

Music as a Digital File: The Winamp Moment

[SLIDE] Old Timers

Browsing through the user forums at Winamp.com, I came across a series of posts from 2001 started by a user named Nexxus. Organized under the heading “Old Timers”, the thread is a place where users who remember the “early days” of digital music on the computer can share their experiences. By way of introduction, Nexxus states a few credentials: “My first MP3s were encoded with L3ENC at 56 kbps, and I was proud. I turned on Creative WaveStudio and click Record, then I played the song I wanted to ‘rip’”. Dozens of other users join in:

I remember the original fraunhofer l3enc. I remember waiting 1/2 hour to encode an mp3. I remember not being able to play a 128 kbps mp3 because my computer wasn't fast enough (I miss my 486). Those were good times (D-cibeL).

I've used winamp since around 1.x I don't really remember. damn that was a long time ago [...] I'm only 15, but I feel so old (s1138).

(All these from <http://forums.winamp.com/showthread.php?s=0d9d015c4304c008f7fe8e20640455a5&threadid=44250&highlight=nexxus>) general discussions 03-14-2001

Put aside for now the specific technologies mentioned in these posts. Underneath their high-tech talk, what these users are really bonding over is an important moment: their first memories of music on the computer. Their technical back-and-forth hardly very musical, but central to their conversation is the joy that came from preparing and playing music on their computers. The longing for technologies that are barely a handful of years old, and the thickness of the nostalgia from these teenage “old timers” highlight the rapidity of the shifts taking place in music and computing.

[SLIDE] It is not surprising these memories are spilling out on Winamp.com.

Winamp, the first widely popular computer audio media player, played an important role in the transition from digital music on CDs to digital music on PCs. Winamp represents the culmination of years of convergence in computing and music; a union that has defined the music industry for the better part of the last two decades and one that continues to have implications for how we access and experience music. Winamp was one of the first programs to mediate between users and their digital music. To borrow a term from Bruno Latour, the “scripts” within Winamp’s interface showed users what music looked like on the computer and what they could do with it and to it. It’s design and features sewed the seeds for the many digital “jukebox” programs that came after it. Beyond the issues the software raises for how we approach and interact with music, Winamp also contributed to a new setting, a new environment, outside the confines of physical packaging, within which the music commodity could exist. As such, Winamp is part of a “zero moment” that calls into question the status and character of the recorded music commodity while simultaneously presenting digital music as viable commodity.

[SLIDE] What is Winamp?

Winamp is part of group of programs known as digital jukeboxes or media players (I assume you are familiar with them). At the time of its launch in 1997, it wasn’t as fast or as feature-loaded as its competition (WinPlay 3 and MuseArc respectively). But just 18 months after Justin Frankel, one of the main developers behind the program, uploaded the program to the internet, over 15 million users had Winamp on their computers {Kushner, 2004 #89}. In June of 1999, internet media giant AOL paid \$100 million dollars to acquire Nullsoft – the company Frankel and friends had built around

the Winamp software. {Kushner, 2004 #89; Tedesco, 1999 #68}. Winamp still exists today, but the AOL purchase marked the end of an era for the media player (editor's note: I'm not sure if three years counts as an era or eons in tech circles). Competition in the media player market grew (from the likes of Windows Media Player, MusicMatch, RealJukebox, iTunes), and most of Nullsoft's design team left AOL, and Winamp's popularity declined as a result.

In the simplest of terms, Winamp is a computing solution. The problem, as framed by Frankel, was a desire to play MP3 files on personal computers with an interface that was as usable and understandable as a home stereo or other devices with which consumers were familiar. The result was a program that was a cross between a car radio and CD player {Frankel, 1999 #72: 48}. While Winamp's offerings weren't entirely unique, it was how the software presented these features that make it significant. Winamp used the modular quality of the digital platform to give users added control and customization options over how the player appeared and how the music sounded. It took ideas from previous audio playback devices and reconfigured them in digital form.

[SLIDE] Skeuomorphs

Put more theoretically, Winamp is an example of what N. Katherine Hayles calls a *skeuomorph*: "a design feature that is no longer functional in itself but that refers back to a feature that was functional at an earlier time" (HAYLES 17). The plastic surface on tables that looks like wood, or the recorded "click" you hear when the "shutter" on a digital camera takes a picture are skeuomorphic in nature. Their presence no longer attests to their original functions, yet the ideas they represent remain embedded in the design. The incorporation of past appearances and design ideas helps smooth the process

of adoption and makes new technologies feel more familiar. A careful balance between the new and the known, skeuomorphs borrow from the past to make the future possible in the present.

Personal computers are filled with skeuomorphs, but the concept of skeuomorph isn't just limited to appearances though. Skeuomorphs are, in the words of Nicolas Gessler, "material metaphors" that encompass old behaviours. They embody previous ways of seeing, thinking, and experiencing (GESSLER). In this light, skeuomorphs can blind us from other ways of seeing or of organizing the systems or technologies in question. Gessler worries about the deceptive capabilities of skeuomorphs: "Once thought is given material substance, it is not always clear what is a skeuomorph and what is not" (GESSLER). Gessler worries about the assumptions we make when the codes and interfaces of past technologies are embedded in new ones unquestionably.

[SLIDE] Interface-lift

Winamp's early design draws from previous audiovisual conventions and its interface has implications for the way we hear, see, and think about music in contemporary culture. Winamp's main window is a small console that contains song data and the playback controls {Frankel, 1999 #845: 48}. The console features a Spectrum Analyzer: a series of bars that would rise and fall based on the different parts of the sound spectrum that any given song was using {Frankel, 1999 #845: 49}. In a similar vein, Winamp's main window included an equalizer feature. Similar in function to some of the features available on high-end stereo systems or portable audio devices at the time, the EQ window let users affect the sound. The inclusion of a visual equalizer may seem comical, considering the perceived lack of sound quality MP3s had with respect to other

sound media, but it can also be read as a response to that criticism. MP3s may not have offered the highest sound quality, but by giving users the ability to manipulate parts of the sound, Nullsoft at least engaged listeners with the sonic aspects of the music and encouraged them to “improve” it. It may not have been the best sound around, but with Winamp it was sound that could be bettered. Together, the spectrum analyzer and the EQ sliders generated an illusion of high fidelity. Their presence is as much aesthetic as functional and they position Winamp as a media player for audiophiles (or at least those audiophiles who had accepted the computer as an adequate music playback device).

[SLIDE] Winamp took visual representations of sound even further with the “visualization” feature: abstract, computer-generated graphics play along in real-time with the music. Visualizations are in a certain sense pure eye candy – examples of amateur and professional programmers playing around and exercising their skills. However, since the imagery visualizations generate is tied to the musical attributes of the song, visualizations also promote the act of watching, instead of just listening, to music. Like music videos, visualizations act as a kind of meta-art; using it as the basis of an additional artistic statement. Visualizations have their roots in the demoscene, computer animation and gaming culture, but their appearance in Winamp popularized a particular stylized way of seeing digital music. Along with the spectrum analyzer and EQ, visualizations support the idea that for Nullsoft, the look of the player was important but so too was the look of the sound. As I’ll explore further in my concluding section, these features provided a visual supplement or package to Winamp’s sonic experience, giving colour and shape to sounds that were otherwise stripped of much of their visual materials.

[SLIDE] Playlist

Winamp also has a playlist window, where users can build a customized list of tracks for playback. Borrowed from the idea of radio station playlists, but more like a mix tape on steroids, digital playlists shift the scale and scope of what was then possible with tapes or CD players, sparking new ways of organizing and collecting music. Winamp's playlist window was relatively basic, but the ideas behind it remain a common feature of in today's digital music environments. Much of the academic and journalistic discussion around playlists involves analyzing them as a new form of listening practice. Enthusiasts tout the added customization and flexibility playlists provide (SOURCE). Skeptics mourn the turn away from the album as the CD, a cohesive statement from the artist, gives way to the playlist, an expression of the user's identity (McCOURT 2005: 250). Although both perspectives have merit, the more significant issue at hand is not what playlists are doing to those who listen to or make albums but (as I will discuss more fully in a minute) how playlists are just another way to package and sell music. Playlists may liberate artists from the technical limitations of previous formats and they may give fans an opportunity to exercise their creativity and individuality, but what the playlist really represents is a tangible and orderly way to package a previously unmanageable commodity.

[SLIDE] Skins

Winamp's various windows came wrapped in a graphical interface known as a "skin". Users could choose between several different skins (created by Nullsoft and users), each of which gave the player a unique look. The functionality of the player remained the same, regardless of the skin, but the aesthetics changed. Skins, playlists and the other features I have been discussing, are examples of Winamp's modular nature. Not

simply an exercise in mass customization, modularity is central to Winamp's broader significance. By letting users change specific modules of the software – the look, the sound, and the behaviour of the player – Winamp was as much a statement about the possibilities of digital music on the computer as it was a digital music player in and of itself. The software's features, which drew on familiar conventions of audio playback while simultaneously promoting new practices for sorting, handling and playing music, serve to promote the difference digital makes. There is little technical reason that Winamp needed to look like the front panel of a stereo or function like a CD player. There are a countless variety of other ways to fashion a digital music player. But the software is a collection of skeuomorphs because Winamp couldn't simply launch as a completely new media player (if such a thing is even possible). The very idea of playing music on the computer was still so new that Winamp's design had to account for the fact that, for many users, Winamp was their first experience with digital music. As an interface that introduced millions of users to music on the computer, Winamp had the twin task of acclimatizing users to a new technology for music management/playback and, more broadly, promoting the benefits of music as a digital file on the computer.

[SLIDE] Music as a Digital Commodity

I want to conclude by talking briefly about what I've been hinting at throughout this presentation: the digital music commodity. As music moves onto the computer it undergoes an interface-lift. It gets stripped of some of its previous attributes and then re-dressed with new ones. While new formats have long presented challenges for the music commodity, the case of digital music is particularly interesting because it is what Maria Styvén and others call an intangible or immaterial commodity. Intangibility, the inability

to touch and hold the product, makes music more abstract: consumers aren't sure what they are getting when they buy digital music, which makes getting them to pay for it a challenge. To complicate matters further, it wasn't originally clear that digital music was or should be a commodity. Rather than a pre-planned format change, like the move to CDs, music on computers was more of a by-product of the multimedia computing "revolution" in the 80s and 90s. This is not to suggest that music on the computer happened haphazardly, but that it was only thanks to a series of hardware and software developments, from a network of competing companies, institutions and technologies, that consumers were able to play and extract audio from CDs to their computers.

In this light, it is tempting to think of Winamp as part of a process that helped destroy or disrupt the music commodity, stripping music of much of its packaging and other commodity cues. Furthermore, since Winamp was indifferent to where music files came from, it was oblivious to whether or not the files it was playing were legitimate; it wasn't interested in the normal commodity relations that governed music. But of course, music's commodity status didn't simply disappear with the advent of Winamp, leaving nothing but pure use-value. The music itself, the marketing and advertising efforts behind it, and the complex star system that gets built up in the music press, videos etc. all contribute to the make up of the music commodity and these hadn't gone anywhere.

Rather than jumping to the conclusion that Winamp and the MP3s it plays are disruptive technologies, perhaps it is more useful to think of Winamp as part of what might be called a zero moment – a term that is inspired by a piece from Jodi Dean on the public sphere and the internet that I won't get into now. A zero moment is one that is temporary and transitory and one where contesting and conflicting views can co-exist

despite their irreconcilable nature. With an unclothed digital music commodity circulating on the internet and on computers, there were (and still are) competing conceptions on the form that commodity should take. Instead of calling that moment disruptive, the idea of the zero moment recognizes that the turn towards digital music might challenge the interests of the dominant players, but it might also further them. After all, the music industry has faced several zero moments since the introduction of sheet music, and usually, each new technology gets tamed or co-opted while the structure of the recording industry has remained relatively intact. Even with the perceived chaos of the current technological shift, as Tom McCourt and Patrick Burkart convincingly argue, the potential of a more diverse and eclectic recorded music industry founded on digital music is quickly giving way to instances of control and ownership from the same cartel of major record labels that have consistently dominated the industry.

As part of a zero moment, then, Winamp's role in liberating music from its commodity form is only one part of the story. In many ways, Winamp signals the starting point for the commodification of digital music. Winamp gave the music commodity renewed life in a different form. By acquiring over fifteen million users in less than two years, one of the undeniable lessons of Winamp was that there was indeed a market for digital music. Furthermore, the fact that a portion of users "donated" money to Nullsoft and that all those users had spent money on related commodities like computers, internet connections, sound cards and speakers suggested that this market was potentially a lucrative one. Nullsoft catered to this market as the software evolved and Winamp's features implicitly and explicitly laid some groundwork for the commodification of music. Version 2.10, for example, included a mini-browser window that linked to

Amazon.com, where users could, presumably, buy a CD of the very file they were listening to (the irony of being sent to buy something users already owned in another format was obviously lost on the browser technology). Visualizations and the other visual aspects of the interface I discussed earlier helped make up for the absence of album art, liner notes and other paratextual elements we associate with the music commodity. They added value to the naked data file by dressing it up in cool clothes, by showing off music's new look. And playlists, as mentioned above, emerge as a way of bringing order to the chaos presented by random music files scattered across a user's hard drive.

There is little doubt that the splintering of the music commodity into individual files on a computer has presented challenges for players heavily invested in sale of recorded music. Software like Winamp certainly added to the chaos of this particular zero moment. However, it also signaled the potential of a variety of new services surrounding the digital music commodity. Winamp, of course, was not the only player involved and the rest of my thesis looks at other important developments (like the CD database) along the road to commodification. But, as one of the most downloaded pieces of software for Windows (CNET SOURCE), Winamp played a particularly important role in transitioning users from playing CDs on their stereos to playing digital music files on their computers. It may have disrupted one form of the music commodity, but it simultaneously began to lay the groundwork for the commodification of music as a digital file. Winamp may have been ambivalent to where the music was coming from but, in the ways it packaged and presented music, it was definitely making a claim as to where music was going.