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Sonifying the Scene: re-framing and manipulating meaning through audio augmentation

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INTRODUCTION

Digital locative music technologies are transforming the ways in which we are able to manipulate and re-frame the meaning of architecture, landscape and art. In this note we explore and outline some of the key features that are associated with this. Defining the future possibilities and challenges that we have identified through our research in the area. Our work is supported by examples and critically assesses the relationship between physical and aural presence, examining the manipulation and re-framing of meaning through audio augmentation. *"Is Space Audible?"* [7].

GAZING INTO SOUND

Music has a long tradition of guiding the interpretation of many of our experiences; it provides accompaniments to our media, narrative performances and ceremonies. Typically these are carefully composed and curated accompaniments that integrate into and reflect the intended mood, narrative and meaning of the experience. But what about music listening in mobile or locative settings, those spaces where music is not normally situated? The work of R. Murray Schafer and the *World Soundscape Project* urged us to attend to the ambient aural environment of our physical world, to connect with and understand its physicality through its aural manifestation [5]. Subsequently, the notion of the locative ambient soundscape has been increasingly augmented or masked by personalized artificial soundtracks of music as broadcast from the Sony Walkman onwards to modern smart phones. Michael Bull states that iPod users *"'aestheticise' their environment through their personal stereo use [...] a remaking of the urban to fit with the users thoughts and desires"* [2]. Bull goes on to note that in urban commuting environments, the iPod is used to deliberately disrupt and re-frame the monotony of the city experience. Furthermore, artists have seized upon mobility and location as a platform for new artistic expression and often playfully engage with the juxtaposition of media – such as audio and music – in contrast to the nature of the locale and artefacts contained within [1,3,5], thus to encouraging users to reason about such objects, landscapes or activities in a different way. Little research has sought to understand the opportunities for the deliberate manipulation and re-framing of the meaning of objects, artefacts and landscapes via musical accompaniments.

Hazzard et al.'s [5] example of soundtrack work in a sculpture garden highlights the degree of manipulated meaning that music can impart upon the interpretation of objects. Here we have a setting, an external site with varied landscaped and rural parkland that has been used to exhibit a variety of sculpture exhibits. There are two layers of meaning already in play here: an artist created a sculpture with a particular intent; this artefact was then re-framed by the park's curators who placed it in the setting of the park; Hazzard et al. [4] then imposed a third layer of meaning – an adaptive musical soundtrack – quite detached from the artist's or curators original perspective. Subsequently, visitors reported an experience clearly shaped by the mood and behaviour of the accompanying music, sometimes enhancing visitor interpretation and sometimes perturbing it. In our second example, Rider Spoke, by the arts collective Blast Theory [3], participants were encouraged to record and leave personal narratives at specified locations in cities for others to find and listen into. Here the audio fragments encourage a re-framing of the context of the locale. Rather than an anonymous alleyway or a building's facade these architectures became the backdrop to the narrative, the set from where the narrative is held and played out, the meaning of the narrative permeates and re-frames the locale.

Appreciating the wealth of such personal experiences, located in a multisensory understandings of the world and the way that these may be counterpoised against, both other experiences and physical entities allows us to further experiment and create new sonic environments that are able to open up and offer different ways to experience sonified spaces that move us beyond our current conventional understandings.

CONCLUSION

This small piece of writing asks for further understandings and re-specification of the meta-materiality and of the nature of sound and it's relationship to the world. With new technologies emerging and opening up a space for exploring audio-augmentation it is important to see this as an opportunity for understanding the relationship between sound and space, and sonification and the scenic. As a leaving gesture, it's perhaps worth thinking about how, as Ingold writes, "a landscape may be *audible*" [4].

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