POSTCARDS IN SOUND & MOVING IMAGE

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ABSTRACT

This workshop explored some strategies for combining sound and image in a non-narrative, non-documentary form that have been deployed in the on-going Sonic Postcards project. Over the course of a two-hour practical session participants took a journey, collecting sounds using portable sound recorders, editing these together into a soundscape; generating and animating text and creating hand-drawn abstract animation, all through the creative use of ICT. Finally the sound and visual elements were combined to create a 'sonikinetic' postcard.

The workshop was suitable for those with little or no previous experience of working with sound or image technology and focused on techniques for undertaking creative work with groups.

WHY SONIC POSTCARDS? A FEW OBSERVATIONS…

Within the last 20 years we have seen a huge development in technologies for manipulating sound. Since the time when sound editing and manipulation moved away from the use of tape and onto the computer there has been a constant and rapid evolution of interfaces and software packages that can be used for manipulating and working with sound in the digital domain. This has happened at a time when the same expansion of the digital domain has affected many other areas of creative activity; photography, film, fine art and publishing are a few examples of areas in which it is now more common for practitioners to start their work by booting a computer rather than physically getting their materials out or opening a studio door.

All of these disciplines share one crucial thing in common: they rely almost exclusively on visual interfaces. As a musician and sound artist this means that I am always dealing with sonic materials through their visual representation and the huge benefits of this inevitably come with a downside. We become so used to looking at things that we often fail to really listen to what they sound like. So we might hear sounds but fail to really listen to the details inside them or the relationship they might have to the environment from where they were sourced.

The dominance of the visual has led to a situation where the sonic experience of the world is seldom considered. In spite of the plethora of 5:1 systems and MP3 players it is still a surprise to many of the groups with whom we have worked that you can actually edit and manipulate sounds on a computer. More surprising to participants is that you can actually go out and record your own sounds, edit them on the computer and use them to create something unique and individual.

In music education, the focus of ICT application has often been towards sequencing, often at the expense of working with sound. Many of the schools I have worked in have fantastic computer facilities for creating music, using sophisticated software packages like Reason, Cubase and Fruity Loops, yet they have no facilities for recording and editing sounds recorded in the outside world. Added to this is the frequently occurring situation in which the only facilities for listening to what comes out of the computer is a pair of low quality speakers or cheap headphones. In music education the emphasis sometimes seems to be on ways of keeping 30 people reasonably quiet and happy for the duration of the lesson, rather than developing critical listening skills and ways of working collectively.

I see the Sonic Postcards project as one way of addressing some of these issues; by creating a sound postcard of where we live, we are able to recognise the unique sonic character of our environment.

Sonic Postcards also creates a series of pieces of artwork which help to preserve some of the vanishing 'soundmarks' of our environment.

CP3 WORKSHOP CONTENT WITH COMMENTS

The session that we ran at the CP3 conference mirrors the process of a Postcards project and falls into four distinct stages.

1: WHAT IS A POSTCARD?

Looking at picture postcards. We compared what one would normally expect in a picture postcard with some more unusual examples (for example a postcard from the Bruce Nauman 'raw materials' exhibition at Tate Modern which contains the text mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm over the whole card).

Observations

■ What do people consider important to include on postcards?
Usually postcards are of things that are considered significant to the location. How can we reflect this in the sounds we record and images we make to go with them?

■ If there are people included in the image, what are they there for?
Usually, humans are included to show the scale: the height of the building or the vastness of the landscape. In the sound postcard do we include ourselves? Our voices? (see also 'recording things' below)

■ Single or multiple images?
Many picture postcards feature multiple images, views of a particular location or sequences through different times of day or seasons (adding an interesting time dimension to still images). Should our sound postcard contain fragments from several locations or should we choose one place to record all of the sounds?

2: RECORDING

For this session we used Iriver portable hard disk recorders (Ihp 120). The advantages of these are that the sound quality is good (it can record uncompressed .wav files in real time), they are easy to use (there's a red button on the side which, when pressed, starts the recording) and perhaps most importantly for educational use it's a USB2 device so by simply plugging into the computer (Mac or PC) the machine appears as an external hard drive and the recorded files can simply be dragged off or played from the unit. It is also impossible to erase files without connecting the machine to a computer, so the chances of work being lost are considerably reduced.

Strategies for recording

■ How do you record sound with groups?
The technique I would normally use in these projects is to have one person controlling the microphone, another monitoring on headphones and another operating the hard disk recorder. A fourth is in charge of creating a log (usually on a small blank postcard) of the locations and descriptions of the sounds recorded.

■ Do you include yourselves? Or, are you simply recording 'what's there'?
This gives rise to much interesting debate about whether we are to actively go and 'make things happen' or wait for sounds to occur.

■ How much should you record?
Given that we are usually working in groups of up to 30 students, it would be very easy to create huge amounts of recorded sound that we have no hope of ever listening to. I have found the most effective way of recording is to think of it more like taking photographs than recording large stretches of material. The finished piece will probably

be about two minutes long so I would always try and encourage students to record short clips. This doesn't exclude having sections where (for example) you might start outside a building and record your journey to the inside (which in itself will create a sense of movement which could help assemble the final postcard).

■ How do we make this into a collective experience?

Careful switching of roles within groups can ensure that everyone participates. Also it's important to have more than one recording session as inevitably groups will record lots of themselves talking on the first occasion.

3: EDITING

In the workshop we used Audacity for editing and composing. This was done on a PC linked to an interactive whiteboard. We also had a pair of high quality nearfield monitors to listen through.

Audacity is a free audio editor and recorder for Windows, Mac OS X, GNU/Linux, and other operating systems. The main advantage of using this piece of software is that it encourages schools and individual students to independently get hold of the means to edit sound and continue the work once the project has finished.

The computer as a collective tool...

The computer is designed as a tool for solitary use. The challenge in creating work with groups is how to ensure that everyone has a meaningful experience and is able to contribute to the collective piece. In many of the Postcards projects we create individual pieces (usually in IT suites) and from this material, we select segments and create a group piece. As a musician, I would see my practice as being about creating things collectively; interacting in a live environment to create something, rather than working with individuals in a sequential way.

Before creating the postcard the issue is one of which sounds do we choose to use? In the CP3 workshop I used a strategy of taking a short sample of sound from each of the groups who went out recording, so that each small group chose what they felt was the most interesting sound from those they had collected.

In creating a group piece, we have found the best way of working is to import the chosen sounds into Audacity and then have participants manipulate these on an interactive whiteboard. Being able to physically 'move the sounds around' with your finger on the board is far superior to using a mouse or joystick control and makes the whole process much more physical and dynamic.

One question at this stage is how much do you allow the material to be electronically manipulated? Sometimes groups get very interested in manipulating the sounds, playing them forwards and backwards, changing the pitch or adding echo or other processes. There is a point when there has to be a decision whether to allow for manipulation or to try and create something that is more 'as you found it'.

4: COMPLETING AND SENDING

The final stage of the process is making a finished postcard, converting it into an MP3 file and sending it to other groups involved in the project. Usually this is the last session. At the CP3 conference we made final edits collectively and then saved the finished pieces as .wav files.

Often what we actually record and find when we go out is very different to what we might imagine. I always feel that its necessary to encourage groups to be 'in the moment' when they are recording rather than 'go after' particular things. People are often surprised by what they find and this encourages further listening and reflection.

SOME FURTHER QUESTIONS

■ Is what we are making music? If not, what is it?

■ What is the appropriate form of 'exhibition' for the finished work? Website, CD, installation, performance?

■ How can we utilise the skills developed in this activity in other curriculum areas?

Duncan Chapman is a freelance composer, sound artist, educator and performer. He regularly works with most of the leading music organisations in Britain including the Philharmonia Orchestra, London Sinfonietta, Britten Sinfonia, Royal Festival Hall, CBSO, BCMG, Wigmore Hall, Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, BBC and Sonic Arts Network. Much of Duncan's work involves collaborations with other artists and often results in sound installations, CDs and multi-media performances.

Duncan Chapman's current projects include work (with Stewart Collinson) at the New Waves Festival in Budapest, a live electronics project with the LSO, a series of sound installations on the cliffs at Malin Head and projects with Salamanda Tandem and Architects of Air as well as more work on the Sonic Postcards project for Sonic Arts Network.