

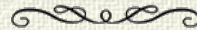
RADIO STARE (1997-2000)

Radio Stare was "an ambient entertainment device based upon synchronous delivery of motion imagery, musical sound, and live radio".

The work was created on a grant from *Turbulence.org*, and existed for three years on their site. It consisted of two asynchronously looping streams — a long MIDI music loop and an even longer Flash web animation — coming together in constantly changing interaction with a live web stream of police radio transmissions from various cities.

Radio Stare depended on the emerging ability of web browsers to receive and play these new media types simultaneously (when the piece was created this had all just become possible, even at the slow modem speeds of the day). Unfortunately subsequent generations of various audio players often handled only the one media type they were intended to play and 'locked out' others. In addition, many of the police and fire department scanner feeds that sprang up when live audio streaming was a novelty came and went at the whim of their providers.

The piece was archived in 2000 when it became impossible to guarantee that it would work as originally intended, but in the meantime it did find some critical appreciation...



AN EXCERPT FROM

"BITS & PIECES: A SONIC INSTALLATION FOR THE WORLD WIDE WEB"

A THESIS TOWARDS A DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN ELECTRO-ACOUSTIC MUSIC

Radio Stare is a Web piece that utilizes three different tools to create a strangely relaxing visual and sonic experience. Its central motive is the use of live police scanners as sound sources. There are several sites on the Web that stream live police scanner audio through RealAudio, and John Neilson utilizes them in a new and highly inventive way.

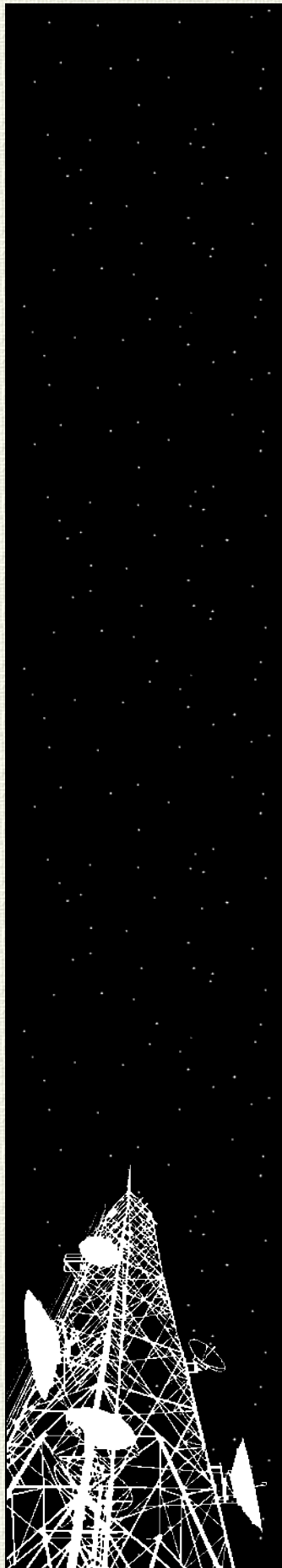
Radio Stare begins with a graphic of a radio tower against the night sky. A few lone beeps are heard. The view pans upward until the tower disappears. Another screen then opens with a first person perspective animation of a drive down a straight, lonely road in the middle of the night. Occasionally, one passes a radio tower. Simultaneously with this opening, the browser downloads a Quicktime MIDI file. Quicktime MIDI Instruments are a group of generic instrument sounds that can be played by most. The tune combines a slow, steady drum rhythm with mellow synth pads. It is intentionally bland and repetitive, with only the occasional pause and drum fill. Simultaneously, and perhaps most importantly, the browser opens up the RealAudio Player to receive a live stream from a police scanner site. It picks the stream from several available sites. The user then adjusts the volume on the RealAudio player to an appropriate level in relation to the Quicktime sound. Instructions on the page tell the listener/viewer to turn off the lights and relax to the experience:

Part of the piece is about passive viewing (once you get into the loop there's nothing to click on) versus active listening, so there's just enough going on visually to simulate a sort of (Infomercial Super-) highway hypnosis. It also gives you plenty of opportunity to consider how all this communication is out there, millions of lives intersecting in the aether (and now, cyberspace). It's as ubiquitous as oxygen, and just as invisible. (Neilson)

I found this to be one of the more interesting Web art pieces I've experienced to date. Conceptually and technically it is very simple. It does not have live musicians communicating over a network, nor does it sample and manipulate Web content. Rather, it appropriates a readily available sound source into the art work without changing it in any way. It adds a separate sound and graphical layer to frame the radio source. The final result varies from undramatic and repetitive, to soothing, to strangely unsettling. The graphical and Quicktime MIDI aspects of the piece remain constants throughout. It is the police scanner output that really determines the feel of the work.

The rhythmic backing seems to accent the distorted and disembodied voices of police officers performing their mostly uneventful routines. In a true Cagian sense, the police scanner provides audio content that is completely beyond the composer's control. Furthermore, it is beyond the police officers' control. Radio programs and stations usually have a format and a schedule, so that even if the output, within the scope of Cage's radio based works, is unpredictable, the output with the respect to those working at the radio station is almost completely predictable. Unpredictability and the possibility of surprise are taken to new levels with the use of police scanners. At any moment a situation may arise that causes a flood of communication over the police network. The communication, itself a collage of voices transmitted from around the precinct, is only marginally controlled by the dispatcher. Thus, completely unpredictable events (from the perspective of the police) such as robberies, shootings, and accidents, determine in large part the overall output of the scanner. It is these surprises, and furthermore the fact that they are live, that make **Radio Stare** such a simple yet engaging work:

Part of the appeal of the piece for me is that the scanner is live and unpredictable and real. You don't know if you're going to hear a five-alarm fire call in L.A. or a couple of bored cops in Dallas wondering where to have lunch. And you never know how the sounds and voices are going to fit into the loop. The moments where synchronicity seems to

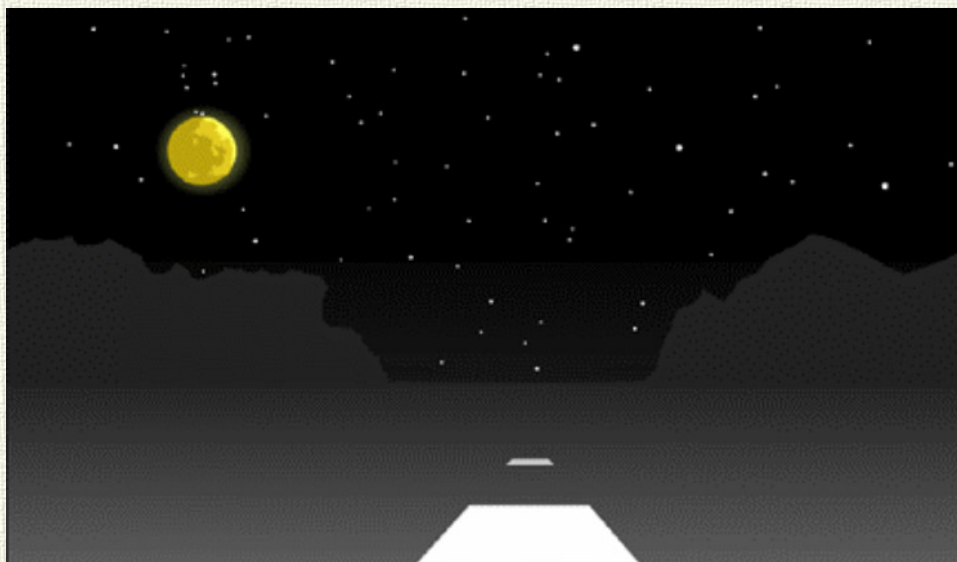


take over are the ones that make me come back to it again and again. (Neilson)

It is also interesting to consider the network relationships that pervade this piece. The individual police officers each comprise a node attached to the central hub, which is the dispatcher. As they move about the area, they each report back their experiences and actions. Their sonic output is mixed in a collage of communication that each officer hears. That collage is then sent out over the Web through a scanner site, appropriated in a work of art, and sent back out over the Web to a new group of nodes, the audience.

There is also a strongly voyeuristic quality to the piece. There is something unsettling about listening to live radio transmissions of police officers performing official business without the knowledge that their experiences, however banal or life threatening, are being appropriated in a work of art. **Radio Stare** is successful because it uses the Web's communication potential in such a simple but profoundly thought provoking way. Through its use of the police scanners, it becomes a work about the communication network it utilizes.

— Peter M. Traub
Dartmouth College
Hanover, New Hampshire
June 4, 1999



*AN EXCERPT FROM
"TURBULENCE.ORG: A PRESENTATION OF SELECT COMMISSIONED WORK FOR UPGRADE JOHANNESBURG"*

Many of the early Turbulence works are self-referential ... Their reference point is the World Wide Web, not the real world or its day-to-day concerns — sometimes this work projects a picture of what the Web really is or isn't; sometimes it talks about the limitations — the technology that is not yet in place; Sometimes it takes issue with other aspects of the hyperbole surrounding the Web.

Radio_Stare (1997) by John Neilson, a composer, musician and programmer, is one of those works. Without saying so, it makes its comment on the (already) over-hyped idea of interactivity.

Unfortunately no longer viewable, Radio_Stare dealt humorously with the then current rage for interactivity and what was called at the time "the twitching finger" (click, click, click, move on, move on, move on) — John's work was slow. It placed its user in the passenger's seat of a moving automobile on a clear dark night. The view was straight ahead. The radio was playing. The opening text, which is actually the only text in the piece, said it all.

The highway's clear

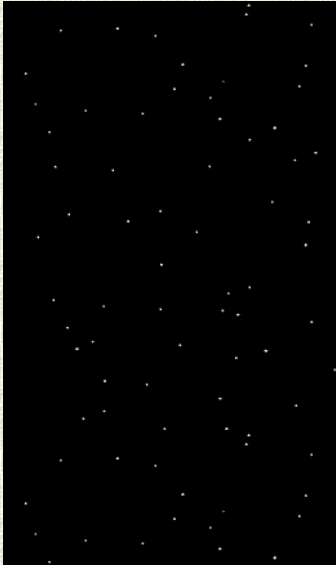
We can make good time

You're in the passenger seat

Leave the driving to us

Feel free to change the station

On a clear night the sky just seems to disappear



I can hear the stars singing

Are we there yet?

And so the user must give up his urgent clicking — to get, where? — and leave the navigation to John, who drives a linear path through a dark emptiness — with only a round yellow moon in the sky — and white center lines in the headlights of the car. On and on. Are we there yet? Instructions tell you to adjust the volume of the "radio", turn out the lights and listen. This is your only interaction with the piece.

But **Radio Stare** does something more, something that until this time none of the Turbulence works had done. John introduced two kinds of sound into his work — the purported radio sound in the piece: the slow steady rhythm of a drum combined with the mellow sound of a synthesizer — and a live stream from a police scanner. i.e., he taps into an outside source, another network, one that is live, readily available and completely unpredictable — not even the police, whose network it is, can anticipate all that is being transmitted over it. It is this outside source — well beyond the control of the composer — that determines "the feel" of the work and in the process captures the unpredictable nature of the outside networks it employs.

-- Jo-Anne Green and Helen Thorington
April 7, 2006

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