

MPTI CULMINATING EXPERIENCE
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THE_FOX_AND_THE_MASK

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TRIP_SEAT

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Introduction

Trip_Seat is an electronic music persona. The goal of this project is to develop and explore what it means to create interactive music experiences. These experiences will be manifested in the form of a dynamic A/V performance, and an interactive video game rich with lore. Taking inspiration from such artists as Damon Albarn and his Gorillaz project, Trip_Seat is intended to be a unique character with a fantastical origin story of betrayal, rage, and vengeance.

State of the Art

Ableton Live™ is the power house behind the project's music programming and production. Ableton is the most popular contemporary electronic music tool used by A/V producers according to one 2015 AskAudio.com survey. (Sethi.) Ableton's popularity is well earned, not only because it was specifically designed with electronic music production in mind, it also seamlessly translates into a top of the line live performance system. Using Ableton for the project was not a difficult decision to make.

The visual aspect of this project required more contemplation. The top choices for adding a visual component to the project were between two pieces of software, 'Resolume Arena 5' and 'Jitter' or 'Max/MSP.' Each of these programs has its advantages and disadvantages. Both can interface seamlessly with Ableton Live, making performance much simpler to integrate. The strongest argument in favor Resolume is its specialization with projection mapping, allowing for dynamic animations to use structures and different surfaces to bring true depth to 3D assets.

Max/MSP, while lacking the projection mapping capabilities of Resolume, shines in the area of customization. Max/MSP makes it possible to send up to 32 separate midi channel signals straight into Max/MSP from Ableton. Accordingly, information can be used to great effect for realtime content generation. Where Resolume relies on pre-rendered video, Max/MSP utilizes realtime graphics generation. This function also provides more depth when playing and reactively manipulating pre-rendered video. While both programs have unique features and strengths, Max/MSP afforded more efficient interactivity. The choice to use Max/MSP was also made easier given the price points for the respective software suites.. Resolume Arena 5, the version with projection mapping capabilities, costs €799.00 (resolume.com), where as Max/MSP has both a subscription and ownership options for \$99/yr, and \$399 (cycling74.com) respectfully.

Description of the work

The Origin of Trip_Seat

High in the heavens, in the pantheon of the Devine, there dwells a cavalcade of powerful Gods, each with their own dominion. Among these Gods are a few known as Raijin. They have governance over thunder and storms. The Raijin keep in their service mischievous, fox-like demons called Raiju. For reasons unclear, the Raijin send hordes of Raiju crashing down into the mortal realm in the form of explosive electrical energy and mayhem. The mortals call this phenomena lightning, and those that claim it doesn't strike the same place twice clearly have never angered a Raijin! The Raijin are callous and judgmental, but above all they are filled with an all consuming jealousy. All gods are jealous, but none like the Raijin.

One Fox Demon Raiju in particular experienced this first hand when he became too powerful in the eyes of the Raijin. In a jealous fit the Raijin decided to trick the Fox Demon, casting him to earth, as they had done many times. However this time, The Raijin threw the Fox Demon directly into a cursed mask, hidden deep in a cursed swamp. The Fox Demon struggled against his new prison, but his efforts failed to affect his cage in anyway. It could not get out on its own, so there, in the middle of the swamp, it sat. Decades passed. Eventually humans began wandering into the swamp, drawn by a mysterious and vast power. Although the Demon's magic could not break itself free from its swamp prison, the aura of power surrounding the Demon

permeated the entire swamp. Those who could sense it, and those who were greedy enough, braved the swamp seeking the source of this power.

But all who, often by chance, stumbled onto the mask and dared to put it on died in a horrible torrent of pain as all of the Demon's power coursed through them, boiling them from the inside out. Some would live longer than others, but all would perish if the mask was put upon them. Or so it seemed. Centuries would pass, and the world would forget things like Gods and Demons and the magic they wield, subscribing to a new digital religion. It is in this time we find a lost boy, wandering through a familiar swamp. Drawn by an ancient force, and seemingly guided by an unknown hand, the boy found a clearing in the dank swamp. In the middle of this clearing was the stump of a very large pine tree. It must have been centuries old when it was cut down for lumber. On top of the stump sat a wood Kabuki Demon mask. Its carvings, while faded, were ornate and obviously held great meaning, even if the boy could not understand them.

As he picked up the mask, without hesitation he placed it upon his face. Then, in an instant, he felt electricity course through his body, throwing the him down onto the ground. When he arose from the swamp floor, he was no longer the boy. Finally, a host that could maintain the Demon's power. Being trapped for so long, the Demon was finally free, but its mind was warped from the eternity spent in its solitary hell. All it could remember was its rage.... and its name.

This mythos is meant to permeate and influence all aspects of the project. The physical work is a 7 song EP composed and performed in Ableton Live, with corresponding visuals powered by a custom Max/MSP patch and generated real-time. The EP will be released as a video game that will be available as a Mac Desktop app as its intended play back method. The Max/MSP patch and the Game will utilize the same custom made 3D models made to echo characters and events from the story. These assets were made using the open source software Blender, which is also used to add animation to the custom. The game is powered by the unity game engine/editor, and was developed using unity as well.

The drums and the drum pattern are often the first element created while making the tracks, and take a lot from world music, in both composition and tonality. The goal was to make a medium between conventional and ever present Hip-Hop rhythms, play with them, and integrate concepts and sounds from other cultures, such as Brazilian and Arabian musical traditions.

In tune with the idea of unconventionality, the tracks stray from conventional arrangement by playing with the audiences expectations, such as dropping out down beats that they have assumed are inevitable, and by breaking from the 4/4 time signature.

The sounds of the Work were also approached with a constant theme of unconventionality, both in melodic content and the sound design. Drawing on samples from the animal kingdom, using them for percussion, and manipulating them into lead and melodic elements of the mix. Using gliding synthesizers and not always being perfectly in key adds an element of mystery to the tracks and the ambiance of EP, live performance, and video game.

The live performance system is an Ableton set made to send midi data, but doesn't not rely on real time synthesis. All the tracks in the set are audio files. This was done to cut down on the CPU because MAX/MSP and the visual patch is so demanding. There are little to no audio processing being done, to free up more interactive options for the visuals (using knobs on a control surface to effect Max instead of an audio effect in Ableton.)

The video game is a living world that continuously plays each track of the EP *simultaneously*.

The player controls a fox-like avatar to navigate towards different giant masks spread throughout the world. Each mask is playing a different song, and the volume of the song is dependent on distance from the Mask of its source. The only way to exit the game, other than cmd+Q, is to collect 50 scarabs floating around the world. This incentivizes the players to fully explore the world and the music. The scarab collecting function adds some familiarity to conventional games, giving the players another in-game objective.

Innovative Aspects of The Work

This project's biggest innovation comes from its video game platform. Using a game or an app as a platform for a musical album release allows for more integration and interfacing with fans, even after the release of the work. By making the audience actively engage with the music to experience it, you force them to pay attention to the work. With the album inhabiting a living world and not just being recited by a playback engine, each listen or play-through will be a unique experience, generating a lasting power for the work in an industry with an attention span that is getting smaller and smaller.

New Skills Acquired

Undertaking this project required acquiring many new talents, as well as honing ones already acquired. The project has cultivated a knowledge Max/MSP and its Jitter capabilities, as well as sound design and interactive performance techniques. By learning this software, it has also opened up possibilities for programming dynamic digital art installations that can run indefinitely in art galleries.

A foundational knowledge of game development skills was gained doing this project as well, including modeling, animation, level creation, and implementation of assets to the game environment its self.

Work on this project has also increased knowledge of all aspects of electronic music production in Ableton Live, from organization, speed of production, quality of production, mixing techniques, mastering. as well as live performance.

Challenges, both expected & unexpected

The biggest challenge facing this project was the Max/MSP aspect, and keeping it interesting enough to warrant an entire EP long performance. Making the interactions between Ableton and the objects in my Max environment was intricate, and required a lot of trial and error with figuring out how to name objects, and where to send what midi data being received from Ableton. Once a scene was established, the challenge then became how to transition smoothly to the next one, and just having enough content in general. I there would not be enough content, then the visuals get stagnant and ultimately deteriorate the whole work.

Future ramifications and/or plans for The Work

The future of the work is further development of the game, and further implementation of the lore. The music may be completed, but the game could use more work to become truly commercially viable as a 'game.' The EP will be performed live to gather a fan base and eventual

customers of the app, all while creating new music and visuals to add to the performance system set up in Ableton Live and Max/MSP. Eventually the App will be distributed/ widely available.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this work has given focus to a love for video games, and a means to close the gap between musician and game designer. Two great loves, combined in an unfamiliar way resulting in a familiar product. This has the potential to reinvigorate the music industry, and have musicians getting a piece of the \$91 billion games industry. If the musicians are the game developers themselves, it also leaves open the possibility that artists would be able to keep more of their rights and revenue from their work. Could game development just become another one of the myriad of job titles new artists have to take on in this day and age? Possibly, but like Will.I.am hints that artists need not just their art, but something to sell with it.

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