Noise Is What You Make It: Interpreting Auditory Environments As Sonic Ambient Narratives

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ABSTRACT

Noisy auditory environments can be defined as environments that contain unwanted sounds given their inhabitants' current needs, goals, and activities. Sounds are labeled as unwanted because these sounds not fit the context in which they appear and inhibit proactive behaviour. They do not suit the ambient narrative that is constructed by these inhabitants. Sonic ambient narrative refers to the context-specific and location-specific stories that emerge over time through daily interactions between an auditory environment and their inhabitants. Sonic ambient narratives are interpretations of auditory environments by their inhabitants that are constantly constructed and reconstructed. Contextual sonic narrative closure, the experience of a sonic ambient narrative as coherent and complete, may emerge as a result of the interaction between a listening subject, the sounds and the environment in which these sounds appears. When a sound fails to contribute to such a closure, it may be interpreted as noise. One possible strategy to design pleasant auditory environments — auditory environments that allow inhabitants to self-select proactive behaviour — is to make sure that such environments maximise the potentiality for contextual sonic narrative closure without fully prescribing what their sonic ambient narratives should be. "Open" auditory environments need to be designed that allow different inhabitants to interpret these environments as pleasant in their own, different ways. Yet, at the same time these environments should afford the possibility of making sense of the environment, to arrive at a degree of closure. Antenarrative is the intuition that an object or phenomenon can be narrativized and that a story may emerge. Antenarrative is the possibility of story, of interpreting phenomena as narratives, without dictating which stories will be told or how they will unfold. As a result, an antenarrative approach may be helpful in designing open, pleasant auditory environments.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Noisy auditory environments can be defined as environments that contain unwanted sounds given their inhabitants' current needs, goals, and activities. Sounds are labeled as unwanted because these sounds not fit the context in which they appear and inhibit proactive behaviour. They do not suit the ambient narrative that is constructed by these inhabitants.

Sonic ambient narrative refers to the context-specific and location-specific stories that emerge over time through daily interactions between an auditory environment and their inhabitants. Sonic ambient narratives are interpretations of auditory environments by their inhabitants that are constantly constructed and reconstructed. Contextual sonic narrative closure, the experience of a sonic ambient narrative as coherent and complete, may emerge as a result of the interaction between a listening subject, the sounds and the environment in which these sounds appears. When a sound fails to contribute to such a closure, it may be interpreted as noise.

This paper will investigate how auditory environments can be designed in such a way that it maximises the potentiality for contextual sonic narrative closure without fully prescribing what this sonic ambient narrative should be. The notion of antenarrative — nonlinear, incoherent, pre-narrative speculation — will play a central role in this discussion. First, the question when a sound can be considered as noise in urban auditory environments will be addressed. Next, the notion of ambiance, a space-time qualified from a sensory point of view, will be related to the practice of ambient storytelling, as well as the role sound plays in this relation. This paper will conclude with an exploration of what it means to comprehend an auditory environment in a narrative manner, and how a narrative approach may lead to the design of pleasant auditory environments.

2. NOISE AND URBAN AUDITORY ENVIRONMENTS

Noisy auditory environments can be defined as environments that contain unwanted sounds given their inhabitants' current needs, goals, and activities [1]. Sounds are labeled as unwanted because these sounds not fit the context in which they appear and inhibit proactive behaviour. Sounds in urban environments, in particular, have traditionally been considered in negative terms as both intrusive and undesirable [2].

Three basic categories can be used in order to evaluate the subjective experience of auditory environments by listeners: Pleasantness, Eventfulness, and Familiarity. These categories are necessary and sufficient to productively map the informational properties of the auditory environments to the interpretation of these environments. The first two categories, Pleasantness and Eventfulness, give an indication as to the pleasantness of the auditory environment. Familiarity refers to the extent to which listeners are able to recognise what the sounds were, and whether or not these sounds are interpreted as belonging to the auditory environments they generally inhabit. A calm soundscape, which is an auditory environment as experienced by listeners, then would be labelled as pleasant and uneventful. A chaotic soundscape, in contrast, would be interpreted as unpleasant and

eventful, and a monotonous soundscape as unpleasant and uneventful [3].

This categorisation can be extended by making a distinction between fore- and background sounds. The combination of pleasant and unpleasant fore- and background then determines the overall assessment of an auditory environment [1]. Moreover, the way people experience their environment in terms of pleasantness, eventfulness, and familiarity indicates the degree to which they feel safe and are able to self-select proactive adaptive behaviour. A calm environment then would consist of a pleasant background with few foreground sounds. In contrast, a chaotic environment can be interpreted as a confusing or taxing combination of foreground sounds that overall provides no indications of safety. A monotonous environment has few sounds that stand out on a background not indicative of safety. An exciting or lively environment, on the other hand, has many appreciated and well discernible foreground sounds, not unlike Murray Schafer's hi-fi soundscape [4] [1].

The above account implies that the evaluation of an auditory environment is not only based on the level of noise. There are many settings where the average sound level is high but it does not necessarily lead to a less pleasant auditory environment. The pleasantness of an auditory environment can only be judged in context. Moreover, the perception of an auditory environment is inherently personal and affected by what a listener, each with a unique set of experiences and preferences, brings to the listening situation [2] [5] [6] [7] [8] [9].

The fact that sounds and sonic environments affect behaviour entails a direct relation between the way people appraise a given situation and the selection of overt behaviour. The notion of core affect is relevant in this relationship. Core affect is defined as an integral blend of the dimensions displeasure-pleasure and passive-active [1]. Core affect influences the interaction with the environment, as it codetermines the extent to which inhabitants of that environment are able to self-select proactive adaptive behaviour. An environment that is experienced as noisy — that is, consisting of unwanted sounds from the perspective of its inhabitants — is generally qualified as unpleasant by those inhabitants as it actively constrains the range of available behavioural options by constraining mind-states to the here and now [1].

As a consequence, "pleasant" needs to be related to activity, and it may differ from person to person whether or not a particular auditory environment inhibits proactive behaviour, and thus may be interpreted as more or less pleasant. This poses particular challenges for the design of auditory environments, as there is no "one size fits all" as far as pleasant auditory environments are concerned. Such designs need to have a degree of openness in the sense that different inhabitants may interpret auditory environments as pleasant in their own, different ways.

3. AMBIENT SONIC STORYTELLING

Traditionally, artworks are considered artefacts that allow for different interpretations by different beholders. An artistic approach to the design of auditory environments may thus be a productive strategy to create so-called "open" environments that allow different inhabitants to interpret these environments as pleasant in their own, different ways. Although probably not for this particular reason, experiments have been conducted to create sound artworks in urban environments, for instance to present new ways to interact with noise in order to produce new and profound urban experiences [10] [11].

Such sound artworks do not necessarily try to minimise or mask sounds that are

considered as noise. A healthy urban auditory environment would necessarily include the sounds that people make [11]. By creating sound installations that reshape noise into sounds that stimulate proactive behaviour, auditory environments may be constructed that are interpreted as pleasant by their inhabitants, yet not necessarily in an identical way.

Put differently, sound installations have the potential to influence and change the ambiance of an environment. People interpret their environments and add specific meaning to it, turning the "space" into a "place." Individuals become part of the environment and in this way contribute to defining its identity. In doing so inhabitants of an environment influence the ambiance, which is the atmosphere of an environment experienced by a person [12].

An ambiance can be defined as a space-time qualified from a sensory point of view. It relates to the sensing and feeling of a place [13]. An ambiance thus is both subjective and objective, as it involves both the lived experience of people and the built environment of the place. Ambiance is what gives life to an environment. An environment is objective and measurable, whereas ambiance is laden with value [13].

Sound is crucial for an ambiance as well. Inhabitants of an environment are surrounded by sounds that propagate all around and come from everywhere at once. Sound thus literally places them in the midst of a world. Moreover, sound and ambiance are so closely related because they both question the idea of a clear distinction between the perceiver and the perceived, the subject and the object, the inside and the outside, the individual and the world [13]. Sound thus codetermines how the process of attuning to an ambiance will evolve.

The process of attuning to an ambiance can be considered as a form of ambient storytelling. Ambient Storytelling refers to the context-specific and location-specific stories that emerge over time and immerse inhabitants in a story world through daily interactions with a building or architectural space. This form of storytelling within the built environment is enhanced through mutual participation and collaboration between inhabitants and the environment as they begin to learn from and interact with one another over time [14]. The development of these stories therefore evolves through the process of attuning to the ambiance of that environment, as this process entails the interactions between an environment and their inhabitants. Through interaction, i.e. the attuning of inhabitants to the ambiance of an environment, context-specific and location-specific stories emerge over time. Ambiance provides an environment with its narrative potentiality. Sonic ambient storytelling, then, refers to the context-specific and location-specific stories that emerge over time through daily interactions between an auditory environment and their inhabitants. Sonic ambient narratives are interpretations of auditory environments by their inhabitants that are constantly constructed and reconstructed through the process of attuning, i.e. the interactions between inhabitants and the auditory environment.

This conception of sonic ambient narrative, in turn, may lead to a reinterpretation of noise. Noise is unwanted sound from the perspective of inhabitants of an environment, sound that inhibits proactive behaviour and interfere with the interaction between inhabitants and their environment. They inhibit the attuning to the ambiance of the environment, the creation of sonic ambient narratives. As a consequence, sounds considered as noise do not fit the ambient narrative that is constructed by the inhabitants, and force them to either try to ignore these sounds or to create other narratives in which these sounds do have a place. As soon as the latter is established, though, these sounds are no longer considered noises. As a result, a possible strategy to design pleasant

auditory environments is to make sure that the sounds in those environments do fit the sonic ambient narratives that can be constructed around/in/about those environments.

4. CONTEXTUAL SONIC NARRATIVE CLOSURE

Attuning to an ambiance is a strategy inhabitants employ to get some grip on the environment they are in. One way to get some kind of grasp on events — sonic, environmental, or otherwise — is to create stories around them. Stories are found in every culture and subculture and can be viewed as a basic human strategy for coming to terms with time, process, and change [15]. Stories are important both in grasping the world and in communicating this grasp. Narratives function as accounts with which human subjects can make the events they undergo discursive; in other words, to turn them into experiences [16].

Narrative here is understood as a representation of a temporal development: a representative sequence of logically and chronologically related events [17]. This implies that causality, or at least the suggestion of causality, is very important in narrative understanding. A narrative can be understood because the events it represents can be interpreted as being related in a causal manner, regardless of whether this relation is a reality or a projection of an apprehending subject. Objects that can be interpreted as containing events that are somehow — metaphorically or otherwise — causally related might be more easily grasped in a narrative manner [18]. If possible, they interpret succeeding events as the former being the cause of the appearance of the next [16]. Thus, causal relation is one of the most important kinds of structuring relations within a narrative. Consequently, narratives may be considered causal networks [19].

Narrativity is not a characteristic that is inherent in an object or phenomenon, be it a novel, a sequence of sounds, or any other phenomenon. Rather, it is the observers' imagination that makes this object narrative during the process of interpretation. Imagination becomes an act of narrativization, and this act amounts to the creation of a construction that can be called a narrative, a structure in which (causal and other) temporal relations are identified [20]. By narrativizing an object, an observer might comprehend this object in a better, or different, way than when assuming another interpretative stance. The process of attuning to an ambiance, considered as a form of ambient storytelling, thus is an act of narrativizing an environment.

Once an experience of coherence and completeness of understanding is achieved after having experienced a narrative, a sense of narrative closure is established [21]. Closure does not equal "solved" or fully comprehended here. A certain amount of mystery or uncertainty may remain, just as many novels do not explain everything but leave room for the imagination of readers as well. Also, closure can be achieved in different ways for different people, and many different narrativizations of the same object or phenomenon may happen.

Narrative closure is the result of the interaction between subjects and the object or phenomenon that is narrativized. Therefore, contextual sonic narrative closure, the experience of a sonic ambient narrative as coherent and complete, may emerge as a result of the interaction between a listening subject, the sounds and the environment in which these sounds appear. When a sound fails to contribute to such a closure, it may be interpreted as noise.

5. DESIGNING SONIC AMBIENT ANTENARRATIVES

The above discussion suggests that pleasant auditory environments are environments that maximise the potentiality for contextual sonic narrative closure without fully prescribing what the sonic ambient narratives of these environments should be. This poses particular challenges for the design of such environments. On the one hand narrative design implies that there is a concrete story created by the designer that needs to be "read" in the "correct" manner, i.e. in a way that is close to what is intended, desired or expected by the designer. On the other hand there is the process where the audience may construct their own meaning out of what is being mediated, independent on whether that meaning corresponds or gets close to what is intended by the designer. It is the latter, in particular, that affords a degree of openness and freedom to narrativize auditory environments in different ways.

In order to account for these two forms of narrative understanding a distinction can be made between narrative and emergent story. Narrative is a whole telling, with the linear sequence of a beginning, middle, and end. It usually implies a backward-looking (retrospective) gaze from present, back through the past, sorting characters, dialog, themes, etc. into one plot, and changes little over time. Narrative is about centering and control. Emergent story, on the other hand, is more apt to be dispersive and to assert differences. Emergent stories are dynamic and escape control, whereas narratives are static. Stories may emerge in the here-and-now, unexpectedly. Emergent story thus can be improvisational and spontaneous [22].

Closely related to this conception of emergent story is the notion of antenarrative. Antenarrative is defined as nonlinear, incoherent, collective, unplotted, and pre-narrative speculation, a bet that a proper narrative can be constituted [22]. Antenarrative thus is the possibility of story, a narrative potentiality that has not yet been actualised. Put differently, antenarrative is the intuition that an object or phenomenon can be narrativized and that a story may emerge.

As far as the design of pleasant auditory environments is concerned, one potentially productive strategy, then, may be to aim to design sonic ambient antenarratives. As argued above, "pleasant" needs to be related to activity, and it may differ from person to person whether or not a particular auditory environment inhibits proactive behaviour, and thus may be interpreted as more or less pleasant. In order to account for this, "open" auditory environments need to be designed that allow different inhabitants to interpret these environments as pleasant in their own, different ways. Yet, at the same time these environments should afford the possibility of attuning, of making sense of the environment, to allow inhabitants to arrive at a degree of closure. A narrative, or rather antenarrative, approach may be helpful in designing such environments.

Although it is impossible to provide a "recipe" for designing sonic ambient antenarratives, some guidelines may be formulated. Firstly, such designs need to have a certain degree of variation and unpredictability. This will ensure that the auditory environment is "open" enough in order to allow for different stories to emerge, even for the same inhabitants at different times. Secondly, the design needs to be responsive. Responsivity is important, for this is one of ways in which variation and unpredictability can be created. Moreover, responsivity ensures that there is a degree of connection between what is happening in an environment and what can be heard. At the same time, this will also contribute to the possibility of closure, the ability to make narrative sense of the auditory environment. Even though the environment needs to be open to allow for

many different narrativizations, it should not be so chaotic that no sense can be made of it at all. This implies that a balance needs to be found between the first guideline — variation and unpredictability — and the third — the possibility of narrative closure. The second guideline, responsivity, may be helpful in finding a balance between the other guidelines.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Pleasant auditory environments are auditory environments that allow inhabitants to self-select proactive behaviour. Noisy auditory environments, by contrast, can be defined as environments that contain unwanted sounds given their inhabitants' current needs, goals, and activities. Sounds are labeled as unwanted because these sounds not fit the context in which they appear. Such sounds inhibit contextual sonic narrative closure.

An artistic approach to the design of auditory environments may be a productive strategy to create open environments that allow different inhabitants to interpret these environments as pleasant in their own, different ways. Sound artists may perhaps be best suited to create sound installations that turn auditory environnments into sonic ambient antenarratives that maximise the potentiality for contextual sonic narrative closure without fully prescribing what this sonic ambient narrative should be. Not just by masking those sounds that are labeled as noise by inhabitants, but through the addition of new sounds that allow inhabitants to incorporate those sounds that were previously considered as noise into emerging stories.

7. REFERENCES

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