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Mobile Media

Reflection Paper

Final Project

12/10/2020

Walking Wissahickon: A Look into Interactive Audio

Audio is often overlooked in media projects because if it is done well listeners will not even notice it because of how natural and smooth it sounds. Most often people listen to the sounds and noises around them passively. We are always subjected to listening to our surroundings wherever we go, and it is nearly impossible to avoid. The way we listen and hear things has a tremendous effect on how we perceive them. When it comes to music, podcasts, audiobook, and soundscapes, the only way to understand them is to listen. These examples can all be accessed at the leisure of the listener wherever they are. By creating an audio project that relies on a specific location, the understanding and implications of that audio piece completely change how users interact with it and their surroundings.

The audio project I created entitled *Walking Wissahickon* requires the user to access the Orange Trail in Wissahickon Park. The piece explores some of the history behind specific landmarks along the trail and is most vividly experienced in person. The intention of this project is to connect listeners with their environment in a new and unique way. I focus on three landmarks, the Walnut Lane Bridge, the Toleration Statue, and the Wissahickon Creek itself. Frequent visitors may pass by these all the time without even seeing them or considering their histories. This audio project provides an

opportunity to learn more about the things we take for granted and appreciate the history that allowed them to still be around today.

Throughout the project, listeners will be prompted to pause the audio intermittently until they arrive at each destination and are given verbal instructions as to when to start the audio again based on visual markers. This allows users to enjoy the natural beauty and sounds of the trail while also engaging with the audio. While listening, the users will hear both a voice over providing instructions and information as well as natural sounds from the trail in an attempt to keep the outdoor, woodsy experience authentic.

I chose this medium as my final project because I wanted to improve from my last audio project. I was able to expand upon an idea I had for the original audio project that I did not end up doing because of the time limit. Additionally, during this semester of social distancing and limited excuses to leave my apartment, I found myself walking the trails of Wissahickon more and more. I would sometimes end up going three times a week just to be able to move around and explore. The more I wandered the paths the more interesting landmarks I stumbled upon. After doing some light research out of curiosity I found that the history of Wissahickon was much more interesting than I ever imagined. This gave me the idea of creating a podcast styled project to share what I learned with other Wissahickon trail walkers. As Murray explains, "intimate soundwork is a project of reflexive selfhood tied to established modes of audio storytelling" (Murray, 2019). Using a place that I was familiar with created an intimate connection and shares my interests and passions with the users listening. In this way my personal experiences

of walking through Wissahickon are reflected in the storytelling feature and natural sounds of the audio project.

The mobility of this project is evident from user's ability to access it on their mobile phones. The entire project is also reliant on users listening to the content while on the move. For about 20-30 minutes, users walk along a path while intermittently listening to a history of their surroundings. By being able to listen to the audio while in a remote location on a mobile device and walking a mile or so through the woods is inherently mobile. Many audio projects require very little from the users other than a piece of their attention. They can be using a mobile device to listen to anything while remaining stationary. By asking the user to become involved in the world and environment that the audio piece takes place in requires a great deal of effort from them to access the space and then walk through it, all while maintaining their attention.

I could have easily adapted this project into either postcards or video format, but I felt that audio would be the best way to convey the stories. As Felicity Ford, an experienced field recordist, mentions in her interview, "Field recording forces you to be still and focus in an environment" (Lane & Carlyle). Here she was contrasting the use of photography and audio in capturing experiences and space, stating that photographs are quick and capture one moment in time but recording and listening to your surroundings requires attention and patience. The same can be said for listening to field recordings and a lot of audio work as well. Instead of video or photography, audio creates a more intimate experience especially when you are in the same location as what is being described so that a user can see it for themselves.

There were several layers of this audio project, such as the natural sounds of the path, the voiceover explaining the history, and additional woodsy noises to make the audio feel more authentic. There may be some people who believe that by adding additional noises such as birds chirping or water running makes it less authentic. Seaward discusses these views stating that some professionals in the field believe "the very idea of editing soundscapes is unethical and in blatant opposition to the core ideology of field recording" (Seaward, 2015). This topic of ethical sound editing is widely debated and essentially hinges on personal opinion. By editing an audio project in any way, some people would believe that action would "draw the ethics of the piece into question immediately" (Seaward, 2015). While I did not drastically change the audio of the sounds of the natural path, I adjusted the audio here and there so that the voice over would not be drowned out or difficult to discern. By doing this some would say that the original audio was tampered with and is not an authentic representation. However, an authentic representation was not the goal of this project. Had the intention been for users to listen while at home, capturing the exact noises of the path would have been a larger concern, but as the users are in the space and can listen to the sounds of the path themselves between the landmarks this was not an overwhelming concern. Additionally, the device I used to record the audio was an iPhone. Even though iPhones have advanced their recording technologies there were many subtle noises that I could hear in person that the iPhone could not pick up. I added a few additional noises such as birds chirping and water running in the hopes to make it feel more realistic and so the user could still listen to the sounds of nature while listening to the audio.

The use of voiceover is the most prominent feature of this project. It is the loudest and most engaging aspect because listeners need to pay attention to the information in order to follow along and understand the context and history of what they are seeing. The information given transcends other media because, "voiceover has the role of indicating space that cannot be registered by the camera. It provides the context of a story but also adds thoughts and comments structuring the visual track for the audience" (Batista & Lesky, 2015). When first seeing many of the landmarks mentioned in this project it would be impossible to discern their history just from seeing it. The voiceover provides context in a way that photography and other visuals cannot. The voiceover leads the user's thoughts in certain directions and can influence the way they interpret what they are seeing. Converging both narration and natural sounds together creates a powerful effect. Seaward explains, "The choice of sound behind the words will uphold their meaning and, in return, the words will imbue meaning to the sound" (Seaward, 2015). The two work together to create a complete picture. The natural sounds provide a locational context, and the voiceover gives meaning to what is being heard. The two work together to create one coherent piece.

The environment in which people listen to media is critical to how they understand what they are listening to and how they interact with their surroundings. Bull takes a look into the culture of mobile listening and states, "the way in which users occupy social space is relational. They look, they listen, and they think and interact through their privatized and technologically mediated soundworlds" (Bull, 2006). Essentially, he is saying that the way that people interact with the spaces around them can be dependent on the audio they are listening to. Many times, people can be in a

public space and be listening to a completely unrelated audio piece such as music or audiobooks. Their 'mediated soundworlds' can often work to mentally distance users from their environment. By creating an audio piece that merges the space a person is in and the sounds and audio they are listening to allows them to be very aware and involved with everything they look at, listen to, and think about. This idea is also addressed in a journal article "Soundwalk Stories" which focuses on audio and visual projects. As the authors explain, "the format of the soundwalk opens innovative narrative possibilities in terms of textual production in connection to space" (Batista & Lesky, 2015). When connecting audio experiences with your immediate surroundings there are a lot of creative opportunities. The more I researched the park and walked the trail the more I was able to incorporate within my project and instead of just pointing out landmarks I could explain the history behind them. Using the same space another project could be created about the plants and animals that inhabit the trail, or another project dedicated to fitness for runners or joggers. A completely fictional story could be created that incorporates aspects of the trail could also be created, the point being that soundwalks can create an endless amount of creative storytelling.

Overall, this audio project was intended to create a unique experience for those in the Philadelphia area or visitors who are looking to explore the Wissahickon Park paths while learning a little bit about its unusual history. The experience of listening to the project is heightened by the user's ability to see in person what is being discussed. Using different concepts from class such as ethical recording practices, sound in relation to space, the mobility of media, and more, helped to form *Walking Wissahickon* into what it is now. This creation was also inspired by conversations about geolocation

and the integration of it into mobile media. In a more developed setting such as an app, there could be more opportunity to use geolocative tagging by marking the exact location of each landmark for easier use for the user rather than instructing them when to pause and start the audio based on the description of their surroundings. Additionally, this could be a project that could be expanded since this was just one short path of the many miles of paths within Wissahickon and only provided a glimpse into the many histories of the park.

I really enjoyed creating this project as it was an opportunity to combine a few of my favorite things, such as hiking Wissahickon, learning about strange and unusual histories of places and structures, and audio storytelling. Working on something I was interested in allowed me to be much more invested in the project from beginning to end. It has also piqued my interest into seeing similar creations along the line of experiencing an audio work in an intended space. From this project it is clear that audio has the potential to transform a person's surroundings and reflect on certain aspects in their environment that they were previously unaware of.

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