Casey Reiland

Ben Miller

Composing Digital Media

10/12/17

Reflection for Audio Project

For this project, I decided to enhance a spoken word piece that I had written for an Astronomy class last year. In this class, our professor stressed taking what we had learned throughout the semester and manipulating the information into a creative project. I organized a portfolio containing poetry about planets, dark matter and energy, eclipses, etc. One poem I wrote that I think is perhaps the most artful one in the packet is called, “The Discovery of Titan”. I modeled it after Sylvia Plath’s piece, “Lady Lazarus” by personifying the moon of Titan that orbits Saturn into a female voice. After reading the text aloud several times, I realized that I wanted the mood for the audio component to be dark, mysterious, and powerful. I also wanted listeners to feel slightly isolated, as if the words were a vehicle to unhinge people from reality. To create this eerie effect, I concentrated on the contrast, emphasis, and tone of the audio in the hopes that listeners would find the piece moving in the end.

Within the first recording, I found Audacity to be a program that was more easily navigational than GIMP. While there are layers in Audacity, there is more freedom in choosing how to manipulate them, and when one track is shifted or condense it does not affect the other components, unlike in GIMP where the physical layer had to be selected every time and if it wasn’t edited properly it could offset the whole entire visual. Audacity is simple and well-organized, due to the tools being lined up horizontally and under specific categories. Having a better understanding of the program allowed me to proceed with my project efficiently and in a timely manner. I recorded my voice first, and while I did run into some problems with my microphone not working on my headphones or laptop, I was finally able to capture the verbal text that I wanted. After that, I chose an audio track from CC Miter called “Autumn’s Dream Lullaby” by the artist Gurdonark. The music is instrumental and has a mystical feel about it, therefore, it would coincide with the mood of my poem. However, when I placed the track underneath the speaking part, I noticed that my voice was significantly quiet and muffled. I utilized the amplify tool to fix this problem. I made my voice louder and the music softer until there was a clear contrast between the tracks. There were still some moments, though, where I felt the music was too loud no matter how much softer I attempted to make it. I employed the envelope tool to help make adjustments, but I experienced some difficulties using it at first. For instance, I assumed that if I just select one area of the audio I could lower or raise the soundwaves. However, when I would click on one part, the whole entire length of the audio would collapse. There were also parts of my track that had odd background noises since I had recorded in the cathedral, and I had to figure out to how to properly compress those areas so they wouldn’t be as loud. After playing around with the tool, though, I managed to make the tracks balanced, clearing any background noises and minimalizing the music when it became too loud.

I wanted to have a component that would grab the audience’s attention in the beginning, so I researched different interviews that could emphasize my piece on SoundCloud. I thought adding in one of Sylvia Plath’s poems would be a nice tribute, but unfortunately I could not find the poem, “Lady Lazarus” that was free for commercial use. I ended up settling on a piece of hers that I had never heard before titled “November Graveyard”. The work is spooky and ominous. I cut the poem using the cut tool so that it would highlight the last stanza, which illustrates a deserted, bare land, similar to Titan’s surface. It was uploaded by the user Ricky Bowers Jr., but it was an original reading conducted by Sylvia Plath. I transformed the instrumental music to slowly fade in to heighten the power she was emphasizing while she read. I also manipulated her voice to fade in so the introduction wouldn’t be so sudden. Having my own poem proceed right after hers didn’t seem to gradually build up enough tension, so I began researching other interviews that could fit into the preface. I tried looking for Stephen Hawking, but most of his discussions were too lengthy. I stumbled upon a Neil deGrasse Tyson interview, though, that was short and contained the right tonality of wonder and amazement while staring up into space that I wanted the audience to experience. The audio is called “Neil deGrasse Tyson interview sample” and it was uploaded by ACMESciene on SoundCloud. I split the track to remove the dialogue that was unnecessary and then made the track louder. The beginning of the audio file now felt like it had a smoother transition, setting up the theme of space and desertion that would carry into the poem.

After listening to the recording multiple times, I still felt like the sound of my voice sounded off, especially since I had a cold while recording the piece. I messed with the pitch levels until my voice became deeper, and tried to remove the static from the background by using the noise reduction tool, which admittedly didn’t seem to help at all, besides making the harsh tones of some of my words subside. I am unsure if it is because it is too large of a track to try to remove all of the static, but unfortunately, I couldn’t seem to make it entirely go away. I utilized the envelope tool again, though, and that helped diminish some of the background noise although, I probably should’ve tried to record again to see if my voice would come out clearer. Perhaps for the final product I will see if I can adjust the clarity and tone at all.

I wanted to add a few more pieces before I deemed the project complete, so I began to research different space themed tracks. I found an interesting Ray Bradbury interview on Soundcloud, but I wasn’t permitted to download it. Eventually, I came across a rocket ship taking off called which I added over the line “He might have molded you into a lasting shelter” as a nice contrast against the calmness of my voice. I used the amplify tool to make the piece softer and then placed a fade in and out effect on it as well. Next, I discovered a recording of the Apollo 11 landing, which I felt would be a nice completion to the whole audio project since having the music at the end fade out was unsatisfying to me. The track was called, Apollo Land, Exec. Sum. (30s) Version and it was posted by the user Alex. I used the cut tool and pasted it at the very end, to create the effect that the listener had been transported somewhere. Finall—the audio that I am perhaps most excited about—I stumbled upon part of the Alien soundtrack on Soundcloud titled “Best of Aliens Soundtrack” by user766048592. Amazingly, the songs fit right into the piece, and while I did have to do some cutting and enveloping, particularly during Neil deGrasse’s Tyson’s quote where there is a hug screeching noise, I had to minimally edit it. Listening to the full audio now, I am impressed that I was able to manipulate the layers so easily and have them knitted together since I had such a difficult time composing them on GIMP. I will still have to clean it up for the final submission, but I am actually quite proud at how successful this project came out to be, and I’m glad that I now feel comfortable enough to use an audio program on the computer.

The citations for this project were more specific than the last one, mostly because not every audio file I found on Soundcloud was downloadable and because many of them needed me to cite them verbally. I have included my official citations at the end of this project in the form of a bibliography with an explanation of what was modified. I also included links for anyone to follow to the sources if they are interested. Many of the licenses required specific attribution including a copyright notice, a license notice, and a disclaimer notice, specifically for the Aliens and Apollo soundtracks, but since they are being used for educational purposes and will not be marketed off of I did not include those citations; however, at the end of my project I verbally gave attributions for the sounds. The copyright laws for the sounds did not have as much leeway as the pictures I used for GIMP did, and I think that is because sounds, particularly on Soundcloud, have tighter restrictions since they can be downloaded and sold to people to listen to.

For this project, I definitely reached the baseline criteria. My whole project is about three minutes long, I included more than three audio tracks, and I made changes to a source element through the envelope, pitch, and cut tool. Since the program was new to me, I was forced to learn all of the various tools that I needed, and I think I also touched upon some of the aspirational goals as well. For instance, I used contrast with the volume and grittiness of sound, fluctuating tracks against one another to make one stand out more than the next. I also used the split tool in some parts of my spoken word to create more of a pause for the listener to reflect and to also heighten the suspense with silence. Furthermore, I used duration and alignment by cutting back in certain pieces and lining different tracks with my poem to create a more punchy and powerful pacing to the project. I mostly centered the audio files around my spoken word piece, as if my poem had become personified to be Saturn and the other tracks were the moons orbiting it. Looking at my audio project through this visual lens, I was able to grasp the genres of the supernatural and sci-fi and stitch them together through the dark tones of the recordings. My original intention of the poem was for the reader to feel that humans are ignorant of feminine power, but now that I am studying the piece orally and with sound modifications, I almost want to take pity on the humans. By using the effects of pitch and inflection, the speaker of the poem feels godlike, a creation that I had not intended when I wrote the piece. With my smooth transitions, volume balance, and conflicting sounds, I think I effectively targeted an audience who is interested in spoken word poetry and enjoy listening and reflecting on a demanding, yet stimulating text.

I thoroughly enjoyed this project and loved experimenting with sound to enhance my own personal writing. I did not struggle as much as I did on the GIMP assignment, and perhaps this is because I rely on ingesting information orally over visually, but I felt that the program was simple and offered a lot of freedom to the user. I hope to clean up this submission by the end of the semester by mastering the various tools and unearth a new meaning behind my poem that I had never recognized before.

Bibliography/Citations

“Apollo 11 Land, Exec. Sum. (30s) Version” by Alex and sourced on SoundCloud.

I made some modifications to this track.

Links:

License: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>

SoundCloud: <https://soundcloud.com/alex/apollo-11-landing-nasa>

“Autumn’s Dream Lullaby” by gurdonark and sourced on CCMixter.

I made some modifications to this track.

Links:

License: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>

CCMixter: <http://dig.ccmixter.org/files/gurdonark/56524>

“Best of Aliens Soundtrack” by user766048592 and sourced on SoundCloud.

I made some modifications to this track.

Links:

License: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>

SoundCloud: <https://soundcloud.com/user766048592/best-of-aliens-soundtrack>

“Neil deGrasse Tyson Interview Sample” by ACMEScience and sourced on SoundCloud.

I made some modifications to this track.

Links:

License: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>

SoundCloud: <https://soundcloud.com/acmescience/neil-degrasse-tyson-interview>

“Rocket Ship Taking Off FX Free” by Natural Phonograph Music and sourced on SoundCloud.

I made some modifications to this track.

Links:

License: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>

SoundCloud: <https://soundcloud.com/natural_phonograph_music/rocket-ship-taking-off-fx-free>

“Sylvia Plath—November Graveyard” by Ricky Bowers Jr. and sourced on SoundCloud.

I made some modifications to this track.

Links:

License: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>

SoundCloud: <https://soundcloud.com/rickey-bowers-jr/sylvia-plath-november>