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THE SERENDIPTICHORD: REFLECTIONS ON THE COLLABORATIVE DESIGN PROCESS BETWEEN ARTIST AND RESEARCHER

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Abstract

The Serendiptichord is a wearable instrument, resulting from a collaboration crossing fashion, technology, music and dance. This paper reflects on the collaborative process and how defining both creative and research roles for each party led to a successful creative partnership built on mutual respect and open communication. After a brief snapshot of the instrument in performance, the paper explores new sensing methods, often driven by a desire to demonstrate the possibilities of a sensing technology (e.g. [4]). In contrast, this project drew on current research into different conceptual approaches to interactive music systems with an aim to explore its possibilities within current artistic practice. Consequently, development was art-led rather than technology-led [5: 62] in that technology was developed to satisfy artistic goals rather than art developed to explore new sensing methods.

The Collaborative Process

The initial purpose of this collaboration was to further artistic practice and to transfer knowledge between different fields. However, by not adhering to the traditional roles apportioned to artist and researcher, some of the common pitfalls of an artist/assistant relationship [5: 61] were avoided. From the outset, Mainstone’s extensive background of sculptural, tactile and interactive work and Murray-Browne’s in sound installation led to distinct creative roles overseeing the sculptural and sonic aspects of the work. Similarly, having spent a number of years in a research environment combining art and technology, Mainstone’s role is of researcher as well as artist. Consequently, each party took great interest in the other’s work, desiring to learn how it may play a part in future work.

Early communication between the collaborators chiefly focused on how each other’s ideas related, technical feasibility and indications of preference among developing themes, allowing an understanding of the issues and possibilities to develop openly. Where these areas met—conceptual development and interaction design—a greater amount of collaborative brainstorming took place, with the artist suggesting how physical components might sound and the researcher how sounds might be invoked.

As in any artistic project, ideas were often pursued or dropped based on intuition informed by past experience and personal objectives and tastes. Whilst not blocking this process, collaborating shaped it by requiring decisions to be explicitly justified, enforcing a form of intellectual rigour.

Developing the Concept

Murray-Browne came to the project aiming to apply his research on the place of narrative (i.e. macroscopic structure) within interactive music systems: how can a composer both develop musical ideas and provide interactional freedom? The enticing and provoking nature of Mainstone’s work offered potential to address this dichotomy by coaxing a listener through a canonical narrative.
Mainstone arrived with a series of concepts referencing sound, exploratory movement and connection within public space (Fig. 2), a direct response to her current work in New York. As the collaboration developed these themes filtered, focusing on the sense of movement, narrative and sound. Both parties shared a fascination with narrative. Mainstone uses story to develop a physical architecture around the body as well as to create potential for interactive scenarios, which complemented Murray-Browne’s research on the place of narrative when a soundscape is explored in a non-linear fashion.

The first month of the collaboration took place with Mainstone in New York and Murray-Browne in London through Skype and ‘PowerPoint ping-pong’—a virtual sketchpad emailed back and forth. Key words like narrative, exploration and space would resonate with both parties, suggesting where the two disciplines might converge. Developing an underlying concept in terms of both artistic and research ambitions allowed both of these aspects to inform each other. For example, the need for an instrument to be predictable [6] coupled with the desire for serendipitous exploration suggested a relationship between user and instrument akin to collaborative improvisation. This led to the instrument being thought of as a character with personality traits like unrestrained, playful, illusive, which informed aspects of the design such as the ambiguous shape or the ‘animalistic’ audio effect applied to the swing of the trunk. It also led to different moods being defined through sound and movement and used to construct a story between ‘pioneer’ (our user) and object.

Concurrently, technical restrictions were considered and informed by the developing concept. A vision of serendipitous exploration made technology overly sensitive to environmental factors (e.g. computer vision) less appealing. However, the instrument ‘hit harder’ should be louder. This fed back into the sound design: sounds ‘hit harder’ should be louder.

Most enlightening, however, was observing the instrument in the hands of a contemporary dancer, whose instant connection showed the piece was unquestionably for dancers. This greatly influenced subsequent development and the nature of the final performance.

Conclusion

The creation of the Serendiptichord was enhanced by both collaborators having distinct creative and technical roles. Each took leadership over their specialist domain, with conceptual coherency maintained through short development cycles.

This design process was enhanced by a short deadline which brought both a clarity of vision—sometimes clouded in longer research projects—and the alignment of each element that made up the creative process, meaning that both design and technical issues were addressed at every stage of development.

References and Notes


Fig. 2. Sketches drawn during the conceptual development. (© Di Mainstone)