FULL CIRCLE: COMPOSING A CATHARTIC EXPERIENCE WITH DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY

Dr. Elizabeth Hinkle-Turner
University of North Texas
College of Music
Denton, TX  76203
ehinkle@music.unt.edu

Abstract

In this poster session the composer chronicles her initial experiences with the cd-rom format and describes the inspiration for the multimedia work, Full Circle. She then outlines the three principal stages and section of the piece and their significance to its overall message. The session will conclude with a discussion of the advantages of the cd-rom format in subverting the concert performance space-time continuum, and the importance of this to the impact of Full Circle during its presentation.

The desire to evoke an engaging event has consistently compelled composers and visual artists to cross their disciplinary boundaries to educate an audience about themselves and their experiences. As a composer trained in the manipulation and orchestration of traditional concert hall and electronic instruments, I have begun exploring the addition of "visual instruments" to my aural world and how this can enhance audience participation and excitation significantly without resorting to cliche in either realm. Additionally, I have a history which has impelled the creation of an artistic event, and this history has demanded both aural and visual instrumentation. An audience of witnesses to the experience is not enough; I want to create an event for them of the same magnitude as the history itself and the act of constructing a reflective description of it. The advent of interactive digital technology (most often found in cd-rom format, but also in use on the World Wide Web) provides me a strategy for accomplishing this. Though somewhat of an artistic "grabbing of the shirt collar" as I force the witness to become intimately engaged by mouseclick, the cd-rom seems to remain a friendly tactic. My audience member can choose when and for how long to turn on his or her computer, activate my composed event, and participate in its progress and conclusion. The final result of my research and labors, the cd-rom Full Circle, now exists as a fully immersive aural and visual documentation of my experiences with serious illness and its aftermath.

Full Circle is an autobiographical work including discussions, presentations, and commentaries from a trilogy of related multimedia pieces created by myself between 1994 and 1997 concerning my experiences as a cancer survivor (Hodgkin's Disease 1991-92). The final cd-rom and the multimedia works which were its inspiration were created primarily utilizing Macromedia's Director™ authoring software as well as digital video, illustration, photo, and audio processing tools by Adobe, Opcode, and Digidesign. Versions of the work exist for both Macintosh and Windows platform playback. Though Full Circle is partially a documentation of previously composed events, it stands as a separate work in its own right providing a concise and self-contained artistic journey for an audience in a compact package. In its cd-rom format Full Circle additionally addresses issues of performance space and time, degrees of viewer participation and idea accessibility. All video footage, animations, images, illustrations, and music for the
work were self-created and specifically represent temporal, aesthetic, and biological issues as they were confronted and resolved by the composer.

Opening to a full-screen content page [Fig. 1] the user can choose from pictured options to read about the work and the composer or can immediately select to enter one of the stages of my recovery experience represented by the cd-rom sections, *A Parable of Pre-existing Conditions, Antigone's Peace,* and *An Object of...*. Order of access is not significant: all works were conceived and implemented simultaneously (though completed at different times) with the occurrence of the thoughts, feelings, and actions they represent. The user is also given the opportunity during the playback of each section to “jump” to another one mid-stream: a small window graphic opens and with a mouseclick, one is taken to another portion of the entire cd-rom work [Fig. 2]. This allows for either a planned “linear” participation by the user or a more playful path of serendipitous discovery. The option also contributes to the *circular* theme of the work as the user can participate for hours without ever reaching an end to the piece. Depending on random choices made by the scripting program (written in Lingo, the scripting language utilized in Macromedia Director), juxtaposition of sonic and pictorial events proceeds in either a logically narrative fashion or as more collage-like pastiche of events. Additionally, like a circle without end or beginning, the creative and actual events are encapsulated, set aside mentally as a discreet past experience and physically as a compact disc by both the composer and audience member to be retrieved and revisited as needed or desired. "Coming full circle" thus represents a cathartic episode I have transcended and which I ultimately wish my audience to understand.
The stages or sections of Full Circle describe what I believe are common experiences of victims of serious illness: community rejection, loss of control over the physical self, and fear of permanent distress or death. For each of the sections I first created the visual elements and arranged their final linear progression. The musical accompaniments to these events were created afterwards: like a film music composer or sound effects engineer, I matched the sonic elements to the pictorial sequence to match the mood expressed visually. Full Circle is most obviously and immediately categorized as an educational piece meant to describe aspects of cancer survivorship to a general audience of other victims of the disease and their friends, families, and colleagues. Common reactions to the work are generally of an anecdotal nature; audience members typically relate to me their own stories of illness and its personal and political ramifications after a concert.

However, this discursive success does not completely illustrate all the factors contributing to my decision to convert my creative ideas to the compact digital realm. Full Circle exists in this format because it allows me to solve several problems which to my mind have severely crippled the communicative power of avant-garde creativity without my having to make any aesthetic compromises. Interactive artwork by its very nature suspends the "space-time continuum" that is often the enemy of audience enlightenment. Presented live in a typical concert venue, the three large-scale multimedia works which are documented in the sections of Full Circle become transient group experiences which must impart their entire impact upon one showing. As discreet stages of Full Circle, however, endless repeat performances are possible as needed or desired. This advantage is, of course, similar to that provided by audio recordings for the purely musical arena.

In Full Circle I took the liberty of programming the work to circumvent one other temporal component of the audience experience: the tendency of many to passively view audiovisual events as a continuous stream of information taking little time to reflect upon or contemplate specific aspects of the presentation. As the developer I avoided becoming the object of total control by the user with the careful insertion of the "escape windows" noted above which randomly appear during playback enticing the user to click and move to another portion of the piece. Additionally, I included several "meditative episodes" into the work. Somewhat similar to the scenic viewpoints found in national wildlife parks, these episodes are found in each section, vary in length from thirty seconds to two minutes, and are characterized by the absence of either visual or audio information and stimulation. Occasionally the total cessation of all activity occurs leaving the user staring into the silent void of the blank computer screen. Lack of composer-provided stimuli forces the individual viewer to create her own; the most logical choice of activity
becoming the consideration of what has so far been experienced and the contemplation of what may possibly occur in the future. This thwarting of the tendency of many to rush through their experiences illustrates the overall purpose of Full Circle as an instructional and artistic tool in seeing, listening, and living.

Full Circle is both a literal and figurative encapsulation of a series of life events. My intended audience may take these events away in a pocket, purse, or backpack and freely make use of them. Created as a cd-rom, Full Circle exists in a format that is not a poor substitute for another type of performance (as are many recordings) but rather offers a complete presentation of its creator's intentions. Full Circle thus additionally becomes an invitation for all to learn and transcend self-expression through the combination of music and art.

For Additional Information
