MALware Technical Report
MALevolence

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Abstract

This report documents the soundscape the author created which takes participants from the front door of the Media Archaeology Lab through all of its rooms while following a disjointed, dream-like narrative. Listeners are asked to engage in a number of experiments. These exercises entailed a mixture of imagining and concrete, corporeal tasks. Other components of the audioscape include remembrances from childhood that occurred at the intersections of family and media. A chief aim of the project was to tap into the realm of nostalgia without veering into sentimentality while also serving as an overview of the MAL's space and objects.

About the Author

Elana Lev Friedland is a writer and performance artist. Previous performance work has received support from the Barry and Sue Baer Graduate Fellowships. They are a 2018 TENT: Creative Writing Fellow. Originally from the Midwest, they are currently based in Boulder--by way of Boston--where they are an MFA candidate in creative writing at the University of Colorado.

MALevolence

Using sounds found on freesound.org (from their website: "a huge collaborative database of audio snippets, samples, recordings, bleeps…); recordings of myself/my voice as passed through various filters available on GarageBand; media recordings; and recordings of devices in use at the media archaeology lab, I created a soundscape aimed at taking participants from the front door of the MAL through to its back room, interacting with each of the spaces encountered along the way. The audioscape also called on participants to engage in a number of experiments in which I asked listeners to complete specific actions. These exercises entailed a mixture of imagining and concrete, corporeal tasks. For example, one track on the soundscape calls for participants to select a (non-functional) cell phone from the back room, then retrace their steps into the study room and hold a pretend conversation. I endeavored to inject a sense of play into the process of completing the audioscape. Other components of the audioscape include remembrances from my childhood that occurred at the intersections of family and media. I was interested in seeing how much I could tap into the realm of nostalgia without becoming saccharine.

This was my first time creating an audio project that required using multiple tracks; in a practical sense, that was something I learned how to do for this project! In a more critical sense, composing the script required me to be very conscious of the verbs I used, as I was calling upon listeners to complete hands-on activities that requires a tactile engagement with objects they don't often encounter in this day and age. Originally when conceiving of this project, I wanted to figure out a work that sidestepped conventions of audio walks like those of Janet Cardiff and Matthea Harvey. Specifically, I wished to center forms of movement other than walking and to avoid a linear structure to the experience, such that listeners could freely float from object to object as they pleased. I succeeded more in the former. While one does need to move through the MAL to complete the piece, manual interactions are the foregrounded physical activity. Regarding the latter matter, I discovered that because the textual/verbal elements of the project were fairly stream-of-consciousness/tangential in nature, I needed to impose a linear structure to contain the chaos.

The photos that follow were taken taken to reference materials for myself as I completed the composition of my script outside of the MAL. I am more familiar with the spatial setup than I am the particulars of each device, so the pictures tended to be close ups rather than "installation views." They have been placed in the order they would be encountered while completing the audioscape.
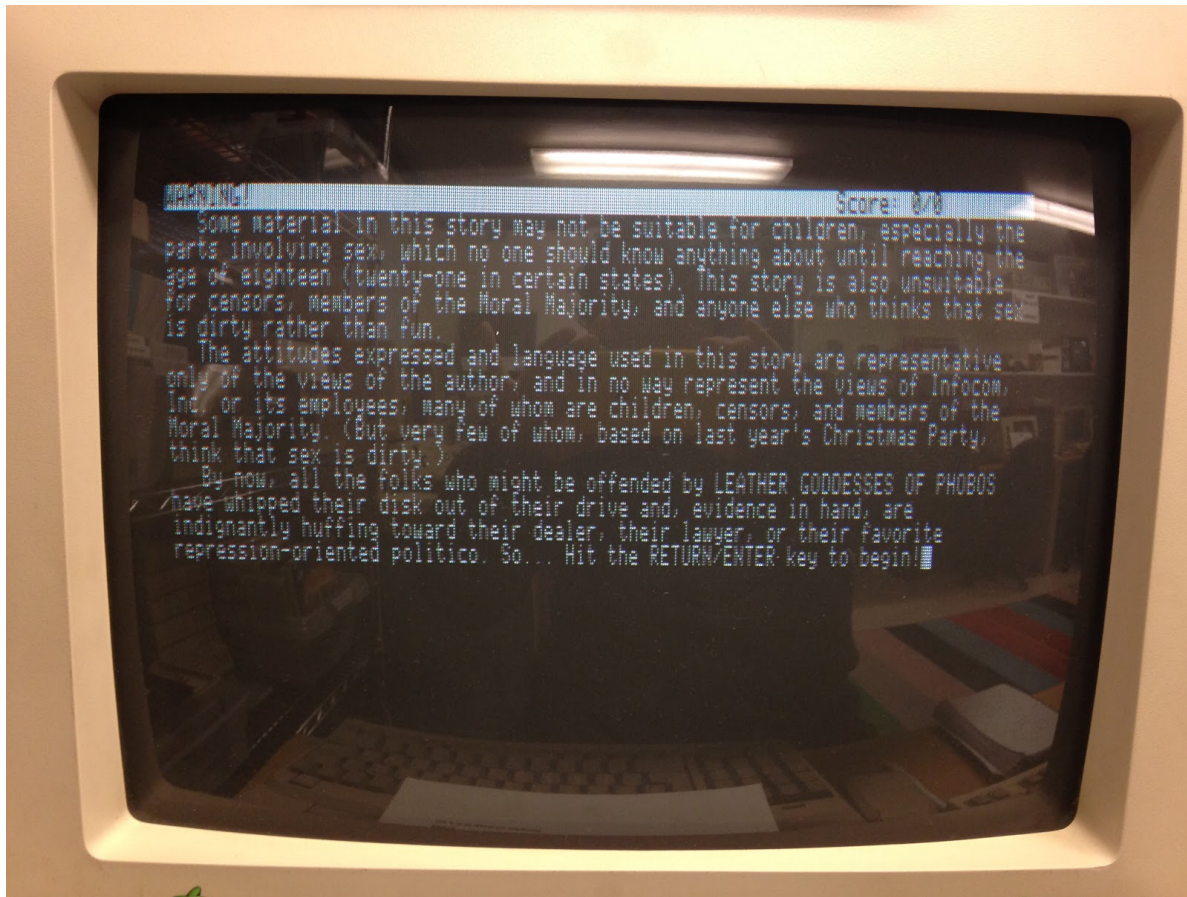
Opening screen of *Leather Goddesses of Phobos*, an interactive fiction game for the Apple IIe, as pictured on Apple IIe monitor. Listeners were instructed to turn on the computer, following the instructions pictured below, then play through the game for as long as they'd like, accompanied by a soundtrack I put together that was reflective of my experiences in playing.
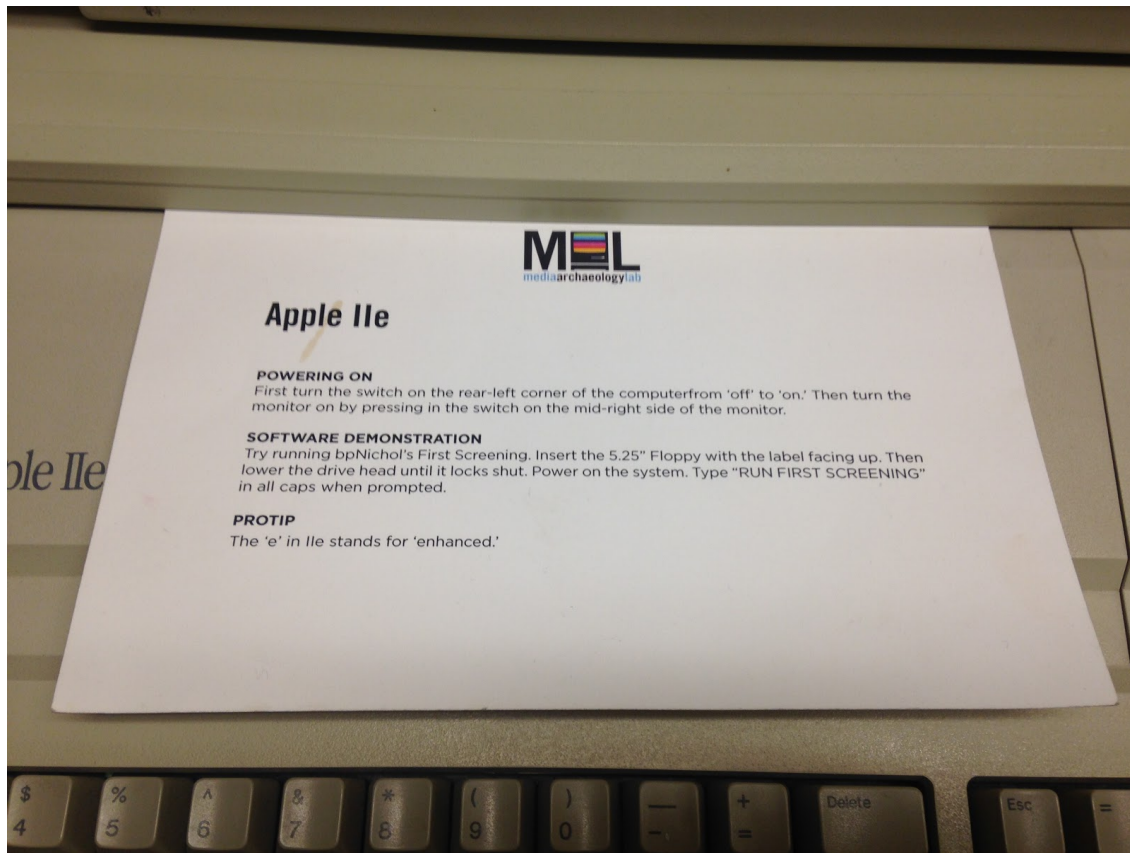
On switch for Apple IIe monitor, located on right side of device.

On switch for Apple IIe computer. Accessing it entailed reaching behind the monitor and finding the switch through touch alone.

Instruction card for Apple IIe. In the "AppleIIe" section of MALevolence, I read from the "Powering On" section of the card, applied a robotic vocal filter, then repeated the sound clip.

Leather Goddesses of Phobos includes a scratch n' sniff card. At various points in the game, players are to scratch and sniff the different numbers as indicated.

The instruction manual for Leather Goddesses of Phobos. Included examples of text chains/word combinations to enter to move through the world of the game.

The CompuVend Love Tester, pictured sitting upon its metal shelf. Participants were instructed to remove the tester from the shelf, plug it in, follow the instructors printed on the tester (which included placing a coin provided into the silver slot, then placing their finger in the appropriate location), then write down the number they received on both their hand and their heart.

The Kensington power strip into which one must plug the Love Tester.

The typewriter in the MAL library, after the lamp adjacent to it has been turned on. Listeners were asked to enter the space, turn on the light, sit down at the typewriter, and type the first line of poetry that popped into their head repeatedly while also repeating the line aloud. They were asked to stay in the space

Shelf of cell phones! Located in the MAL back room, the cell phone shelf includes both flip- and non-flip-phone options. Currently none of these are functional.

The video game area in the back of the back room. Pictured center is the yellow N64 controller, attached to the N64 console. Inserted into the console is the game Perfect Dark. Participants were asked to pick up the yellow controller, take a seat, and then listen as I played through a level of Perfect Dark while indirectly reflecting on my experiences the day of September 11, 2001.

Participants were next asked to lie down on the floor at a particular point on a multicolored rug and look upwards--ultimately, to imagine they were looking at the stars. The magic lantern (seen on the shelf; device with metallic copper tip) served as a focal point for this exercise.

Close up of magic lantern.

Non-functional phonograph, referenced in track named "Communicator" (which was given such a name because the thumping sounds in the background of the track came from a recording of a device in the room called a Communicator). Music from a different phonograph was also played during this track.

The Etch A Sketch Animator, the final device participants interact with during the audioscape. Listeners were told: "You have a few kilobytes at your disposal. What do you want to leave for those who will come after you?"

About the Media Archaeology Lab

Founded in 2009 and generously supported by the College of Media, Communication and Information as well as the Department of English at the University of Colorado at Boulder, the motto of the Media Archaeology Lab (MAL) is that "the past must be lived so that the present can be seen." Nearly all digital media labs are conceived of as a place for experimental research using the most up-to-date, cutting-edge tools available. The MAL – which very well might be the largest of its kind in the world – is a place for cross-disciplinary experimental research and teaching using still functioning media from the past. The MAL is propelled equally by the need to both preserve and maintain access to historically important media of all kinds – from magic lanterns, projectors, typewriters to personal computers from the 1970s through the 1990s – as well as early works of digital literature/art which were created on the hardware/software housed in the lab.

The lab is defined as much by what it is not as by what it is. It is a unique humanities lab that is not interested in scientificity. Rather than being hierarchical and classificatory, it is porous, flat, and branching. Objects are organized in any way participants want; everything is functional and made to be turned on. Rather than being an entity you need to apply to be a part of or

something you can only participate in as a researcher, librarian, PhD student, anyone may participate in the lab and have a say about what projects we take on, what kinds of work we do. Rather than setting out to adhere to specific outcomes and five year plans, we change from semester to semester and year to year depending on who's spending time in the lab.

The MAL is interested in experiments with temporality, with a disruptive relationship between past, present and future, and with lab infrastructure in general. It is a place for serious play and for playful seriousness. It is an anti-museum museum, in that all of its hundreds of devices, analog and digital, are meant to be turned on and actively played with, opened up, tinkered with, experimented with, created with, and moved around and juxtaposed next to any other device. The MAL acts as a kind of meta-lab for thinking through the infrastructure of labs and how they fundamentally shape and inform what is produced, from games to history, within the confines of the lab structure. The MAL's holdings quietly show how the history of computing is anything but a neat progression of devices simply improving upon and building upon what came before. In other words, the MAL's collection itself is a disruption to a particular notion of temporality underlying another particular notion of "history". With these devices, we can understand the waxing and waning of technologies more in terms of a phylogenetic tree whereby they are altered over time, split into separate branches, hybridized, or are terminated.