Belfast Soundwalks:
Experiences in Sound and Place through Locative Media

Sarah Bass, Sonic Arts Research Centre (SARC), Queen’s University Belfast, Belfast, UK
Pedro Rebelo, Sonic Arts Research Centre (SARC), Queen’s University Belfast, Belfast, UK

ABSTRACT

This article outlines the ongoing development of a locative smartphone app for iPhone and Android phones entitled The Belfast Soundwalks Project. Drawing upon a method known as soundwalking, the aim of this app is to engage the public in sonic art through the creation of up to ten soundwalks within the city of Belfast. This paper discusses the use of GPS enabled mobile devices in the creation of soundwalks in other cities. The authors identify various strategies for articulating an experience of listening in place as mediated by mobile technologies. The project aims to provide a platform for multiple artists to develop site-specific sound works which highlight the relationship between sound, place and community. The development of the app and the app interface are discussed, as are the methods employed to test and evaluate the project.

Keywords: Locative, Smartphone App, Sonic Art, Sound and Place, Soundwalking

1. INTRODUCTION

The practice of soundwalking has existed since the 1970’s and was originally devised by R. Murray Schafer in the context of the World Soundscape Project. A soundwalk can be described as ‘any excursion whose main purpose is listening to the environment. It is exposing our ears to every sound around us no matter where we are... wherever we go we will give our ears priority’ (Westerkamp, 2001). Westerkamp (2001) further describes soundwalking as ‘an exploration of our ear/environment relationship, unmediated by microphones, headphones and recording equipment. It is an exploration of what the ‘naked ear’ hears and how we relate and react to it’. These descriptions highlight that the core purpose of undertaking a soundwalk is to listen to the environment around us without technological intervention. In the 40 or so years since the practice was devised, developments have inevitably taken place. Though many practitioners including human geographers or urban planners carry out soundwalks under the original ethos, others have used it to inform artistic practices that investigate the relationship between sound and place. McCartney (2010) informs us that a soundwalk ‘can be recorded or not. It can be re-situated in the same location, or translated into other media forms with little

DOI: 10.4018/ijmhci.2014040105
or a great deal of sound processing’. It is within the investigation of sound and place through soundwalking that the Belfast Soundwalks project is situated.

The Belfast Soundwalks project, led by Pedro Rebelo, was created by artists and researchers at Sonic Arts Research Centre (SARC) at Queen’s University Belfast, in collaboration with the Institute for Collaborative Research in the Humanities and Belfast City Council. The project was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council’s Cultural Engagement Fund in 2013. Through the development of a locative smartphone app, the project aims to engage the public in the relationship between sound and place with a focus on the city of Belfast. Aimed at both tourists and citizens of the city, this project seeks to sonically enhance the experience of place in a number of areas in the city, including destinations that may not traditionally be considered attractions by visitors or maybe disregarded or undervalued by local residents. The project brings together a number of sonic artists/composers from SARC to create approximately ten soundwalks within and around the city. Using GPS technology, the app tracks the user’s location within the city to present unique listening experiences associated with key places. These listening experiences may consist of sound materials ranging from speech and environmental sound to abstract imagined sound worlds.

The sound materials developed in each soundwalk take into account the soundscape of the chosen site.

The core aim of the project has been to explore how sound inflects our experience of place. Even though GPS technologies are a rather rudimentary form of context awareness, the project makes use of notions of site-specificity to engage the listener in rediscovering a place through sound. The history of sound art is intertwined with the notion of site specificity as for the last 50 years strategies employed by sound artists revolve around the location or dislocation of sound in place. In Max Neuhaus’ “Listen to This’, the act of taking participants out on a guided soundwalk highlights the notion of shared listening experience while articulating the relationship between sound and place through the design of a specific walking route. The role of transmission in the work of Bill Fontana is an example of how resituating sound can reveal ‘hidden’ characteristics of place. His transmission of the sound of vibrations of the Brooklyn Bridge as captured by accelerometers onto the World Trade Centre site, suggests at the same time a sense of dislocation and one of connection in the 1983 piece “Oscillating Steel Grids Along the Brooklyn Bridge”. Ultimately, this type of intervention exposes the ephemeral and volatile character of a soundscape, here understood as the sonic environment associated with a site. Initially articulated in the 1970’s the term soundscape has more recently come under criticism by writers such as Ingold (2007) who question the notion of isolating sound from an overall experience of place.

In projects sound as the Belfast Soundwalks, the experience of listening in place can be said to take precedence over a concern with the soundscape itself. In this context, sound can belong to place but can also be imposed on place or indeed disrupt place. These different types of relationships shift the focus to the experience of the listener, in our case inevitably mediated by mobile technology but focusing on what we have elsewhere termed ‘evocative listening’ (Chaves & Rebelo, 2012). Each soundwalk is then the intertwining of the soundscape of a site, the sound materials heard through the headphones and the listener’s own experience through the route that connects sound and place.

2. SOUNDWALKING AND MOBILE DEVICES

One of the key differences between the Belfast Soundwalks project and soundwalking in its original form is that pre-composed audio is presented to the user on a mobile device and listened to through headphones. The user typically listens to a mix between the soundscape of the location they are in and pre-recorded sound materials played through headphones.
Related Content

Knowledge Engineering in Adaptive Interface and User Modeling
www.igi-global.com/chapter/knowledge-engineering-adaptive-interface-user/22417?camid=4v1a

Designing Usable Security Feedback for Web-Filtering Systems
www.igi-global.com/chapter/designing-usable-security-feedback-web/47351?camid=4v1a
Attitudes Toward Tax Evasion and the Choice of Self-Employment
[www.igi-global.com/article/attitudes-toward-tax-evasion-and-the-choice-of-self-employment/98625?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/article/attitudes-toward-tax-evasion-and-the-choice-of-self-employment/98625?camid=4v1a)

Framing the Context of Use for Mobile HCI
[www.igi-global.com/article/framing-context-use-mobile-hci/47099?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/article/framing-context-use-mobile-hci/47099?camid=4v1a)