

Listening to Locative Narratives: Illusion and the Imaginative Experience

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ABSTRACT

The author discusses her research project *Transition-Felt*, an investigation of the development of locative narratives that informs the app *The Letters*.

In the last 10 years, mobile devices have moved interactive media from the desktop to real-world environments. Affordances of GPS and, more recently, indoor positioning techniques, are utilized in new forms of play and theatrical experiences. Pervasive games, participatory theater and locative narratives are transforming streets and waysides into spaces of potential. The research project *Transition-Felt* investigates the development of locative narratives and considers imaginative simulation and the listening experience, drawing upon recent findings in cognitive psychology and neuroscience.

Delivered via smartphone apps, these locative narratives can be thought of as audio dramas, heard in real-world locations. An interesting aspect of the form is the integration of the real-world environment within the listening experience. Affordances of consumer headphones enable sounds in the environment to bleed into the recorded audio that in turn augments the participant's vision, resulting in cross-modal interactions, unplanned synchronicities and ruptures of the visual and the aural. Auditory streaming experiments demonstrate that perception is not necessarily a stable state, as switching between interpretations can occur when listening to sequences of pure tones. This phenomenon, known as perceptual bistability, is analogous to visual illusions such as the Necker cube or Rubin vase. Attentional focus can bias what is perceived, but the listener's inability to control the switching may indicate that instability is a feature of auditory perception [1--3]. The potential to harness perceptual uncertainty by incorporating interactive, semantic and multimodal perceptual illusions, suggests that real-world environments can become further enfolded with imaginary spaces.

The Letters is a locative narrative app [4] devised in response to an intriguing archive of travel correspondence exchanged between two lovers in 1925. Mapped over 20 acres of gardens, the story-world has seven virtual locations depicted in binaural soundscapes, including streets in Rome and a snowy walk in Yosemite. GPS is used to trigger sound files and participants can wander freely or follow narrative threads to build the story (Fig. 1).

The temporal and spatial plotting (Fig. 2) occurs on a number of levels, the actual time taken to traverse the location, the story time and time as represented within the virtual location. Each soundscape has a narrative arc that suggests moving through the space and arriving at destinations. The virtual locations are plotted to maximize the visual and auditory connections with the real world; for example, the sounds of the sea are mapped over existing water [5]. Attenuation and silence within soundscapes make apparent the ambient sound occurring in the real-world environment.

Audio strategies for extending the story world into the real world can be seen to occupy a range between simulation to symbolism. In the development of virtual environments, spatial sound is used to mimic the localization cues experienced in real-world environments [6]. In contrast, established techniques in radio drama often simplify the auditory scene by using key sounds sequentially to avoid confusion [7], as the listener's environment, mode and quality of listening is unknown. Sounds are selected to appear *like* the sound sources they represent, using familiar codes, conventions and dialogue that may anchor meaning.

Narrative conventions also invite participants to imagine physical spaces, with the listener's real-world experiences providing the basis for conjuring the imaginary [8]. This mental simulation is not unique to narrative engagement but is continuous with fundamental neurological processes of perception and cognition, where "re-enactment" of our prior sensory interactions with the world enables us to make predictions about situations, actions, people and internal states [9].

The stance taken by participants of a locative narrative experience ensures that however naturalistic the soundscape may be, it is arguably perceived as a mediated artifact. As Barry Truax suggests, interpretation of soundscapes can also ask the listener not merely to

identify the depicted sounds but to contemplate their signification [10].

It is put forward here that the adoption of a *stance* primed for narrative engagement combined with perceptual ambiguity enables the listener to become a participant within a liminal space. Initiated by audio "props" [11] this guided imaginative experience holds the nascent potential for immersion and a sense of presence, which may be re-figured as Bergson's intuitive apprehension of phenomena [12]. The recollection of presence can be understood as *Transition-Felt*.

References and Notes

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3.

Possible links with neuronal bi-stability and perception of visual and auditory cues were highlighted in discussion with Jane Grant and John Matthias in October 2012.

4.

The Letters will be available as a smartphone app in 2013. [Whittaker, E. & Brocklehurst, J. *The Letters*. iOS App (2013)] Materials related to this article are available at <www.culturedebate.org>.

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Fig. 1.

The Letters, locative narrative, [Dartington Hall], Devon, U.K. [(© Whittaker, E. & Brocklehurst, J. Photo © Emma Whittaker)]

Image Caption:

The onscreen map simultaneously plots the participant's position in the virtual and the real-world location.