Chapter 6. SoundPlay: A Sonic Experience of Digital Loose Parts

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This project captures in part a sequence of two assignments exploring childhood play in a first-year writing course. The first assignment, Play Narrative, asked students to follow an object, place, or experience of play they could deeply describe and re-enact through text. The second assignment, Digital Loose Parts (DLP) Soundscape, challenged teams of three students to bring their play narratives together in a sonic experience, discovering connections among their words and ideas to develop an audio project.

Context: Playing with (Digital) Loose Parts

Creativity, said play theorist Simon Nicholson (1972), is "the playing around with the components and variables of the world in order to make experiments and discover new things and form new concepts" (p. 5). He calls these variables "loose parts": "In any environment, both the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and the possibility of discovery, are directly proportional to the number and kind of variables in it" (p. 6). Environmental psychologist Leanne Rivlin (2007) added that "these are elements within a site that are amenable to manipulation and change" as well as having "the potential to lead to creativity and discovery" (p. 40).

Through this series of assignments, I played with these notions of loose parts and amenable sites to ask students to construct their own Digital Loose Parts (DLP) Soundscape, the second assignment in a series of explorations into childhood play. The first assignment in the series asked students to individually write a narrative about a single play ecology. Three of these first-person essays explore a backyard trampoline, a tennis court, and a forest stream—each featured in the companion website for this book.

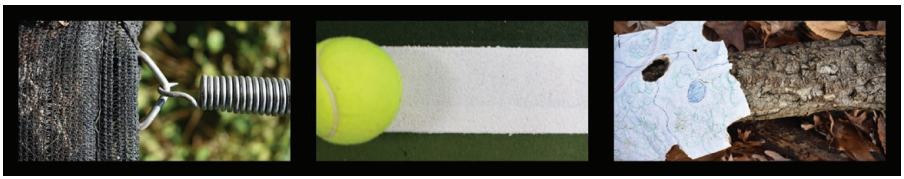

Figure 6.1. A trampoline spring, a tennis ball, and a forest scene

For the DLP Soundscape, students worked together to find connections among ideas in their narratives—loose parts themselves. For example, would students

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find connections in their relationships to their play environments (like the backyard trampoline, the school tennis court, a home's neighboring forest)? Would they find connections in sound, like to trampoline springs, tennis ball bounces, and leaves crunching underfoot? Might these sounds come together at any point to create a single soundscape? Students then remediated those combined narratives and other loose parts into a single audio project by revising through sound they recorded themselves or found online, invoking audio research from NPR as well as having other voices record additional source material, and including appropriate music.

Rationale: PlayWriting

Reconciling my life as a parent-scholar has encouraged me to look at the ways my own children learn literacies through play. Much of their earliest literacy practices began on the walls of their bedroom, as they scribbled representative images, such as a "circus" (see Fig. 6.2) and, eventually, communicative, rhetorical symbols (see Fig. 6.3).

Allowing my children to play along the walls of their bedroom seemingly permitted them to do so through the rest of the house: on walls, on furniture, on themselves.

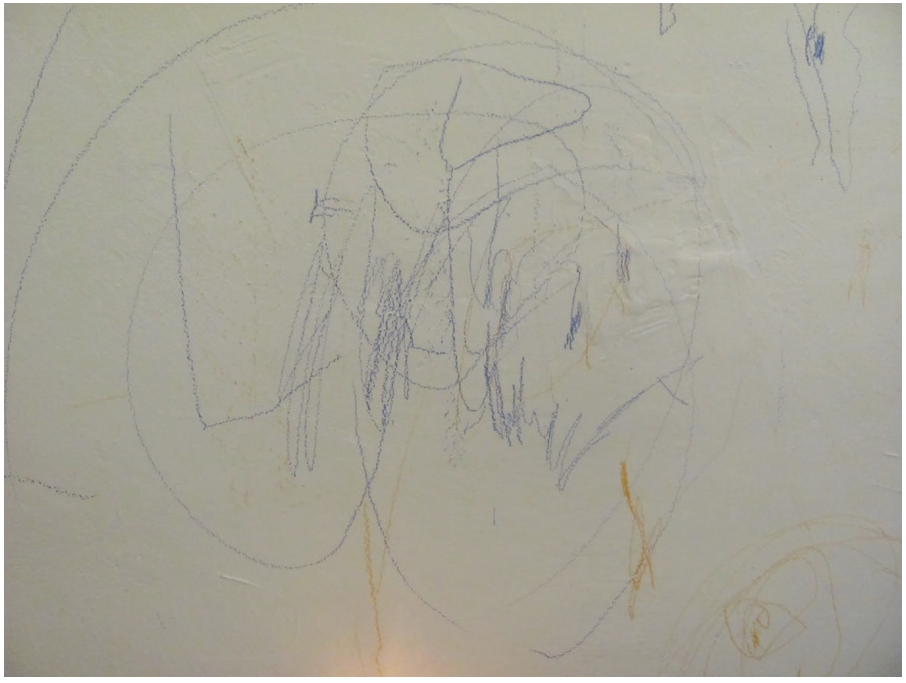

Figure 6.2. My daughter's drawing of a "circus." Photo by author.

Figure 6.3. My daughter's recording of her own height on her bedroom wall. Photo by author.

Now playing as a parent-scholar, my own digital scholarship and teaching answered a call from Bre Garrett, Denise Landrum-Geyer, and Jason Palmeri (2012). I saw the DLP project as a way for students to engage creative juxtaposition:

> Composing is a process of making connections, rearranging materials (words, images, concepts) in unexpected ways. The first words, images, and concepts that come to our minds are often the most obvious/the most expected/the most banal. Thus, if we wish to be creative, we can benefit greatly by gathering a wide array of disparate materials and then taking the time to experiment with combining and re-arranging these materials in novel ways. (Garrett et al., 2012, Act I, Scene 1 section, para. 1, citing Hogan, 2003)

I saw disparate materials manifesting themselves as a way to understand the nature of embodied knowledge and rhetoric. My single body as a scholar and teacher is certainly made up of disparate materials themselves, and, following Garrett et al., we must re-member these kinds of embodied interactions. That is, even as researchers and teachers, we must remember that we are bodies, that our/selves inherently engage with ecologies of other bodies—in classrooms, within

institutions, with colleagues and, of course, with students: "We tend to erase the body despite its corporeal presence, and we must re-remember that such erasures are not neutrally enacted, but that the body is always already a politicized identity-space" (Garrett et al., 2012, Act 1, Scene 2 section, para. 4). Students will be very aware of their own voices—*hating to hear* their own voices, they say, but not hating their own voices in the long run.

With re-membering our voices in a digital mode, we should also consider the fact that multimodality extends past the digital, re-membering the body as a mode of analog sound production itself. If, for example, classes of students are unable to use sound recording equipment, the assignment below can easily be reframed for live performance, bringing in materials that would create the sounds live or using their own bodies to create the sounds. This approach, then, would also give student musicians the chance to play along.

The playful nature of such projects should encourage us to see how play is inherently inclusive. A part of my own audio reflection heard later in this chapter is set in a universal-designed playground, where kids of all abilities can play. But in a classroom-sandbox of playing with sound, how do we—and more specifically, the following assignment—invite those who are Deaf and hard of hearing to play as well? Looking through the lens of loose parts, consider the pieces of sound and its synesthetic materiality: the feel of reverberations, the peaks and valleys of sound waves, the colors of three-dimensional sonograms. Can, for example, the aforementioned re-envisioned sound assignment for a live classroom performance benefit those who rely on feeling reverberations? Can those students work together to perform sounds that reverberate across a table where all students can feel the sounds as well as hear them? Embodied knowledge and rhetorics play a part in these scenarios as well, drawing together questions that all bodies experience: Though our bodies are made up of rather tight parts, how can we loosen them to demonstrate their potential in composing in different ways? How can we see the body as one more part negotiating and traveling and reverberating among seemingly other disparate bodies—other parts—coming together to make new meaning?

Assignment Prompts

Play Narrative

In this short paper, you'll explore play through an event/object(s)/journey that you've experienced as a child. We'll use Lindsey Campbell's (2015–16) "Ek Stasis" as a model for your own, even though you may have a different approach, style, and experience that will influence your narrative. We will conduct a number of workshops through this process, so don't worry that the following guidelines are minimal.

Think about your purpose: Why write about this experience? Why is this a good story to tell—out all the stories you have to tell? What do you want

your audience to walk away thinking or feeling or doing? It isn't important to explicitly address the purpose in your paper, but we should be able to say by the end of it, "I got it."

Who's your audience? Is it a general reader? Or do you have a group of people in mind? Who might benefit from your story? Don't write as if you're responding to an assignment. Don't assume I know what you're talking about.

Give your story a good title—not "Play Narrative." At least 750 words.

Criteria

The instructions for this assignment are purposefully vague to allow you to discover your own topics and directions. But there are some elements that you'll want to demonstrate:

Tell a compelling story that has a clear point/purpose. ____/60 pts.

Is it clear that you are invested in your own story, providing detail about the play event. Don't simply tell us you had an experience—show us how the experience played out (so to speak).

Use appropriate style and conventions. ____/30 pts.

You should demonstrate appropriate rhetorical choices in style—such as present tense—grammar, punctuation, and organization.

Share insight. ____/8 pts.

This is the infamous So what? question. Show that you've gotten something out of your experience. I do not, however, want to see conclusions that go like this: "What I learned from this experience was . . ." or anything remotely like that.

Total ____/98 pts.

Digital Loose Parts (DLP) Soundscape

The purpose of this project is to encourage you to make and articulate connections among

- some of the ideas you and your classmates wrote about in the first major assignment, the play narrative;
- external research you conduct through the library databases or Google Scholar and through audio sources such as NPR; and
- music and sounds you either record or find royalty free online.

You are engaging what play theorists call loose parts: "found objects and materials that children can move, manipulate, control, and change while they play. . . . The materials come with no specific set of directions, and they can be used alone or combined with other materials. . . . These objects invite conversations and interactions, and they encourage collaboration and cooperation. Put another way, loose parts promote social competence because they support creativity and innovation" (Daly & Beloglovsky, 2014, p. 3).

With other classmates, you'll develop an aural narrative—or soundscape—that engages various loose parts:

- classmates' play narratives
- sounds
- music
- audio/textual research

You'll write, record, edit, and bring together these elements into one innovative sound experience that explores the connections you make among ideas in your play narratives.

Context

You'll produce a 4-minute soundscape using **original and/or found sounds and music** and **voiceovers** (your own and your research sources) to tell a story that incorporates **aspects of each of your own play narratives**. To help you further develop the narrative, you'll conduct **research** into some of its aspects.

Process

Bringing your voices together. Share your personal narratives with each other during the first day of the project. Just like any other assignment, you'll develop a purpose you want to explore or point that you want to make. As you read the narratives, discover things that might lend themselves well to the content of your soundscape:

- Do you notice shared experiences?
- Do you notice shared aspects of the events/places/objects you wrote about?
- How does your writing style compare to the others?

Explore. What ideas might be best to explore in the soundscape? What stories do you tell? What ideas lend themselves well to an aural experience for your listener? What questions or thoughts come up that might lead you to conduct research?

Sketch. You might find yourself sketching out a script before you do anything else, or you might start recording things, or reading research first—more than likely you'll be doing all of this at the same time. You'll probably revise as you start editing the audio. However you go about it, you'll have some idea of the story you're wanting to tell early on.

Capture sound. Keep your ears open for the sonic samples you'll need. You can stage recordings, create the sounds you need to record, or just capture them naturally happening. You can also manipulate sounds to make them sound like you need them to.

Put it together. Undoubtedly this is the most challenging part of the process. You'll find that your script needs reworking, or you need additional audio, or the quality of the sound is not great, or you need to find a different soundtrack.

Criteria for Soundscape

Though I'll look at the soundscape holistically, you must demonstrate effectiveness in several areas. There are, though, some specific criteria to attend to: overall time; minimum times for certain elements; purpose; research; and rhetorical choices in the technical and creative aspects.

Overall Time: Is it between 3:30–4:00 minutes long?

Aural Components: As this is a sound project, the choices you make for a meaningful sonic experience should guide you, but here are some criteria to help you along:

Voiceover. Your own voices should make up most of the soundscape, but it's hard to assign a solid timeframe on how long you should talk. The voice-over might last the whole 3:30–4:00 minutes with sounds and soundtrack underscoring it, or you may pause and let the music or sounds do the work.

Sounds. Determining the number of sounds you use can be challenging too: How do you count sounds? Is the sound of a bouncing tennis ball one sound? Is the sound of a tennis ball being hit by a racket and then bouncing on a tennis court count as two sounds? Or is that one mixed sound? The answers aren't easy, and I don't want you to fret over whether you have one very layered sound made up of six individual sounds, or you have one very distinct, countable sound. You're shooting for quality, not quantity.

Soundtrack. Choose appropriate music for the project, but do not let it overwhelm your narrative. Shoot for no more than 30 seconds total throughout the whole project.

Source. As noted above, you'll engage some form of sonic research; that is, you'll engage at least two sources that are spoken, not written. You might record a friend reading some text-based research that you're engaging in the project. Or you might find appropriate research in an NPR story that you download, edit, and mix into your project.

Purpose: Is it clear that the author is demonstrating a focused purpose?

Research: Is the research appropriate for the purpose and topic?

Rhetorical Choices:

Writing

- Is there a clear purpose or point being made?
- How effectively do the writers engage the research?
- Is the writing equitable for each team member?
- How effectively do the writers transition from one element to the next?
- How well do the authors make connections among their ideas?
- How effective is the overall quality of writing expressed through the voiceover?

Aural

- Is the voiceover understandable?
- Are the soundtrack and sounds appropriate for the story?
- How's the quality of the sound elements?

Editing

- Are the transitions from scene to scene appropriate to the story?

Overall

- How do all of these elements contribute to an overall purposeful experience?

Sample Student Projects

The Play Narrative assignment asked students to individually write a narrative about a single play ecology.[1] The following student samples respectively focus on a backyard trampoline, a tennis court, and a forest stream. Their authors later came together to find connections among various aspects of their narratives and create a 4-minute sound project.

1. "Jump for Joy" by Jessica Maroney (a Play Narrative)
2. "Concrete Cloud Nine" by David Shull (a Play Narrative)
3. "Burnt Out" by Stan Bottcher (a Play Narrative)
4. "Boundaries" by Jessica Maroney, David Shull, and Stan Bottcher: In this audio project, three students discuss the idea of boundaries around playing: in the woods, on a tennis court, and on a trampoline.

Reflection

[A two-by-four bats rocks through the air.]

Scott Lunsford: The neighborhood kids would come over and we'd take two-by-fours and bat rocks across the dirt lot that made up most of my grandparents' backyard.[2] My mom and I were living with my grandparents at the time, in this small town in southeast New Mexico on West Texas Street. There is no East Texas Street, oddly enough. It just starts West.

[running and jumping along junk: old wooden boards, metal materials]

Piles of rusted car fenders, old railway ties, a concrete slab of something sat out behind two sheds my grandfather had built himself many years before, providing enough platforms and roofs to climb on and loose materials to balance and jump from. You weren't supposed to go into the sheds, one full of old tools that my grandfather used when he was a young farmer—when they called him "Bean Picker"—and another shed for stuff Bean Picker didn't want in the house anymore. He'd keep the keys to the sheds on top of the fridge so little ones like me couldn't reach them.

The house is now abandoned, No Trespassing signs attached to a number of its exterior walls. At least that's what Google Earth shows. I zoom in . . .

[walking across a street and through a yard]

. . . and trace the path I used to walk to school, going across 9th Street to stop by my friend Raulito's house and pick him up.

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

2. The audio version of Scott Lunsford's reflection can be found on the book's companion website.

[A car passes by.]

We'd cut through his backyard and into the alley, across a dusty vacant lot that parked tractor trailers full of hay bales, and stop long enough to throw rocks into the bales to see if they'd stick. The owner's wife would come out in her housecoat and yell at us, threatening to call our moms. So we'd run down the street to school, Hillcrest Elementary, which is now also empty. Along with three other schools in town, Hillcrest closed in 2017 because of poor performance. All of the students were consolidated into two brand-new, better-performing schools.

My name is Scott Lunsford. I'm an associate professor of writing, rhetoric, and technical communication at James Madison University. I teach courses in genre theory, editing, contemporary rhetorical theory, and first-year writing. I also produce multimodal forms of scholarship, particularly videos.

Much of my current research explores graffiti . . .

[A freight train passes by, its wheels scraping against the rails and horn blowing.]

. . . and other types of counter-rhetorics in unsanctioned spaces. I am particularly drawn to the backs of buildings, and alleyways, and underpasses, and train yards, to be in the places where graffiti writers find their own solace.

It's a profession that I have only recently realized extends from West Texas Street, decades ago.

My teaching over the past couple of years has reached back to that house, to that street, and the desert-tanned neighborhood, and I bring my own experiences from them into the classroom, where I encourage students to write through their own childhood experiences in a variety of modes, including video and audio.

One assignment in a first-year writing class asked students to write a play narrative. They were simply to write about a play event that they could deeply describe, perhaps even re-enact through dialogue they may have had with other kids they were playing with—just tell the story. Now, many students find it challenging to write about themselves, as many of them in previous years of education haven't had the opportunity to reflect much and articulate their own experiences as part of primary research. Depending upon the genre, I advocate researchers inserting their own experiences into their work. Doing so further makes us and our readers aware that research and writing are not disembodied, that it isn't magic and immaterial. Writing and rhetoric are of course always material. And that's what I hope to bring to students' attention, which can be rather frustrating for them because they're not used to it but eventually liberating for some because it gives them permission to play.

[Children play in a playground, a girl squeals and laughs, being spun around on some of the play equipment. A child's voice says, "You've got to hold on." Scott, in the scene, says, "Hold on real tight! You ready?" Another child: "It's not even . . . FAST," laughing, squealing.]

I'm at a playground with my own kids. It's a universal-designed playground, with accessible equipment, stationary but fun nonetheless. There are swings, and slides, and a synthetic rock wall, musical instruments . . .

[Kids drum on the instruments.]

. . . a chalkboard built into a concrete sculpture of a horse. Everything has its definition, everything is used based on its purpose, but every now and then, children will climb on top of the chalkboard wall and walk rope across, and of course the favorite thing to do, walking up the slide to slide back down. With this, kids are attempting to loosen the space in order to appropriate it for themselves.

And I think this is what I'm asking my own students to do with their writing, as they come in from years of using other models that have worked for them in their situations and then venture into a classroom where I encourage them to reflect on their lives as writers. That means tearing apart their assumptions about what it means to be a writer, what *writing* means. They find that they must loosen those tight spaces, those tight approaches, those tight assumptions to writing in order to find room for playing with writing, which of course means writing through modes other than the traditional alphabetic text. This is particularly important for a second assignment that I have this same class of students perform. I group them into teams of three and ask them to share their original play narratives with each other and begin to find aspects of each of them that have some connections among them. They are then to conduct research into the connections they discover and produce a 4-minute audio project, something I call a Digital Loose Parts Soundscape. The idea behind loose parts comes from a play theorist named Simon Nicholson (1972), who back in the early 1970s defined a loose parts theory, which essentially says the less defined or structured an object may be within a certain context, the more opportunity it has to take on other purposes. So, a two-by-four outside the context of carpentry, for example, can become a bat that you hit rocks with. And so some play theorists have taken issue with the design of playgrounds with equipment that have purposefully limited use: for example, a swing is a swing and you can swing on it; you can't take it apart and create something new from it.

This is what I'm asking students to do with each other's narratives: rip them apart, find something new about them, pull in other parts, such as research and sound effects and music, and create something new.

Now, there are challenges to this. One is if I'm expecting my students to take as much agency as possible to find connections on their own, essentially giving them permission to play without supervision, where do I come in as a teacher? How do I teach someone to find connections among disparate things, connections that sometimes simply aren't there? Do I let students play and whatever comes out is what comes out? And do I let them be okay with that, because they might not be okay with it? Sometimes the connections among narratives were contrived, stretched, and made no sense. Others had to revise extensively their original narratives in order to create connections.

One of the other challenges stems from my requiring audio research or audio-recorded research in the soundscape. It's easy to search library databases and Google Scholar for the research you need. You can of course skim parts of alphabetic texts to find what you might be looking for. Much harder to search for research that comes in audio form, such as NPR articles, and then to skim through such audio pieces in order to see if that particular research might be appropriate. You sometimes have to listen to the whole thing in order to see if it works. NPR's website thankfully has a search function, so you can search for various stories on, say, free-range parenting or how play has an effect on the brain. There are also transcripts for many of the audio articles, so anyone can scan the text before actually having to listen to the whole audio piece just to see if it's appropriate. NPR also allows you to download audio articles, which you can bring into audio-editing software.

All in all, though, I've let it be okay that these projects are seemingly messy at the end, because if I am to advocate a notion of play throughout the course, where I must allow for as much agency as I can—that is after all a necessity for playing—the objects of that play become in themselves loose parts, not tightly packaged, tightly controlled, tightly produced artifacts. But manifestations of play themselves, of voices who are re-taking ownership of play that they had left in their childhood.

Note

All sound recordings in this reflection were by the author.

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