

The MP3 Player as a Mobile Digital Music Collection Portal

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INTRODUCTION

MP3 players are often described as *music collections in our pockets* or the *pocket jukebox*. Indeed, it would seem that MP3 players have significantly transformed music collections, music collecting practices, and contemporary understandings of the music collection. The MP3 player may be used to store, retrieve, and reproduce digital music files, and, therefore, it can be described as a portal—if we define the term portal as an entrance, doorway, or gateway—into these simulated (Baudrillard, 1983) mobile music collections. It is an interface between the human body and archives of digitally compressed music. This can perhaps be understood as constituting a kind of *musical cyborg*, a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of human and machine (Haraway, 1991). The MP3 player, in this hybridised sense, is a gateway into the digital, virtual, or simulated (Baudrillard, 1983) material cultural realm of music, a mobilised cyber-collection. The question then is what becomes of the music collection and the music collector when music shifts from the objectified disc and spool to the digital compression format and MP3 player portal? And, what are the social and cultural implications of the MP3 player portal's increasing pervasiveness and embeddedness in the flows of everyday life? The purpose of this article is to briefly introduce and discuss these questions alongside some of the technical details of the MP3 player. This article aims to use the material and technical details and definitions of the MP3 player to open up a range of possible questions that may be pursued in future research in this area. I will begin by defining the MP3 and the MP3 player.

BACKGROUND: MP3

The MP3 player, such as those manufactured by Sony, Creative, and Apple, can perhaps best be understood as a music retrieval interface that provides a portal for its appropriator to access an archive of digitally stored music files. These may be selected and reproduced or illuminating the increasingly inert user, the device may select the tracks on behalf of the listener. An example of this is the *Shuffle* function on the Apple iPod (see next). This extension of the random play function of the compact disk (CD) player can perhaps be offered as an example of the increasing intelligence of

the machine and the increasing inertia of the appropriator (Gane, 2005; Kittler, 1999).

According to Duncan and Fox (2005):

One of the oldest—and probably best known—compression/decompression formats (codecs) is MP3. It is popular with users for its near-CD quality and relative high speed of encoding and decoding. It is less popular with the music industry because it lacks controls to prevent copying. (Duncan et al., 2005, p. 9)

MP3, an abbreviation of *Motion Picture Experts Group One Audio Layer Three*, originated in 1991 as a system for broadcasting media files. MP3 is a file compression format that has the capacity to reduce music files to around one-twelfth of their original size (Mewton, 2001, p. 25), thus making the transfer across the Internet far more rapid and the space required to store the music much smaller. However, and contrary to the utopian rhetoric of the information or digital age, these are not perfect reproductions. The process of compression removes elements from music files so as to reduce them in size effectively; this leads to some of the subtleties of the music being removed. This then is a somewhat alternative vision to the perfect and infinite reproducibility that digitalisation has come to represent.

The MP3 format can be understood to have mobilised the music collection by compressing it, or miniaturizing it (Haraway, 1991), to fit into these pocket sized retrieval and reproduction devices.

THE MP3 PLAYER

The MP3 player, then, is a device that may be networked with the Internet (usually) through a connection with a computer, provided that the relevant software is installed upon it. A CD containing the required software usually comes with a newly purchased MP3 player. This connection made via the USB (Universal Serial Bus), USB2, or Firewire port or connector on the back of the computer enables music files stored on the computer's hard drive or accessed directly through the Internet to be downloaded onto the MP3 player where they are stored. The MP3 player then enables the appropriator to retrieve their music and reproduce the

music file, often through headphones, although a variety of technologies are now available through which MP3 players may be docked (amplifying the music through speakers around open spaces).

MP3 players vary somewhat in size but, to give an idea of dimensions, are usually somewhere between the size of a box of matches and a pack of playing cards (more exact dimensions are included in the following discussion of the iPod). However, contrary to the image this suggests, the MP3 player is not a discrete, standardised, or self-contained device that takes on a single form or design. The current trend is for the combination of MP3 players with other technologies to create hybrid devices, the most significant of which is the combination of MP3 and mobile telephone technologies. This creates always-already networked MP3 players that may access networked archives of music files and therefore, exceed the storage capabilities of an isolated MP3 player and the collecting practices of its owner. Recently, highlighting their dynamic form, MP3 players have also been hybridised with camcorders, sunglasses, and even confectionary packaging to create novelty devices.

MP3 players are highly mobile portal technologies upon which anything between around 120 and 15,000 songs may be stored, dependent on the device. The music collection is then entirely mobile and may be comfortably carried around; weight is bypassed as an inhibiting problematic. It is now a common site in the street to see people interfacing with MP3 players and other mobile music devices (mobile CD, tape, and MiniDisk players). Indeed the scale of use and the details of the practices of these cyborgs (Haraway, 1991) may well represent one of the biggest challenges facing studies of contemporary music collecting practices. This is not to mention the implications that these devices have for the human body and the everyday spaces, which they populate (Bull, 2000, Thibaud, 2003). Before developing these future research questions, and to crystallize the material dimensions of the MP3 player, I will first focus briefly on a specific example of the MP3 player, the Apple iPod.

THE IPOD

The Apple iPod (see www.apple.com) has come to dominate the emerging MP3 player market. Due to a series of high profile advertising campaigns and innumerable editorial pieces, it has obtained a high international profile. Possibly the most interesting of these advertising campaigns came in 2003. This incorporated a two-page advert, which juxtaposed images of what had become the conventional record collection, records, tapes, and CD on the left hand page, and the image of the iPod on the right hand page. This attempt to redefine or “recraft” (Haraway, 1991) the music collection had some success, although it is not clear what part, or to what extent, this advertising campaign had in this shift in

musical consciousness. Yet from purely anecdotal evidence, and the sales figures available for the iPod, it appears that music collecting practices have indeed shifted to momentarily rely on the outdated dualism from the actual or physical to the virtual and non-physical.

We now find the iPod dominates contemporary music discourse; the non-capitalised “i” prefix appears frequently in media discourse to evoke the downloading phenomenon and issues related to it. Furthermore, the descendant term Podcasting (Crofts, Dilley, Fox, Retsema, & William, 2005) is now becoming increasingly widely used to describe a practice of downloading pockets of music from the Internet onto the hard drive of computers and MP3 players. A practice that numerous companies such as British Telecom and the BBC (Radio 4) are buying into, as well as musician community sites such as www.garageband.com, in addition to the vast numbers of private podcasters.

In terms of its form, there are now five distinct models of iPod on the market, these are the original iPod, the iPod Mini, the iPod Shuffle, the iPod Nano, and the new iPod with video screen. Although the iPod Mini has now been discontinued to be replaced, it seems, by the iPod Nano. These iPod’s come in various sizes and have the capability to hold various numbers of songs. To highlight this, and to give some sense of scale, I will look at the iPod, with the largest memory, and the iPod Shuffle, with the smallest memory.

The new video screen iPod, which has replaced the original iPod, is available (at the time of writing) in two forms or models; these are the 30GB memory model, which holds up to 7,500 songs, weighs 136g, and measures 103.5 x 61.8 x 11mm, or the 60GB memory model, which holds up to 15,000 songs, weighs 157g, and measures 103.5 x 61.8 x 14mm. The iPod Shuffle, the smallest of the iPods, also comes in two forms, a 512MB memory model, which holds up to 120 songs, and weighs 22g, or the 1GB memory model, which holds up to 240 songs, and weighs 22g (www.apple.com/uk).

These iPod’s, despite the fact that they have come to be described as an MP3 player, in fact, like the connected iTunes Internet site (www.itunes.com), use the advanced audio coding (AAC) format. MP3 is one of a number of digital compression formats; there are innumerable other similar formats that are available such as AAC, WMA, some of which are encrypted like liquid audio for example, yet it is the dominance of the MP3 that has caused it to become the representative label for an entire series of music compression technologies.

RECONTEXTUALISATIONS AND SIMULATIONS

To return to the broader question of the implications of the MP3 player, we find that the collection is recontextualised

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