Chapter 2. Experimentation, Integration, Play: Developing Digital Voice Through Audio Storytelling

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This chapter provides an instructional sequence for an Audio Story assignment, originally situated within the 200-level writing course Digital Storytelling that I taught in 2016. I also provide three student sample projects that were composed in response to this assignment, along with my own audio reflections on what I learned as an instructor through working with students on this assignment. Overall, I learned that experimentation and play, scaffolding, and the integration and manipulation of sounds were important for student authors as they worked toward developing a robust digital voice. Some useful ways of enacting and practicing these composing concepts included written and spoken reflection, low-stakes online discussions, and using models.

The Audio Story assignment asks students to compose a short audio story in a digital format, and its purpose is to give students an opportunity to practice storytelling techniques through the use of legally publishable sound materials such as voices, music, sound effects, ambient sounds, and/or silence. Specifically, the learning goals for this assignment include the following:

1. Students will consider and use storytelling techniques from course readings.
2. Students will edit and combine at least three different kinds of sounds with audio-editing software.
3. Students will follow copyright laws and produce a legally publishable audio file.

These learning goals focused first on storytelling techniques that lined up with broader course objectives to explore the rhetoric, ethics, styles, and technicalities involved with telling personal, observational, and ethnographic digital narratives. These techniques involved, for example, giving attention to purpose and meaning, tapping into emotions, and exploring a moment of change. Using such storytelling techniques through sound was our second goal as we had previously focused on visuals and were building our way to composing a video story that would use images, sounds, and written words together. Audio-only composing required students to tune their ears and bodies to words, music, silence, and sounds, and they had to learn audio-editing moves that they needed later on for video. Finally, requiring students to produce a legally publishable file that did not

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break copyright laws was a challenge, but this goal offered students power: At the end of the assignment, they were entirely free to publish their audio story (or not) without restrictions or worry. This requirement also asked students to learn about and explore how to find, make, and/or use legally publishable materials, which further prepared them (1) for a project at the end of the term where they could decide whether to abide by copyright laws or break them on purpose and (2) for their lives as digital authors beyond the course.[1]

The Digital Storytelling course that this Audio Story assignment was situated within was full of low-stakes, small composing assignments designed to get students familiar with digital composition through image and audio-editing tools, and small assignments led to a larger research-based digital story due at the end of the semester. The Audio Story came after students had composed and turned in a proposal and research plan for their large digital story project, as well as an Image Story that asked students to tell a story using only visual media. Early in the course, students also learned about copyright law, Creative Commons, fair use, and searching online for legally publishable materials through several readings and completing an activity using the handout provided on the book's companion website. For the Audio Story, I assumed that students had no prior experience with audio composition or editing.

The Assignment Sequence

Lesson One: An Introduction to Audio Editing with Audacity

This lesson asked students to use the free, open-source audio editor Audacity to compose a practice audio file in class.[2] Students used the handout provided on the book's companion website to orient themselves to Audacity's interface and to compose a practice file due by the end of the class period.

Lesson Two: The Audio Story Assignment, Analysis of Serial, and Searching for Sound Assets

During this lesson, we first went over the prompt for the Audio Story assignment. The main requirements of the assignment were to tell an interesting story with a purpose, meaning, emotion, or a moment of change; to use only sound to tell the story; to use at least three different kinds of sound within the story; and to compose a "copyright-free" story that was legally publishable online.

1. Crystal VanKooten's handout "Educating Yourself on Copyright Laws and Fair Use" can be found on the book's companion website.

2. Crystal VanKooten's handout "Audacity Workshop" can be found on the book's companion website.

Audio Story Assignment

For this assignment, you will use audio and audio-editing software to create a short audio story in a digital format. You may choose how long your audio story is, but this assignment is meant to be short, so aim for between 0–2 minutes if you can.

Requirements

You must tell an interesting story. Think about the elements of story that we've read about in *The Digital Storytelling Cookbook* (Lambert, 2010)—your story should have a purpose or a meaning, tap into emotions, and have a moment or moments of change.

You may only use sound to tell the story—no written text or images allowed.

You must use at least three different kinds of sounds within the story: your own voice, other voice(s), music, sound effects, ambient sounds, or silence.

Your audio story must follow copyright laws and be legally publishable online (whether you choose to publish it or not). That means that you need to use sounds and music that you have created yourself, that you have permission to use, that are available for reuse and modification under Creative Commons, or that are in the public domain.

Your audio story must be presented in MP3 or WAV format. You can hand in an MP3 or WAV file directly or you can upload the file to a hosting service like soundcloud.com and hand in the link.

Timeline

Wednesday, March 2: Rough draft due to Moodle and bring digital copy or link to class for workshop

Monday, March 7: Final draft due to Moodle

After discussing the assignment, we moved into an analysis of popular podcast *Serial*, Season 1, Episodes 1 and 2 (Koenig, 2014). Students had listened to the episodes before class. In class, we used the following discussion questions to analyze how the podcast used different kinds of sounds, layering, a narrator's voice, and story.

1. What sound assets are used? How are the assets layered (or not layered)? Which sound assets are the most compelling for you as a listener, and why?
2. What do you hear in the sequence? *Describe* the sounds that you hear. Describe the *effect* of the sounds that you hear.
3. What is the role of Sarah Koenig's voice in the story?
4. Did you find *Serial* a compelling story, and why or why not?
5. Why do you think *Serial* is so popular?
6. What can you take from *Serial* and apply to your own use of audio?

After discussing *Serial*, we used the following prompt and spent about 15 minutes searching online for different kinds of music and/or sound effects that had a suspicious, triumphant, or remorseful tone.

Search for music or sound effects on the web that could be used to set the following tones:

- suspicious
- triumphant
- remorseful

Lesson Three: Combining Sounds

This lesson was conducted online. Using the following prompt, students were asked to compose a 30-second audio file that combined at least three sound assets, post the audio file to the class forum in Moodle, and comment on two classmates' posts.

Combining Sounds

Using Audacity or another sound editor (GarageBand, TwistedWave, etc.), create a 30-second audio file that combines at least three sound assets. The sound assets you use are up to you—they might include, for example, your own recorded voice, the voice(s) of others, original music, music from others, sound effects, and more.

For this Create and Share assignment, don't worry about copyright—you can use any sound or piece of music, as long as you cite it. You can place citations written out in the forum, or you can speak your citations as part of your audio file.

Post your file as an MP3 in the forum below, and provide comments on what works and what might be revised in your classmates' work.

Lesson Four: Analysis and Discussion of Barber and Dorwick

During this lesson, we used the following prompt to discuss two sound articles published online: John F. Barber's (2013) "Audiobiography of the 1960s" and Keith Dorwick's (2013) "Two Sound Pieces."

Discussion Prompt: Barber and Dorwick

Topic 1: Barber's "Audiobiography of the 1960s." What kinds of sounds does Barber include in his article "Audiobiography"? What was the effect for you as a reader getting to hear the sounds versus reading the words about the historical events? What sound or sounds was most powerful for you as a reader of the piece?

Topic 2: Dorwick's "Two Sound Pieces." What is your reaction to Dorwick's experimental sound work? Would you consider this work digital storytelling, and why or why not?

Lesson Five: Audio Story Workshop

For workshop, students brought a rough draft of their Audio Story to class. They were placed in groups of three to four students and asked to follow this protocol for workshopping their drafts:

1. Author introduce the story (1 minute)
2. All: listen the story—use headphones if necessary (2–3 mins.)
3. All: take notes on the handout (3 mins.)
4. Discuss the notes and have a back-and-forth conversation (5–10 mins.)

The handout students used during the workshop asked them to answer a series of questions to guide their small group discussion of the drafts:

1. What story does the audio tell? What is the story's meaning? Does the story tap into emotions, and how? What is the moment or moments of change in the story?
2. How is the story organized? What organizational revisions might the author consider?
3. Discuss the composition of the sounds. How are they layered (or not)? How does the author use voice, music, sound effects, and/or silence? How might the author consider further editing or composing the sounds?
4. Does the author use only sound? Are the sounds legally publishable online? If attribution is used, is it done clearly and effectively?
5. What other ideas for revision can you offer the author?

Lesson Six: Distorting Sounds

This lesson was conducted online through Moodle. Using the following prompt, students were asked to record an ordinary sound, use audio-editing software to distort the sound for an alternate meaning, post the audio file to the class forum, and comment on two classmates' posts.

Distorting Sounds

> Find or record an ordinary sound, and use sound-editing software to distort the sound in a noticeable way for an alternate meaning. You might slow the sound down, speed it up, change the pitch, or do other kinds of distortions. Post both the original sound and the distorted sound to the forum, along with a paragraph describing what you hope the new meaning for the distorted sound might be.

Sample Student Projects

1. Audio Story by Audrey Downs: Audrey tells the story of how she met her best friend Alex using music and narration.[3]
2. "The Empty Barn" by Paige Efting: Paige tells the story of showing and selling animals at a 4-H fair using music, poetic narration, animal sound effects, and silence.

3. Three student examples (audio files and descriptive transcripts) can be found on the book's companion website.

3. Audio Story by Mandy Olejnik: Using narration and self-recorded sound effects and music, Mandy tells the story of the initial confusion of studying abroad in Montreal.

Reflection on Teaching the Audio Story Assignment

Crystal VanKooten: *[Music plays: bass guitar and drums.]* This is Crystal VanKooten, Assistant Professor of Writing and Rhetoric at Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan.[4] I taught the Audio Story assignment that I'm highlighting in this chapter in 2016 in a 200-level writing course that was called Digital Storytelling, and I learned a lot as an instructor about how to support students in developing a robust digital voice through audio storytelling, a voice that included not only the human voice but also other sound elements. And in particular, I learned about three concepts that I want to reflect on today:

- number one: the role of experimentation and play in students' composition processes;
- number two: composing with the support of scaffolds and composing in small pieces;
- and number three: the integration and manipulation of sounds. *[Music fades.]*

First, though, what is digital voice? What is digital voice?
[voice slowed and distorted] What is digital voice?
[Music plays with electronic beat and sound effects.] Erin Anderson's 2014 piece in *Enculturation*, "Toward a Resonant Material Vocality for Digital Composition," has really helped me to think about voice as much more than tethered to language or in service of language only. And it's really helped me to think about voice as something we need to pay more attention to because of the role of technologies in manipulating voice now. And she states that voice sits "at the intersection between language and body." This to me means that voice involves both words *and* the physicality of experience. And thus digital voice becomes a resource: "a performative material with potential to act and to affect in its own right" (Anderson, 2014). So what all might be involved in digital voice if it's not just limited to language? Certainly, I think the sounds of the human voice, but also sounds—other sounds like music, notes, sound effects—these are all part of voice.

And this is something that Kyle Stedman explores in his piece that was published in 2011 in *Currents in Electronic Literacy* called "How Music Speaks." *[Super Mario Bros. theme music plays.]* For Stedman (2011), music is both discursive—through lyrics—and nondiscursive, through instruments, rhythms, tempo, recognizability, association. . . . And he states that "Music has both its inherent

4. The audio version of Crystal VanKooten's reflection can be found on the book's companion website.

meaning for an audience *and* the meanings it creates when affecting everything around it. Music is like a virus of meaning. And that shifting meaning is worthy of playful experimentation." So I say yes—voice is both tied to language and to the body, and it can and should include music and other sounds. *[Super Mario Bros. theme ends on ascending phrase.]*

So, where does all this leave us? Erin Anderson (2014) suggests that voice going digital is an invitation to create new texts *[music plays with a gradually ascending phrase]*, and to weave, to play, to disrupt, to experiment, to weave, to play, to disrupt, to experiment *[voice overlaps and repeats]*. And she concludes her article with this statement: "Perhaps what emerges, then, is an opportunity to re-orient our approach to voice in digital rhetoric away from time-honored models of delivery and toward alternative possibilities of invention."

These alternate possibilities of invention with voice are what I think we as computers and writing scholars and teachers need to be exploring more in our own scholarship, but also in our classrooms with students. Which brings me back to the audio story. *[Music crescendos and lyrics state, "They don't care, just cutting through the barbed wire fence. . . ."]*

So we start this assignment with a getting-to-know Audacity, low-stakes, practice audio-file activity. And this is done in class. *[Music plays with electronic sound effects.]* Students don't receive a grade for their work, they just, you know, get credit for doing it. Students can work at their own pace, which is why I make a checklist and have students check off tasks as they make their practice file. And students can get some help, and some scaffolded help to start building their functional literacies with the Audacity software.

Another thing I wanted them to do through this assignment was to play around a little bit *[bass beat begins to play within music]* and to start enacting some of those principles that Anderson and others talk about of experimentation with audio. However, the way that I encouraged experimentation here was fairly open and wasn't as effective as some other measures that I'll talk about in a minute. So, as you can see on the handout, I had things like, "record or import any other sounds or words you'd like to add to your exploration." Or "play around with the effects menu to manipulate your sounds." And this is all under Phase 5, which I entitled "Play Around." However, when I actually went and listened to the files that students created for this practice activity, not many students were really playing around. They were really just concerned with getting their song in there, getting it clipped, getting it the right length, and then actually exporting the file in a format where they could hand it in.

*[*Serial *music plays, high piano chords.]* Another thing we did through this assignment sequence was to listen to models and to discuss and analyze these models and to do a little bit of emulation as we went to do our own composing. So we listened to a couple of episodes from Season 1 of the podcast *Serial* (Koenig, 2014), and we discussed them in class and picked apart a couple sections. We listened to John F. Barber's (2013) piece "Audiobiography of the 1960s."

[Barber's piece plays, reporter states: "From Dallas, Texas, the flash apparently official, President Kennedy died. . . ."]

And we listened to Keith Dorwick's (2013) "Two Sound Pieces."

[Dorwick's piece plays: low, sustained notes crescendo; insect-like clicks continue; a bell chimes.]

So we listened to these pieces, we discussed them, we talked about what they say, how they say it, what their voice was, and then students actually talked about these pieces in their reflections as they looked back at their Audio Stories and thought about how they decided to create meaning. *[Dorwick's piece continues to play.]* So one student really fixed in on the narrator of *Serial* as being an inspiration. Another student really liked the Dorwick piece, the experimental piece, and liked the weirdness of it and tried to do some of her own recording of everyday sounds and distorting of them in her own piece. *[Music fades.]*

A third activity that we did which really helped students to integrate and manipulate sounds was to do these low-stakes online forums. And so we did two of these while students were working on their Audio Story. The first one was called Combining Sounds and the second one was called Distorting Sounds.

[Audrey Downs's Combining Sounds audio file plays: high, echoing notes crescendo and then quickly fade. The sound repeats several times.]

And I think these worked really well to do all three of the concepts that I'm reflecting on today. To have students experiment and play around, but to scaffold their composing. And then also to force them to integrate sounds and manipulate sounds in a way that they may or may not have done on their own. So the first forum asked students to combine three sounds together and post the file, and then comment on each other's compositions.

[Audrey Downs's composition continues to play: low piano notes play and an echoing voice states, "Run like your life depends on it, because it does."]

And the second forum asked them to record an everyday sound *[Mandy Olejnik's "Snaps" plays]* and then distort it to get a different meaning, to post the file and then to comment on each other's work. And so there were so many cool things that students put in the forum. One student recorded a microwave beeping and then distorted that sound. *[Audrey Downs's microwave beeping recording plays.]* One student recorded a toilet flushing, which was funny to everyone in the class, and distorted that sound. Students put different kinds of music together and different sound effects that they found on different websites with different kinds of music. So it was a really fruitful place for them to play, to be able to do these small moves, like juxtaposing two or three things, two or three sounds, or distorting one sound for a purpose. And to be forced to do some of the playing and the integrating and the manipulating that they were reticent to do or that they just ran out of time to do in other activities. *[Microwave beeps.]*

[Music plays, bass guitar and drums.] Overall, I just really think I learned to not be so product-based through this assignment. And so if I was valuing experimentation, and valuing integrating and manipulating and having students do new things, try new things, play around with software in ways that they'd never done before, you know, valuing a really polished product in the end wasn't the most important thing, is what I ended up coming to. Instead, I looked to their reflections along the way, that they did in the forums, that we did in class, that they turned in at the end of the assignment and at the end of the course. I looked to elements of story that we'd been talking about in the class. And I looked to how they went out, found the sound assets that they used, and that's the way that I ended up assessing the assignment. And it was great fun, and as you can see by some of the samples, even though I didn't emphasize product, the products came out pretty great too. *[Music fades.]*

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