

Module 4: New technology is creating new ways of telling audio stories

[00:00:05] This week, we're looking at three developments in audio that mobile devices and voice platforms have paved the way for. We look to continuous personalized listening in the first lecture this week. Now let's move on and look at how interactive storytelling and augmented reality and location based storytelling may be some places where we'll see growth, experimentation and innovation in the future.

[00:00:27] We'll spend a lot more time on interactive storytelling because augmented reality is just still on the borderline of really being a thing. So let's start with interactivity. Now voice assistants are where we see this new development in audio really start to take shape because voice assistants are ultimately all about interacting. You ask for something and you get a response back. Sometimes you're asked for more information and you have to give another response. Sometimes the requests you give them are really simple. Alexa, play NPR. Hey, Google, what's my weather? Siri, what time do the Wolverines play? But things can get a lot more complicated and a lot more innovative.

[00:01:06] Choose your own adventure style storytelling was a natural start to interactive storytelling. In typical choose your own adventure stories, there are decision points where you can select one of a set of options that will take you down a different plot path. You then may come to other forks in the road where you have to choose the next path you want to go down. In most of these experiences, the player has to choose between a set of options at various times in the story or game or the listener call them player can use a variety of set phrases to request something or change the trajectory of the story.

[00:01:38] We haven't seen this approach really being taken to journalism, but what we did start to see a lot of news organizations experiment with, NPR included, were news quizzes. At NPR we created an interactive version of Wait Wait, Don't Tell Me, which is our game show so that people can play the news quiz. You're asked a question about the news and the player has to answer the question. This presented some real challenges because the news changes every week. And this meant that the system would have to use what's called natural language processing to understand your response and figure out what those words you naturally use mean. Think about it this way. The system would have to be smart enough to figure out if the words you say in response add up to the right concept that answers the question because each person might correctly answer the question a little bit differently, using slightly different words. And players in answering the question have to use names and places or maybe concepts that are new. So the system may not have had a lot of time to be trained. So it's tricky to do.

[00:02:38] Another form of interactive storytelling is some work Google and the BBC have been doing using interactive news storytelling. The BBC offers a news briefing that allows you to ask for more information at various points to go deeper into a story or get more information. We'll go deeper into the BBC's work in my conversation with Nicky Birch. But it really opens up some interesting possibilities for journalism storytelling. Brenda Salinas at Google often talks about how most news stories are written with a certain level of assumed knowledge in mind. Interactive storytelling might open up the possibility to let people who need more information quickly get it if they need something to find or maybe some background explained. And this kind of approach might allow news stories to get more quickly to new developments in the story or deeper information about the story.

[00:03:27] Now, one of the big challenges or tricks with this sort of interactive approach to news that we've run into at NPR and others that I've spoken to admit to struggling with, is that getting people to know and remember what they can say or even what they can ask for is really hard. A colleague of mine likens a smart speaker to an old school dos prompt. Back before Windows and apps and icons. You just get a blue screen on your computer. You'd have to know the magic phrase to type in to get the computer to do what you want it to do. It's kind of the same way with smart speakers. You have to know the magic phrase to say to it. Now, there's a lot of possibility here, but perfecting natural language processing and helping people learn what's possible for them to ask for is a hurdle to overcome.

[00:04:13] Finally, let's move on to the last category of storytelling, augmented reality. This is another possibly interesting area of storytelling development, but it's still early days. Now it can range from the pretty simple to the really complex. A simple example is a lovely little experience a small music society in Vermont put together during the pandemic. You basically download an app and you go to this trail they created and you walk a prescribed path while you're listening to music on the app by Beethoven. And they've set it up so that the piece you're hearing plays while you walk by certain trees that have sketches of the music Beethoven created. It's a really sublime and cute little way to create an experience and put you into the story of the inspiration Beethoven got from nature. But it gets a whole lot more complex from that example. Think about museum audio guides on steroids. These are systems that use your phone GPS to know where you are and to play you the right audio to really enhance your experience and really almost take you into a story while you're touring a city or experiencing a place.

[00:05:17] Now, the audio company Bose has put a lot of fanfare into augmented reality over the last couple of years. But over the summer, they pulled the plug on that work. Augmented reality and virtual reality always seem to be these things that are just around the corner. And so far, neither has really taken off as something that's an everyday part of our media diet. But there's still a lot of hype and a lot of experimentation, a lot of work in this area. So perhaps someday it really will be a thing.

[00:05:44] Regardless, audio as a storytelling form is still evolving. And when it comes to interactive audio storytelling, we really are in the early days. There could be a lot of exciting developments that could come in the future. And work you do could be part of the innovations that make it a thing.

[00:06:01] Nicky Birch from the BBC is really enthusiastic about the future of audio storytelling. I've heard her say we are truly in a golden age for audio, so make sure to listen to my conversation with her. Also this week, I'm talking with Ezra Eeman from the European Broadcasters Union about voice platforms, their adoption elsewhere in the world, and some of the concerns they present to journalism organizations with a public service mission.

[00:06:25] And as we wrap up our class in the final lecture, I want to spend a few minutes talking about how you actually find an audience for your audio project.