigg, 2020). Commercial VJ tools such as Synesthesia Live, Imaginando’s Visual Synthesizer, and Kaleidosync rely on a catalog of predefined visualizations known as presets (Imaginando, 2025; Kaleidosync, 2025; Synesthesia, 2025)¹. VJs typically select one preset at a time and may adjust a handful of parameters to modulate its behavior. However, these parameters offer limited expressive and customization potential. As a result, creating compelling music visualizations relies on switching between many presets throughout a live performance rather than engaging in continuous in-depth interaction and exploration. To address this limitation, ADI employs a self-organizing system whose emergent dynamics yield a wide range of visual behaviors, enabling more expressive and continuously variable interactions.

2.2. (Neural) Cellular Automata and Music

Cellular Automata (CA) are computational systems composed of cells on a grid — sometimes called a substrate — where each cell in the grid has a state that is updated according to a common set of local rules (Wakefield, 2018)². Interestingly, despite the locality of its rules, these systems exhibit globally organized behaviors, making them fall under the category of self-organized systems (Wolfram, 2002). The history of cellular automata and music is long and diverse. Since the late 1980s, many researchers have explored mapping CA dynamics to different musical properties (Beyls, 1989; Wolfram Research, 2005; McLaughlin and Tremblay, 2010; Zareei et al., 2015; Schaap and Hedblom, 2024; Didiot-Cook, 2025). However, while these efforts mostly use CA for sound synthesis and music composition, relatively little research has focused on CA-like systems purely as a medium to visualize music.

Neural Cellular Automata (NCA) are similar to CA, but instead of having rules be explicitly defined, they are learned by a neural network (Mordvintsev et al., 2020). NCAs have continuous rather than discrete states. However the fundamental idea of local rules driving global behavior still applies, as every cell is updated by the same neural network. Since their academic popularization in 2020, NCAs have proven useful in many fields and tasks such as morphing across images (Sudhakaran et al., 2022b), learning spatial-temporal patterns (Richardson et al., 2024), policy network learning for reinforcement learning tasks (Najarro et al., 2022), and even as potential models to achieve analog universal computation (Béna et al., 2025). In the musical visualization domain, NCAs have barely been explored within academic (Suk, 2024) and non-academic contexts (Baecker, 2024; Tension, 2023; u/PsyzygyMusic, 2023). However—similar to earlier research on classical CA—existing, NCA-based works have primarily focused either on audiovisual pieces, where sound and visuals are co-generated, or on music visualization processes that seem to operate off-line.

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1. These sources are product websites that include descriptions and demos. They provide detailed examples of usage and capabilities.
 2. This source has no year since it is from York University course DAT4950, taught by Assistant Professor Graham Wakefield, which has no visible date.

2.3. Edge AI

Edge AI is an AI sub field concerned with AI systems that run computations and/or training on the device where data and input is collected. These systems are generally less powerful and less scalable than systems that run on centralized super computers. However, Edge AI systems have certain advantages such as operating without an internet connection, reduced latency, increased privacy due to lack of centrality, and less reliance on expensive hardware (Gill et al., 2025). Since ADI generates visuals in response to audio and user inputs in real-time, the system’s inference process should have as low latency as possible. Thus, framing the development of our system in the context of Edge AI aligns with our goal of exploring real-time, accessible, creative experiences with AI systems.

3. Methods

3.1. Technology Stack

Artificial Dancing Intelligence uses React (Stack Overflow, 2024) for its user interface, Tensorflow.js (TensorFlow Development Team, 2023) for conducting NCA computations, and the Web Audio API (World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), 2018) for audio stream feature extraction.

3.2. User Experience and User Interface

The ADI user interface shown in Figure 1 is designed with the purpose of exposing inputs and outputs to the system on the same web page. The layout is divided into two sections, the *Controls* section which houses user inputs, and the *Viewer* section which displays the music visualization.



Figure 1: The Artificial Dancing Intelligence Web Application UI, showing the *Controls* area and *Viewer* area.

3.3. Architecture

As shown in Figure 2, Artificial Dancing Intelligence builds upon a pre-trained Growing Neural Cellular Automata (GNCA) (Mordvintsev et al., 2020) architecture by modulating its update dynamics according to the audio stream’s average amplitude energy (known as root mean square, RMS). The first half of this section summarizes the main components of the GNCA, while the second describes the modifications introduced in ADI.

3.3.1. BASE PRE-TRAINED ARCHITECTURE

The GNCA architecture was chosen as the base for ADI for its small size, low computational cost, interesting growth dynamics, and real-time web portability (Mordvintsev et al., 2020). The GNCA is an NCA trained to grow a target image³ from a single black pixel, also known as a *seed*. To do so, each pixel on the target image is represented in the GNCA with a 16 channel cell. Three of these channels represent the RGB values of the image, one is the alpha channel A representing image opacity as well as the notion of a cell being alive ($A > 0.1$) or dead, while the remaining 12 channels are hidden channels.

The update process for the GNCA starts by extracting state representations of each cell and its neighbors. Then, a fully connected neural network is applied to each cell’s state representation. The network then outputs ds , the incremental update of each cell. Finally only alive cells and cells next to alive cell are allowed to update (a process known as *alive masking*). Alive masking is necessary to induce the ‘growing’ process from single pixel to target image.

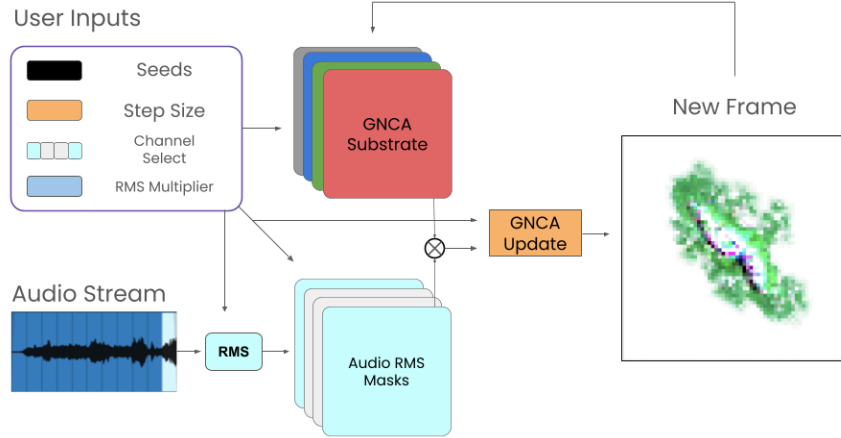


Figure 2: Artificial Dancing Intelligence Architecture

3. For this paper, we trained the base GNCA to grow a lizard emoji on a $64 \times 64 \times 16$ substrate.

Algorithm 1: Artificial Dancing Intelligence Update Loop

1. **While audio is playing:**
 - (a) **Extract audio RMS** since last frame.
 - (b) **Compute Audio RMS Masks:**
 - i. Read user channel selection.
 - ii. Apply RMS Multiplier to each selected channel.
 - (c) **Apply modulation:**
 - i. Perform element-wise multiplication between the NCA substrate and the Audio RMS Masks.
 - ii. Apply `NaN_to_zero()` filter to clean invalid values.
 - (d) **Update GNCA:** execute one GNCA step (Seed placement and Step Size parameters modulated by user inputs).
 - (e) **Render output:** display the GNCA’s RGBA channels for the user.
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3.3.2. AUDIO VISUAL ARCHITECTURE

The primary contribution of Artificial Dancing Intelligence is the real-time audio modulation architecture built on top of the pre-trained GNCA, shown in Figure 2. The update loop for this modulation system is outlined in Algorithm 1. After selecting an audio file in the Controls panel of ADI, we begin each frame rendering loop by extracting the audio stream’s RMS since the last frame update of the web application. Then, this RMS value is multiplied by a user-adjustable floating-point scalar value — the *RMS Multiplier*. This multiplied scalar fills a tensor of size equal to the GNCA’s grid. We refer to this tensor as the *Audio RMS Mask*, inspired by the goal-guided masks of [Sudhakaran et al. \(2022a\)](#), but here masks are computed on-the-fly from audio RMS rather than learned. The user selects which of the 16 channels of the GNCA’s substrate to apply the Audio RMS Mask using the *Channel Select* user input. Finally, because the audio-NCA feedback loop introduced by our architecture occasionally causes the NCA substrate values explode in magnitude, we add a `NaN_to_zero()` routine that converts NaN or Inf values into zero values before computing the GNCA’s update and rendering it onto the Viewer.

Additionally, we introduce a user-controllable *Step Size* parameter. This input is a positive floating-point number that scales the GNCA’s incremental cell update ds described in the previous section. We introduce Step Size as a modification of the GNCA to explore how scaling incremental updates affects the system’s growth dynamics. *Seed* is a user input that places a stream of seeds on the substrate based on where in the Viewer the user clicks and holds their cursor. Lastly, we introduce *Color Shift* a secondary input in ADI which shifts the colors of the rendered image to introduce color variety without affecting any of the GNCA substrate directly.

4. Results and Evaluation

4.1. Web Demo and Code Repository

The web demo can be accessed through <https://adi2026.netlify.app>. The repository with the website’s code can be accessed through https://github.com/adi-eaim-2026/adi_eaim2026_copy.

4.2. Web Application Metrics

To verify that Artificial Dancing Intelligence (ADI) operates in real-time on consumer hardware, we profiled the deployed web version using Chrome DevTools (Lighthouse local metrics) on a 2023 MacBook Air (Apple M2, 8 GB RAM) running Google Chrome. The system achieved a Largest Contentful Paint (LCP) of 0.20 s, indicating rapid interface load, and an Interaction-to-Next-Paint (INP) latency of 32 ms, confirming immediate visual feedback to user inputs. Runtime analysis suggests an average render rate of 31.2 frames per second, maintaining smooth, perceptually real-time responsiveness. Together, these measurements substantiate that ADI performs well within standard browser environments in modern consumer hardware.

4.3. Performance-Based Research

Artificial Dancing Life is an instrument for the visual performance of music, which means creativity and exploration are at the center of its design. Therefore, we evaluate our system in the context of performance and artistic expression using Practice-Based Research (PBR), a methodology that generates new knowledge through the integration of creative practice and critical reflection (Skains, 2017). It typically involves formulating a research question, conducting contextual research, producing a series of artistic performances, and reflecting on their relationship to the initial inquiry and theoretical background. The value of this methodology emerges most clearly because the researcher also assumes the role of the performer, enabling a deep, embodied exploration of the system’s capabilities and fostering the kind of serendipitous discovery described by Skains (2017). Accordingly, this section is organized around three research questions about the system’s creative performance capabilities, followed by their corresponding artistic outcomes and discussions.

4.3.1. QUESTION 1: HOW DO USER INPUTS IN ISOLATION AFFECT THE SYSTEM?

RMS Multiplier: This parameter can be modulated during performance via a slider input in the ADI UI. When this input is set to zero, the GNCA behaves as originally intended by growing the target image from a seed. However, as the RMS Multiplier increases, as shown in Figure 3, audio-reactive color changes, and emergent⁴ growth dynamics start transforming the target image. As the RMS Multiplier is further increased, the rate of this growth is not always predictable. If the product of the RMS Multiplier and audio source’s RMS exceed a certain threshold, the system’s growth explodes, leading to clipping of colors and chaotic dynamics. In other words, the choice of music audio file plays an important role in shaping the visual outputs of ADI.

4. The growth dynamics observed have a structured nature, yet they were not explicitly coded.

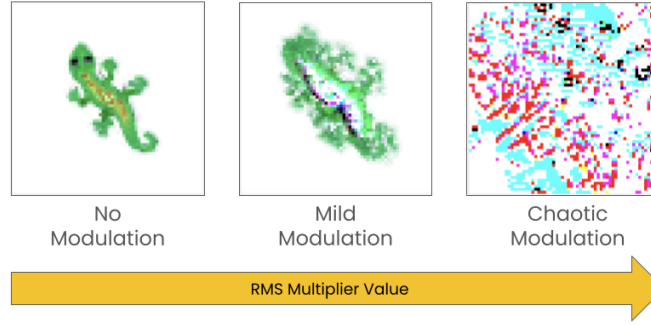


Figure 3: System evolution as RMS Multiplier increases.

Step Size: This parameter is adjusted during performance via a slider input. When Step Size is set to zero, the GNCA dynamics freeze because the incremental update ds of each cell is zero. As Step Size increases to approximately⁵ 2.0, as shown in Figure 4, the system dynamics gradually speed up to reach the target image. As the Step Size continues to increase, the target image suddenly grows into clipped colors with seemingly random dynamics. As the Step Size is further increased, these random noise-like dynamics start organizing into small gliding shapes reminiscent of “glider” patterns in Conway’s Game of Life⁶ (Gardner, 1970).

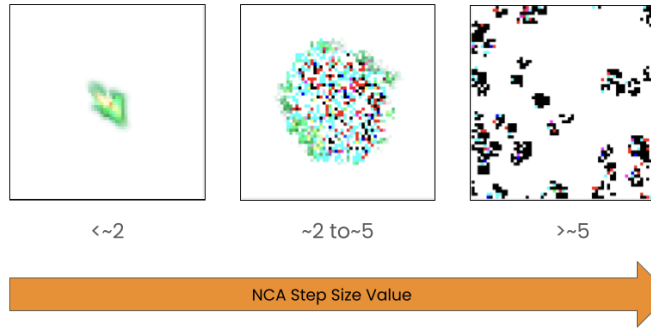


Figure 4: System evolution as Step Size increases.

Channel Select: These parameters are changed via toggles in the ADI UI. Selecting the red, green, or blue channel has an immediate impact on the colors of the system. As shown in Figure 5(a), if the Green channel is selected, any cell that contains green in the target image will start pulsing and changing color along with the music. By contrast, audio modulation of hidden channels generally does not affect the colors of the system; rather, it induces unpredictable distortions to the growth dynamics of the GNCA as shown

5. The actual range depends on the pre-trained image and the current growth stage of the GNCA.

6. Conway’s Game of Life is arguably the most famous two-dimensional cellular automaton.

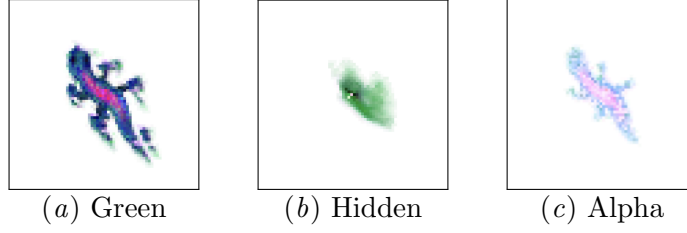


Figure 5: Different visual outputs from audio modulating different GNCA channels.

in Figure 5(b). Since the alpha channel regulates the GNCA’s growth, modulating this channel causes the target image to change in opacity. If the audio modulation is too strong, the system goes blank (every cell turning dead). However, at lower modulation strengths, the target image grows and shrinks along with the music audio stream, as shown in Figure 5(c).

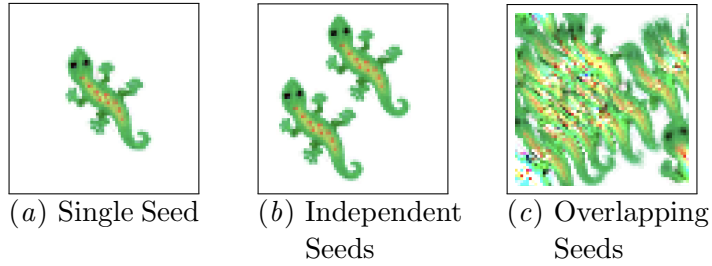


Figure 6: Different growth dynamics based on seed placement

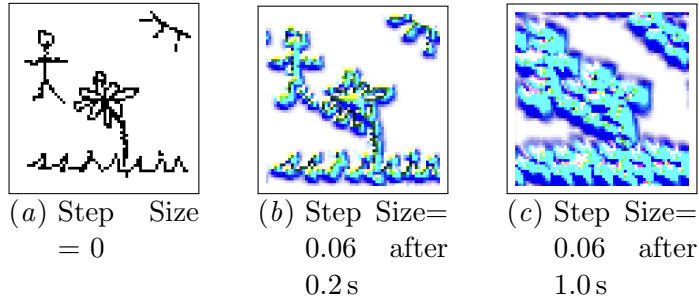


Figure 7: Progression observed with drawing functionality.

Seeds: The user can place seeds by clicking and dragging on the ADI Viewer component. When a single seed is placed, a single pretrained target image grows, as shown in Figure 6(a). If two or more seeds are placed far apart, they each independently grow a target image, as shown in Figure 6(b). However, when seeds are placed close enough, their independent growth processes overlap and interfere with each other causing distorted target image formations, as shown in Figure 6(c). If Step Size is set to zero while the system is

playing, as shown in Figure 7(a), the click and drag gesture enables users to draw shapes. When the Step Size is then increased above zero, as show in Figure 7(b) and Figure 7(c), the drawn pattern will grow and react to music.

4.3.2. QUESTION 2: HOW PREDICTABLE ARE THE SYSTEM’S VISUAL OUTPUTS?

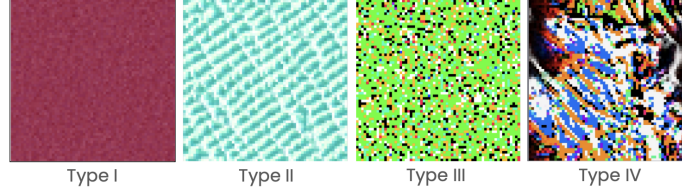


Figure 8: ADI outputs reminiscent of the Wolfram four-type classification of cellular automata.

The ”explosion” dynamics discussed in Question 1 — which we observed across different channel selections, RMS Multiplier, and Step Size configurations — are difficult to characterize since the space of possible input combinations is essentially untractable. However, it is clear that these chaotic explosion occur when the GNCA substrate values explode in magnitude due to alterations of the system’s feedback loop through the repeated multiplication of the Audio Masks at each time step.

Additonally, we found that the visual outputs of ADI tend to fall into Wolfram classes of CA behavior, as seen in Figure 8. In his book *A New Kind of Science* (Wolfram, 2002), Wolfram classifies cellular automata behavior into four types. Type I is constant, where the automata is in a uniform state. Type II is a repetitive state. Type III is seemingly chaotic or random behavior. Type IV is when the automata shows emergent behaviors. While we observe Type IV patterns in ADI with beautiful shape and color distortions, they also tend to rapidly break down into one of the other three types of patterns.

4.3.3. QUESTION 3: HOW EXPRESSIVE IS THE SYSTEM?



Figure 9: Four examples of emergent ADI Visual Outputs. The named labels are the authors’ own interpretation.

PBR encourages the researcher-practitioner to “remain open to [the] serendipitous connections” they may come across. In Figure 9, we present notable and unexpected visual

result that emerged from freely performing with ADI using a wide variety of songs. These compositions are a testament to the ease of exploration and expressive power of Artificial Dancing Intelligence, especially considering that only one pre-trained GNCA model was used for all the work shown in this paper.

4.3.4. QUESTION 4: HOW DOES THE SYSTEM PERFORM DURING A LIVE SHOW?

The system we present was used to produce visuals for the MIT Laptop Ensemble’s Fall 2025 concert. The input audio stream was a live mix of all the ensemble instruments. Performing with ADI yielded varied and compelling audio-reactive visual results. Because the performance happened in a live public space, we are unable to share a performance video due to privacy and consent constraints. However, we do provide some cropped screenshots of notable moments in Figure 10.

Upon reviewing the performance footage we noticed the occasional explosive growth of the system, discussed in the previous section, sometimes happened at awkward moments, where a burst of visual energy was not appropriate to the musical context. Additionally, while using trail-and-error to find interesting patterns in a offline scenario is rewarding, doing so is less feasible in a live performance setting where time and audience attention is limited. Thus, we note that the inclusion of presets for different ADI parameter configurations could in fact be helpful, allowing the VJ to switch quickly between different visual scenes that better match the fast-changing musical moments of a live performance, while still retaining the interactivity afforded by live parameter modulation.

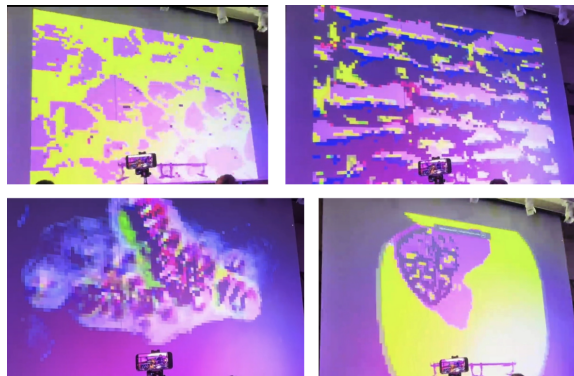


Figure 10: Four examples of visuals produced by ADI during the MIT Laptop Ensemble Fall Concert.

5. Discussion and Future Work

The system presented harnesses self-organization to produce varied, unexpected, and musically informed visuals while running in real-time on modern consumer devices. However, this same self-organized behavior can make it difficult to control (Kelly, 1995). More specifically, we note that the neural cellular automata feedback loop is very sensitive to the music’s dynamic variations and the various user inputs. A study focused on carefully varying the audio signal while monitoring the NCA’s substrate in real-time could shed light on the origin of (and potential control over) the chaotic tendencies of the system.

Currently, the system’s user interface allows for complete and direct control of all input parameters. In future work we aim to conduct user studies to understand how the user interface and user experience could be improved specifically for the needs of a live performance. Additionally, we plan to optimize system performance by switching to a WebGL and GLSL implementation of the GNCA in order to increase visualization resolution and frame rate (as described in Mordvintsev et al. (2020)).

Our initial goal was to conduct an exploration of a music energy modulated NCA to produce interactive music visualizations. Similar investigations could be conducted using other audio features — frequency spectra, pitch contours, onsets, etc. — and NCA architectures other than the GNCA. In other words, the possibilities for using Neural Cellular Automata for music visualizations are vast, and ready for continued exploration.

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