

'SUBTLETY AND SILENCE IN WEB AUDIO'

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Abstract

The unfortunate thing about current thinking in web-audio, with its aspiration to a more established audio art such as film-sound, is that it seems to have consistently neglected one essential element; that of subtlety.
Published in create-online magazine in October 2002.

1. Dynamic sound

The peaks and troughs of film sound have such power in drawing in an audience that the impact of the louder, more spectacular sequences in a film are dramatically magnified by preceding silence.

2. Louder, faster, harder

Perhaps the problem does not lie with the actual thinking behind web-audio - which is on the whole ambitious and creative - but rather with the practice of producers and developers forcing audio to be as loud as possible. How many times have phrases like 'more bangs per buck', 'beef-it-up', 'more, louder, faster, harder' been heard at design meetings?

3. Grab the ear mufflers

Of course, it's fine to grab someone's attention with a few flashy sound effects or drum and bass loops, but producers rarely see the long-term effects of audio on the user - repetitive sound effects get annoying, and generally force people to cover their ears.

4. Use with caution

That is not to say that audio should not be used because it annoys users. On the contrary, it should not be used if it is badly designed. Sadly, much of the time producers can't see the difference between the two.

5. Using contrast

Well placed subtle silences will allow the parts of the site that need to be larger-than-life to be more powerful when placed next to contrasting silences. If the user can simply listen to the subtle environmental sounds in a site, it can be an enjoyable and engaging experience.

6. The apex of subtle sound

The sound techniques that designgraphik and high-res have established are examples applicable to the whole web design community. Their use of rollovers, tiny blips of white noise and minimal soundscapes are subtle to the point that you probably wouldn't hear them unless you knew of them. This is the holy-grail of sound design: to be subconscious. However, the sound is there, giving depth to the experience without the user even being aware of it.

7. Harmonious continuity

Clearly the producers, sound designers and musicians need to see the entire site as a whole, and need to be aware of this macro-structure at whatever stage is being produced. This implies that the audio designer should be running parallel to the entire design process, from paper sketch at the pub to the finished, online product, steering the audio and ensuring that it does not pull against the visuals.

8. The influence of cinema

The maximisation and over compression of sounds and music is another area that shrinks the headroom for subtlety and dynamism. If we were to compare how the waveforms from a film soundtrack and a web soundtrack look, the visual difference is striking. Of course, websites are not films - we are dealing with a medium which should be allowed to develop its own direction. But that is not to say that the influence of film is not present, and being felt more and more each day.

9. Subtlety in film and advertising

A cleverly constructed montage of silence potentially has more dramatic effect than the biggest and loudest sounds. The structuring of how silence works in conjunction with sound is similar to the film-editing practices espoused by Eisenstein nearly a hundred years ago: in that expressive power is only gained when these elements are edited together and played against one another.

10. Horror movie

These techniques can be clearly seen in horror movies. What about the oldest trick in the book where a lone teenager creeps through a creaky house... the high pitched strings build and build and...phew it was only a cat...then, in that moment when the audience is catching their breath, THAT is when the enemy strikes. It is this playing with silence and tension, building and releasing that helped define the horror genre of the 1980s.

11. The power of silence

One of the most under quoted uses of silence is in TV advertising. Whenever a commercial comes on that uses silence, the contrast with the rest of the over-compressed sound output is intense (ever noticed that TV commercials are generally a lot louder than the programmes?). Invariably, an audience will stop what they are doing when a silent commercial comes on and give their attention is given to the TV. Perhaps it's because we think something has gone wrong with the set, but the psychology behind this has been fully exploited by only the most daring ad agencies.

12. Use it sparingly

Although interactive entertainment is championed as distinctly 'non-linear' there is still a great deal of opportunity to design and play with these kind of tensions. The Web is different from TV in that the majority of sites are silent and the odd stand out site has sounds. However, this is not to say that we need to pollute the bandwidth with in-yer-face audio in order to realise that it doesn't always work.