Nomadic Audio

11.99, 4 weeks

Nomadic Audio explores ways of supporting the escape, daydreaming, and the ritual of the everyday commute, through the design of an ambient audio experience using mobile phone technology.

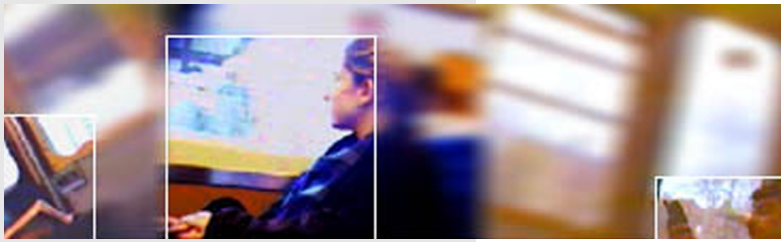
brief

Nomadic Audio is a vehicle for exploring appropriate sound qualities and interaction with audio content for the context of commuting. Stemming from personal experience, the project considered a variety of design possibilities in relation to inspiration and materials gathered from commuters, refining a solution to support an appropriate ambient experience and peripheral interaction. The outcome included two, parallel aspects: (1) crafting a video of one possible audio experience and (2) an electronic prototype of an alternative, gestural interaction with sound content.

process

Train, tube, street: in-between places and 'down' time characterized the context that I was designing for. From responses gathered through 'audio diaries' sent with commuters, I came up with a series of possible design directions to enhance the escape and daydreaming of the commute.

These included:



Love Lines / 1-1 / Adding sensual intimacy to physically distanced situations
Wiretap / 1-world / Urban nomad as a receiver of ambient information
Audio Graffiti /group-group/ Territorial marking for clubs, tourism, and gangs
Party Line / 1-many / Channels of non-verbal group communication

These concepts were evaluated in a train context using prototyped content. Before testing, the Graffiti concept had seemed most promising in terms of an innovative use of technology and merging of online interest groups with WAP-enabled mobile phones. In testing, it was immediately apparent that Graffiti content was not suited to the experience I was trying to design.

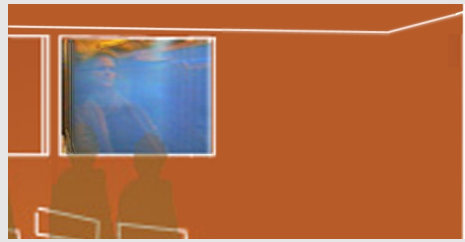
Rather than voice-based messaging or traditional communications, Wiretap supported more ambient, abstract sounds, which immediately sparked the imagination about what they were and what triggered them. Taking the Wiretap concept, I focused on designing an audio experience to trigger daydreaming about places seen through the train window.

outcome

experience:

Rather than proposing a single, universal solution, I concentrated on carefully crafting and choreographing one possibility. Taking abstract audio content, I determined a series of audio filters from research conducted on radio frequency engineering, which are place dependent. I crafted a video demonstrating an experience structured by these principles, an audio ambiance generated by the places you're travelling through.

presentation:

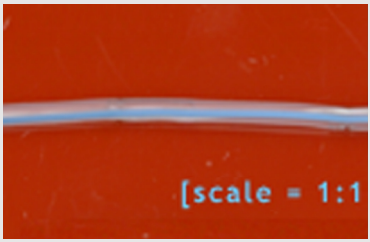


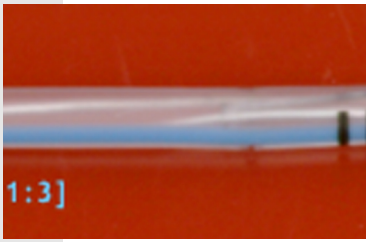
The project presentation involved choreographing the audio visual experience so as to immerse the audience in the experience. Carefully locating speakers and projectors to create an emmersive environment with multiple focal points, I evoked the peripheries of attention characteristic of the context of commuting. Thus engaged, the video brought the audience fully into the context, opening up a discussion based on an immediate experience of the qualities I was designing.

interaction:

Parallel to designing experiential qualities, the project considered alternative, gestural ways of interacting with audio content in the commuting context. Taking the mobile phone cord as input device, this involved iterations of an electronic prototype based on an interaction metaphor between 'flute' and 'rosary'. The final design balanced technical issues with qualities of tangible interaction. Through iterations of 1:1 scale, working prototypes, various qualities were resolved: fluidity of movement along the cord, rigidity of the cord to establish pressing as input, and texture as a cue to press. The final prototype demonstrated the possibility for navigating content in a peripheral and playful way, one that is integrated into our less explicit gestures, motion, and attention.

project implications:





This project explores ways in which technology might be integrated in a more ambient and peripheral way into daily activities, integrated into our less explicit gestures, motion, and attention. The mobile phone is becoming ubiquitous, but the mobile context of use varies greatly in terms of appropriate and desirable modes of interaction. I wanted to reconsider current trends which seem to advocate putting the entire internet on the mobile phone and adding YAPDIYP (Yet Another Portable Device in Your Pocket).

Just as architects consider each design anew, considering site-specific social and spatial practices, interaction designers can find new opportunities in considering the particularities of situations. Information access, modes of interaction, and qualities of experience need to be evaluated in a more holistic way, within a bigger picture of user experience. Here, the design considers a minimal intervention with high impact. Complementing the imagination and escape of commuting, a simple, alternative, daydreaming mode expands the experiential quality of the mobile phone.

project context:

In considering qualities of experience, peripheral interaction, and the design of ambiance, the project acknowledges the role of design in enhancing small, everyday pleasures. This approach proposes an alternative to traditional interaction with products that demand your full attention, to the prerogative given to visual rather than gestural or tangible interaction, and to a current tendency toward information overload and emmersive entertainment. The project can be seen in relation to work done in wearables (particularly within Philips Design) and tangible user interfaces (specifically projects at the MIT Media Lab).

Inspired by the work of Tony Dunne, this project takes the daydreaming of the commuter as a context for suggesting a 'daydreaming' state for a digital appliance. Structuring narrative and designing for imagination was inspired by the work of Janet Cardiff, Bernard Tschumi, Nigel Coates, and Scanner. Exploration of qualities of experience was informed by the work of Steve Reich, Theatre de Complicite, Bill Viola, muf Art + Architecture, research conducted at the Interval Research Corporation, and by the writing of Lauralee Alben.

project reflections:

In retrospect, this project involved an unconventional approach to the design process. Rather than starting at one point and moving in linear way to the design solution, I explored the context of commuting in terms of qualities of experience, evolving separate outcomes from the same design criteria. This parallel progress allowed me to meet separate goals which could have been incompatible given the limited timeline of the project. Here, I was able to communicate a personal and sensory experience as well as develop a rigorously derived electronic prototype in a way that proved to be complementary.

Starting with a brief that was clearly delineated but very wide, I approached the project in a highly personal way, engaging users in helping me to re-visit my own experience. That way, I wasn't making claims on what other people wanted or needed in that context or on what I wanted the outcome to be, but engaged deeply in the qualities of the experience. This opened up a design space that I felt personally about and allowed me to make decisions quickly. I was able to then engage in 'making', having content and prototypes as a basis for getting specific feedback. This provides a jumping off point for thinking about future directions of the interaction concepts, in terms of applications for actual products and more universal use.

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