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The Immersive Power of Radio/Audio Dramas

Imagine turning on the radio on Halloween in 1938 expecting to hear a radio drama but instead it is a news broadcast announcing that Martians had invaded New Jersey, and they were incinerating people with heat-rays! Police stations, newspapers and radio stations were inundated with calls from terrified people (Schwartz). The *Mercury Theater on the Air* broadcast of Orson Welles' *War of the Worlds* radio drama caused mass hysteria because it was presented as a realistic news broadcast (Schwartz). "No one involved with *War of the Worlds* expected to deceive any listeners," but Orson Welles "conceived the idea of doing a radio broadcast in such a manner that a crisis would actually seem to be happening . . . and would be broadcast in such a dramatized form as to appear to be a real event taking place at that time, rather than a mere radio play" (qtd. in Schwartz). It worked, and listeners believed it was true because the script, voice actors, music, and sound effects made the news broadcast sound so real that it immersed and transported the listeners into the story. That is the power of an effective radio drama.¹

The original radio dramas flourished during the Golden Age of Radio from the late 1920s until the 1960s when television became the dominant medium. It wasn't until podcast technology was created that a new interest in radio and audio dramas emerged. In her article "The Rise of Fiction Podcasts," Cohen discusses early podcasts. When Apple launched its new

¹ "The FCC investigated *War of the Worlds* immediately, promising to put a stop to any kind of 'simulated news items.' The FCC closed its investigation in December 1938 when it found that while some people took the program to be real for various reasons, CBS agreed to take steps to avoid making a fiction broadcast sound like it was actual breaking news" (Yogurst, par. 2).

iTunes podcast app in 2005, it enabled radio shows such as *This American Life*, *The Moth* and *Radio Lab* to move into the podcast medium and broadcast weekly episodes. Podcasts were on-demand, and they were free from FCC restrictions. This enabled small companies and independent producers to produce all types of podcasts. However, it wasn't until 2012, when the popular *Welcome to Night Vale* serialized podcast launched, that the fiction podcast genre emerged. Radio dramas are not the same as fictional podcasts, but they both thrived in the on-demand podcast medium.

Fred Greenhalgh was instrumental in establishing modern radio dramas² when he founded *Radio Drama Revival* in 2007 (Radio Drama Revival). It is “one of the internet’s longest running anthology audio drama shows, with the goal of showcasing the diversity and vitality of modern audio fiction” (Radio Drama Revival). “More than a decade ago, Greenhalgh was introduced to radio dramas—a dramatized, purely acoustic performance—and fell in love” (McEvoy). “He asked, ‘why isn’t anyone doing this?’” (qtd. in McEvoy).

Although he studied film in college, he discovered that podcasts were “cheaper to create” and he “loved that radio drama invited listeners to participate” (McEvoy). “What I really love about the art form is the ability to sort of hack the brain and project images onto your mind through the ears” (Greenhalgh). He is “obsessed with the sounds that surround him and uses them to enrich the radio dramas that he writes and produces” (McEvoy). “His passion is sharing this amazing art form with everyone with ears” (Radio Drama Revival). His enthusiasm is contagious!

² Note that the terms radio drama and audio dramas refer to the same thing. However, radio dramas are broadcast on the radio; whereas, audio dramas are distributed through podcasts and other streaming internet platforms.

Podcasts have generated a revival of interest in the old radio shows, which are available on many revival websites. Podcasts are “the ideal medium for such a revival—portable, free, easy to use” (Zorn). New and innovative audio dramas—and even new genres such as The ElfQuest audio movie—have transformed audio dramas and made them hugely popular. “We’re coming into a new time when there’s a lot of opportunity out there to do this stuff . . . in the world of podcasts specifically” (Keller). Even audiobook publishers have been converting audiobooks into full-cast audio dramas with music and sound effects (Maughan). In 2017, Amazon Audible created a \$5 million grant fund to pay emerging playwrights to write audio dramas (Tiffany). Of course, the BBC is the gold standard for radio dramas. “The BBC produces and broadcasts hundreds of new radio plays each year on Radio 3, Radio 4, and Radio 4 Extra” (TheaterCrafts.com). This is a new “golden age” for audio dramas.

I became interested in audio dramas because I produce audio stories with film production music and sound effects for my stories2music (s2m) project. In 2011, while teaching myself how to use Audacity sound editing software, I had an unexpected surprise. I narrated one of my short stories and then added some film production music clips as background music. I was amazed at how the music matched the story so perfectly that it could have been written for it. I was just experimenting with background music, but it enhanced the story and made it more vivid and compelling. This intrigued me, so I experimented with other stories, and the music did the same thing in all of them.³ I might have just lucked out and found the perfect music for every story, or something unusual was going on with the music and the stories.

The music also affected me in an unexpected way—it reached out and grabbed my emotions; it told me how to *feel* about the story. It captivated me and swept me away into the

³ Note that these few paragraphs are from my s2m website, so they will be a match on Turnitin.

story. Narration alone didn't have the same emotional pull, but the added music did. When I started adding sound effects to some stories, the world of the stories became much more real in my imagination. "An audio story with added sound effects . . . immediately generates more vivid, detailed, and lifelike visual images in the mind of the listener" (Rodero, *See It*). This realism caused me to experience immersion and transportation into the stories. I had to find out why this happened and how to make it happen in my audio stories.

In 2019, I did a mini research study for the final project of the History of Multimedia class I took at Palomar College. I wanted to find out if the inclusion of film production music and sound effects in an audio story enhanced the vividness of the images created in the participants' imaginations and more effectively maintained their attention. For my tiny survey, I had participants listen to one of my audio stories three times: one with just narration, one with narration and music, and one with narration, music, and sound effects. They completed part of the questionnaire after each version and explained how each version affected their imaginations.

The narration-only version generated normal story imagery—the words were descriptive enough to paint the scene in their imaginations. The music affected their emotions and told them how to feel about the story; this increased the intensity of emotions that they felt for the characters and the situation (one participant cried). However, the sound effects made the story world real and transported them into the story; this version changed how the participants had originally perceived the story. For example:

One participant said the mud falling on the casket sounded heavier than she had originally imagined, and she reasoned that the rain made the dirt muddy and heavier, something she did not imagine originally. One participant had a stronger sense that the grieving woman was leaving the cemetery in the carriage because of the carriage

departing sound effect. That same participant said that he somehow missed the idea of “fierce rain” in the narration-only version, but the sound effects of the rain brought that to his attention, so his view of the scene changed dramatically. He could visualize the woman standing in the pouring rain at the grave site (Matthes, *Multimedia*)

Although it was a small study, it confirmed what I had experienced and what the research was telling me. Therefore, I wanted to explore more methods of audio fiction, which led me to full-cast audiobooks and radio dramas.

In the Multimedia Writing/Reporting class I took at Palomar College in 2019, I had to do three interviews for my feature article assignment on full-cast audiobooks. I was able to do an email interview with Michelle Cobb and audio interviews with Dr. Emma Rodero, and William Dufris. The interviews were so interesting that I posted them on my s2m blog and converted the Rodero and Dufris interviews into s2m podcasts. Myk Eff reposted the Rodero interview on his Audiobook Design page on *Medium*.

Michelle Cobb is the Executive Director of the Audiobook Publishers Association. She explained that “full cast productions have always been part of the audiobook world,” but it’s not “cost effective for every book to be done as a full-cast recording” (Cobb). One main problem is that books are not written to be full-cast audiobooks; they are written to be read (Matthes, *We’re All Ears*). “Audiobooks generally have one narrator who reads the book, word-for-word, as it is written. The narrator often uses different voices for different characters. Adding voice actors, music and sound effects to a verbatim audiobook doesn’t work because the book is not written to cue an audio listener about what is happening” (Matthes, *We’re All Ears*). “When you are listening to an audio, regardless of the type, you need some cues to understand the content” (Rodero, *See it*). Therefore, Cobb explained that “many full-cast productions being done today

are original works that are crafted specifically for this format.” For full-cast audiobooks to work the same way as audio dramas, they had to be rewritten into audio drama format—they had to be written for sound.

Dr. Emma Rodero is Professor of Media Psychology and Neurocommunication in the Department of Communication at Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona, Spain. I had emailed her after reading her “See It on a Radio Story” article, and we hit it off, so she was happy to do the interview. She explained that the “main function of sound effects . . . is precisely to create an audio reconstruction of reality, imitating reality’s actual sounds so as to create in the listener’s mind a specific image of the phenomenon that it is intended to represent” (Rodero, *Interview*). Sound effects have four functions: objective, subjective, descriptive, and narrative (Rodero, *Interview*):

- Objective function example: using running sounds to indicate that a **character is running rapidly**.
- Subjective (or expressive) function example: using the sound of rain to create a sad emotion.
- Descriptive function example: using sounds to identify the spatial dimension (location) such as wave sounds for the beach, bar sounds for a bar, or car sounds for a parking lot.
- Narrative function example: using sounds to structure the narration to indicate the beginning, middle and end of the story—e.g., the sound of a train far away, fading out, could be an end-of-story sound.

How sounds effects are used “to make it more life-like . . . is important to be transported to the scene. If I don’t perceive that the story is real or is life-like for me, I’m not going to feel inside. I’m not going to get this immersion, so it’s important to get this feeling with sound effects”

(Rodero, *Interview*). This really reinforced for me the idea that sound design is crucial for an effective audio drama.

For my third interview, through Michelle Cobb's connection, I was fortunate enough to do the interview about audio dramas with the late William Dufriis before he passed away in March 2020. He was the consummate expert with "well over 100 hours of recorded audio drama work, hundreds of audiobooks, three companies, and personal stories of such multitude and drama" (Dagaz Media). One thing that he said stayed with me: "Whatever allows the listener to become fully immersed themselves and not even question what's going on—that's our goal. The listeners should never be jolted out of the listening experience by having a question that pops up in their heads about what is happening. That should never, never happen. The listener should always remain immersed in the story" (Dufriis). This raised an important question: how does one immerse the listeners and keep them immersed?

Part of the answer is in the format of the radio/audio drama itself. Unlike passive, visual media such as movies or theater, where viewers don't use their imaginations, a radio/audio drama is a "purely acoustic performance" that "depends on dialogue, music and sound effects to help the listener imagine the characters and story" (TheaterCrafts.com). This is called the "theater of the mind" because the "action takes place entirely in the audience's mind, guided only by the voices and sounds that they hear. . . . the story is told with the power of human voices and all the additional support of sound effects and music to create an intensely emotional experience" (The Radio Theater Workshop). According to Rodero, "audio is one of the most intimate forms of media because you are constantly building your own images of the story in your mind" (qtd. in Wen).

However, this format alone doesn't guarantee immersion. "The creation of mental images needs active, voluntary attention from the listener" (Rodero 460), so the audio drama must use dialogue, skilled voice actors, music, and sound effects in such a way as to create immersion. Just because it is an audio drama, doesn't mean it is an effective one. "Sound design makes all the difference. A well-written and produced audio drama will enable the listener to become immersed in the story. Immersion happens by creating images in the listener's imagination" (Duftris). Narrative transportation is "the experience people have when they become so engaged—or immersed—in a story that the real world just falls away. Transportation is important because it focuses the attention of the audience, elicits strong emotional reactions and generates vivid mental images" (Green).

Vivid language is another way to cause transportation. "Vividness through crisp 'imagery and or sound' is more likely to capture the interest and attention of the audience" and cause the audience to "lose a sense of awareness of their physical surroundings and be transported into the world in the story" (Neimand). According to Ek, "The better the story can keep a listener's attention and stimulate their imagination, the easier it is for the listener to create mental images . . . Thus, a successful soundscape in an audio play is rich, realistic and consists of many different components that serve to enhance the listener's imagination" (8).

Now that I had a better understanding of audio dramas, it was time for me to learn how to do one. In fall 2021, I took Acting for Radio and Voice Overs class online at San Diego Mesa College with Professor Jesse Keller. The final project for the class was a short radio drama. We were placed into groups, and each of us had to select, or write, and produce a 3-to-5-minute radio play with a minimum of three characters. We had to write a radio drama script because we would also have to do voice acting for each other's projects. We would then edit, mix, and add music

and sound effects for our own projects. We met online in a Zoom meeting to record each other's projects using the SoundTrap software. I was in the Blue Group with Eric, Sera, Caroline, and Kevin.

First, we had to write our own scripts or adapt an excerpt from a radio drama, stage play or even an animated movie clip. Radio dramas have a basic structure of a beginning, middle and end, so we had to choose an excerpt (or write one) that had this structure. Like stage plays, radio dramas tend to use “. . . the long-standing dramatic structure that involves exposition, conflict, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution” (Cloud Radio), so incorporating these elements was important as well. I decided to adapt one of my stories²music stories: “The Rescue” because it fit the above criteria, was very dramatic, and had lots of sound effects.

In the story, Michael and Kate (married) are driving home at night when a thunderstorm hits suddenly. They are driving on a dark, two-lane road when a flash of lightning shows a panicking black horse in a pasture running toward the barbed-wire fence. They try to stop it by honking the truck's horn, but it doesn't work, so the horse crashes into the fence and gets tangled up in it. They stop, call the vet, and then work together to extricate the horse from the barbed wire. Once the vet arrives, she takes the horse to the clinic. Before they leave, Kate hears horses whinnying, so they run to the barn and find horses abandoned without food or water. They call their friend Jeff to bring the big horse trailer and take those horses to the vet as well.

My next task was writing the radio drama script. Fortunately, I had recently taken a screenwriting class at Palomar College, so I had already converted and combined two stories (“The Rescue” and “The Fight”) into a short screenplay, so “The Rescue” portion did have some dialogue now—the original audio story did not. However, I soon learned that a screenplay, which is mostly based on description, is very different from an audio drama play, which has no

description except what the dialogue and sound effects reveal (unless there is a narrator).

According to Salao, “Radio drama has the same building blocks as a stage play. The difference is that since these elements are executed as radio dramas, they can’t convey visual information, so listeners need audio cues to help them imagine an accurate picture.”

I did have some experience writing a radio play script for another assignment in that screenwriting class, so I had some idea of how to format the script in BBC radio drama format, but it proved more difficult than I had anticipated to convert the descriptions into sounds or dialogue. I had to imagine the story as “sound only,” so I could determine how to help the listener understand what was happening. The old-time radio dramas often had narrators to set the scenes—and some new ones do, too. Dufres’ viewpoint about narrators gave me something to think about:

When we did *Locke & Key*, I preferred to have a script that actually detailed everything in a way that didn’t require a narrator to give guidelines to the action that’s unfolding in an audio drama. Sometimes, it’s really difficult to do this all the way through an audio drama. Lacking that visual element, certain actions can take place that are tricky to convey without some sort of explanation as to what has just transpired or is going on.

I decided not to have a narrator provide descriptions.

I still needed help thinking in “sound,” so I listened to Dick Jordan’s YouTube video “Image This: A Story Told with Sound Effects” where he demonstrated that it could be done. I was amazed that I could put together the pieces of the story from just the sound effects, and it helped me “hear” how sound could tell the story. It changed the way I saw my story. I had a better idea of how to think in “sound” and convert descriptions into dialogue and sound effects.

For example, in the original story, the setting is described this way: “A flash of lightning lit up the dark, night sky and filled the air with a buzz of electricity. A loud, rumbling thunder rattled the truck windows and was followed by a sudden, fierce rain that obscured our view of the two-lane road” (Matthes 1). In my radio drama, the dialogue and sound effects had to set the scene:

2. SOUND: LIGHTENING CRACKLE. RUMBLING THUNDER.
 SUDDEN FIERCE RAIN. WINDSHIELD WIPERS TURN
 ON.

3. MICHAEL: This rain is really coming down hard. It’s so dark I can’t see the road.

Radio dramas also have four characteristics: character, action, dialogue, and time and place (Salao). As I learned about each one, I was able to implement them in my script.

Character

According to Salao, “Radio drama often has fewer characters than stage productions because it’s difficult for listeners to keep track of characters when they cannot see them. It’s also harder to distinguish characters by voice alone. This requires characters to have distinctive voices. My radio drama had three characters: Michael and Kate (married) and Dr. Taylor (veterinarian). It was fairly easy for the voices to be distinct enough to be distinguished by voice alone, but I also had to make each character speak differently—their choice of words had to be distinctive to their characters.

As “director” of my radio drama, I had to make casting choices from members of the Blue Group. Caroline and Sera were the two other women in the group. Caroline had a thick French accent and tended to be loud and over-dramatic, so I choose Sera, who sounded more like

Dr. Taylor. Her voice had a calmness that an experienced veterinarian would have in an emergency situation.

Kevin and Eric were the two guys in the group, so one of them had to do the voice of Michael. Eric was the better choice because his voice and manner sounded more like Michael, but Eric did not have much confidence as a voice actor yet, so he didn't want to perform in our Zoom meeting. I reluctantly had to use Kevin. "One of the bad practices for voice overs and radio dramas is when you're acting and playing a character [and] you get too aware of yourself and aware of your voice and are actually trying too hard to do something (Keller). This is what Kevin did—he over-acted and played Michael a bit too young and flippant, which didn't fit the character or the tense situation of the trapped horse. His voice didn't really match the serious tone of the scene. I later emailed Eric and asked him if he would record Michael's lines and send them to me. He agreed, and his version of Michael was spot on, so I used Eric's version. Choosing the right voice actor makes a difference in how the character is portrayed. The voice matters.

Action

"Since you cannot see what is happening in the story, actions must then be communicated through dialogue and sound effects. Characters in radio dramas frequently describe what they're doing or what they're seeing" (Salao). There was definitely action happening in my story, so I had to figure out how to show it. For example, this is the description from the original story: "Another flash of lightning and peel of thunder sent a lone, black horse into a panic. We saw him flee across the pasture toward the highway—and the barbed-wire fence that enclosed the pasture. We frantically honked the horn to get him to stop or to go in another direction, but we

were too late” (Matthes, *The Rescue* audio story). In my radio drama, the characters and sound effects had to tell the listeners what was happening:

6. KATE: Did you see that? Is that a horse running toward the fence? Point the headlights in the pasture!

7. MICHAEL: Oh my God! He’s heading straight for the barbed-wire fence. Maybe this will stop him!

8. SOUND: FRANTIC HORN HONKING.

It was a painstaking process because each part of the story needed to be analyzed to determine what to include and how to use the dialogue to show the action.

Dialogue

“Dialogue is perhaps the most important element in a radio drama. It conveys the setting, the character’s thoughts and emotions, their actions, and how they react to what’s happening around them (Salao). In the last part of the story, Dr. Taylor drives off, and Kate hears whinnying coming from the barn. Kate and Michael run to the barn in the sloshing rain. This scene uses dialogue to show the new location, the state of the barn, and the abandoned horses as well as Kate and Michael’s compassion and concern for them. Their response is to help.

4. KATE: That’s weird. The barn door is open.

5. MICHAEL: I’ll get the lights.

6. SOUND: LIGHT SWITCH CLICKING ON AND OFF.

7. MICHAEL: Power must be off.

8. SOUND: HORSES NICKERING.

9. KATE: Looks like there are six horses in here. No food or water in the stalls. One stall door is broken. Must be how the black horse got out.
10. MICHAEL: Water is turned off, too. No hay or food in the bins. How could someone just abandon them like this?
11. KATE: They're in bad shape. I'll call the vet.

“Dialogue is also essential in identifying audio effects. Without visual context, the sound of an engine can easily be that of a car, a truck, or any type of vehicle. When a character, through dialogue, identifies the sound as that of a car, it helps you form a better picture of the scenario” (Salao). For example:

3. KATE: Stop the truck!

4. SOUND: TRUCK SLAMMING ON BRAKES AND SKIDDING.

or

2. KATE: Carefully snip the wire and gently pull it from the wounds.

3. SOUND: SNIP, SNIP, SNIP OF BARBED WIRE SEVERAL TIMES.

“Dialogue can also convey the proximity of a character. Voice actors often stand near the mic or away from it to differentiate being near or far from another character. A character’s voice can also be made to sound hollow and mechanical, to sound as if it’s coming through a phone” (Salao). Although phone calls were used twice in my radio drama, it wasn’t necessary for the listener to hear what the other person was saying on the phone, so I chose not to include that

technique. Kate, Michael and Dr. Taylor were in close proximity to each other, so distance didn't need to be shown.

Time and Place

“Time and place are told through a combination of sound effects, music, and dialogue since there are no stage settings to do so. Radio dramas can evoke these scenarios better than stage plays as they only need audio elements and your imagination. It is possible to create multiple sets and quickly switch between them by utilizing certain sounds and music elements” (Salao).

In my radio drama, time and place were told through sound effects, music, and dialogue. We know it was a stormy night from the rain and thunder sound effects. We know it was a dark road at night because Michael told us: “it’s so dark I can hardly see the road.” We know they were by a pasture because Kate said to point the truck’s headlights into the pasture to see the horse. Resolution music signaled the end of the first scene when Dr. Taylor drove off. Urgent music signaled the new scene, and the sound of Kate and Michael’s footsteps running to the barn indicated that they were moving to a new location. Their dialogue described what they saw in the new location in the barn.

I initially used the background music from my audio story throughout the whole radio drama because that is what I do in my flash fiction audio stories for my stories2music project. I wanted to see if it would work in radio dramas as well. The music did fit the tension and action, in my opinion. However, Professor Keller said I should try a version where music was added only at key points: the beginning, during an emotional or tense moment, to show the end of a scene or the end of the piece.

There are several ways that music can be used in radio dramas according to Thraille: theme music, stings (a short phrase or chord), diegetic music (music that characters hear like a radio), and non-diegetic music (mood music that the characters don't hear). I decided to use excerpts from the background music. I used the brief opening section for the theme music at the beginning. For the non-diegetic music, I used a "resolution" excerpt to indicate the end of the rescue scene. I used a tense/urgent excerpt after that when Kate heard the horses in the barn. Once they were in the barn, I used an emotional excerpt to reflect their feelings about the horses. I used the theme music to end the story. I used the theme music to end the story. I did not use any stings or diegetic music. Professor Keller was pleased with my efforts. I, however, prefer the one with the background music throughout because the music actually matches the scenes perfectly—just like the audio story.

My radio drama fulfilled the required criteria. The story had exposition, conflict, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. It utilized techniques for character, action, dialogue, and time and place. It used two types of music in key areas and added emotion and drama to the scenes. It used sound effects to create reality, action, and location. Does my radio drama successfully cause immersion and transportation into the story? I'll let you decide. You can listen to both version at http://www.stories2music.com/radio_dramas.html

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