

Sound of the Crowd

First Author

Tom Flint

School of Computing
Napier University
Edinburgh, UK EH10 5DT
t.flint@napier.ac.uk

Second Author

Chris Cousin

Bathysphere
120a Hartopp Road
Leicester UK LA1 4WA
chris@bathysphere.co.uk

Abstract

“That’s our camera and we want to play with it!” By appropriating publicly funded technology Sound of the Crowd creates a large-scale interactive sound and visual piece inviting participation.

Keywords

Play, audio, visual, public, appropriation.

Introduction

By appropriating the BBC big screen in Liverpool’s Clayton Square and a specifically installed camera we create an environment in which members of the public are encouraged to play.

Sound of the Crowd is a developing series of works aimed at bringing technology and research out of its academic confines and delivering it back to the public whose taxes have paid for its development. Within the confines of Academia, it is easy to forget that technology is being indirectly developed for the public, indirectly funded by the public.

Tom Flint originally demonstrated sound of the Crowd at London Metropolitan University. In its first iteration, abstract lines were drawn on the floor based on participants’ movement. A short video is available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BIIAqeC_9KQ



figure 1. The first iteration of Sound of the Crowd.

The iteration of Sound of the Crowd for reActor3 consists of an image of Clayton Square permanently projected on the BBC big screen from a camera above the square. Layered above the projected image will be three algorithmically generated shapes, each linked to properties in a designed soundscape.

If a participant places her or himself into a position where their image touches that of the projected shape, the shape will then follow their movement across the x and y plane. Data generated from the x and y movement of the shape will be fed into the software controlling the installation and causing real time changes in the soundscape.

The projected shapes will also respond to interaction. The installation is intended to appear to be organic and intuitive, responding positively to interaction. Naturally, the idea of what is organic, intuitive and positive in a piece of work such as this is a matter of perception and is one of the questions that will be addressed by this and future iterations. The more the shapes are played with, the softer their edges become and the warmer their colours become. On interaction, the sound develops from a static roughly defined sound to a more pleasing, sonorous output.

Considerable effort has been put into making the work site specific. We have planned a visit to the square in early August so that we may gain a "sense of place" and in order to give ourselves "time to allow [our] unconscious to creatively engage with the location." Following best practice as described by Ajaykumar [1]. We are particularly keen to incorporate live feedback into the soundscape and our preliminary visits are focused on the best approach for this.

There has been much contact with Bren O'Callaghan, manager of the BBC's big screen in Liverpool. The technology in place at the screen is specifically designed to facilitate this type of work. Mr. O'Callaghan is keen that the public is aware that the camera used is not a part of any surveillance system although surveillance technology is one aspect that Sound of the Crowd addresses.

Recent advances in technology have been rapidly adopted for surveillance; thereby opening much debate. The surveillance is put in place with benevolent intention (it's there to keep us safe). One discussion is that constant surveillance leads to the creation of a panoptic society. A panoptic society will lead one to monitor one's own behaviour, thereby changing a person subconsciously (There's a cop in all our heads and he must be killed). If we are constantly monitoring ourselves according to conformist views of behaviour then we will be unable to act in a free and natural manner.

There is now no going back and the only response is to embrace the technology used to survey us. By placing a Groucho mask on the unwinking eye, we make it easier to live with. If we have been externally affected in this way then we should be able to rewire our subconscious. If we make our relationship with the technology a positive one, surely we should be free again, or at least as free as we were prior to the technological surveillance.

The fundamental aspect to consider is that by the very public nature of the spaces and the technology, they belong to each of us. Surely we have the right to use the technology for our own means, as long as those means do not interfere with the job in hand. Sound of the Crowd joins the debate about what we can and should do with the technology.

A public square is a constrained space that conceptually holds no barrier to entry; it is a place of conformity and strict social rules. With Sound of the Crowd we invite people to let go of their behavioural norms and play naturally. One main way of using the installation effectively will involve cooperation between three people, opening up the possibility of social interaction, something that is usually avoided in public spaces.

Another aspect at the heart of the work is the Digital Divide. As hardware drops in price and machines over two years old are given away, computing has started to become truly accessible. Although software drops in monetary value at a similar rate, it is the time it takes to become competent with software that is the most valuable resource.

As Barbrook and Cameron[2] point out, the majority of people enjoying the current sea of technology available are relatively wealthy and educated. The majority of software currently available for the production of innovative and engaging cultural artefacts demands a technical virtuosity that can often be beyond the reach of those that do not have the benefit of education and time.

By giving the role of virtuoso to the interface and allowing a truly intuitive method of production, Sound of the Crowd will empower people to culturally comment on their lives and produce their own art forms.

References

1. [1] Ajaykumar (2003). Zen and the art of peer and self-assessment in interdisciplinary, multimedia, site-specific arts practice: a transcultural approach. *Art Design & Communication in Higher Education*, 2,3, 131-142.
2. [2] Barbrook R and Cameron A The Californian Ideology [online] <http://www.hrc.wmin.ac.uk/theory-californianideology-main.html>

Additional Online Material

Use this page (maximum one A4 page) to provide a maximum of 10 links to additional online material (websites, photos, videos, animations, etc.). Provide a brief description or title and the hyperlink.

1. YouTube of initial installation: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BIIAgeC_9KQ
2. Bathysphere business website: <http://www.bathysphere.co.uk>