The Future of Satellite Audio Drama

Af Leslie McMurtry

Introduction

The audio drama audience in English-speaking countries such as the US, the UK, and New Zealand in the second decade of the twenty-first century faces an embarrassment of riches. Technological advances such as the podcast have made the creation of audio drama easier, less expensive, and potentially more accessible and democratic. While the modes of making audio drama have changed with the technological upsweep to either resemble film location recording or *satellite* audio drama[1], as opposed to the traditional studio recording sessions, these practices have not been uniformly adopted.

Concentrating on three case studies (Misfits Audio's *Snape's Diaries,* Cooperantem Audio's *Der Tickentocker,* and BrokenSea Audio's *Maudelayne* series 1), we look to the future of satellite audio drama in English – will it survive as original one-shots, serials, fan audio, or another category? Will it remain free to download and if so, how will it sustain momentum in an increasingly commercialized online world? What will its relationship to more traditional forms of audio drama as well as to terrestrial radio drama (such as the BBC) evolve into, if anything?

A working parallel for the issues of access pursued in independent audio drama is BBC iPlayer and its use in playing radio drama. Chris Kimber (BBC iPlayer Radio: Two Months On, 2012) recorded in his official BBC blog that iPlayer Radio had brought together all of the BBC's English language radio stations "into one coherent digital product across desktop, tablet and mobile." By rising to the necessity of engaging audiences through interactivity, iPlayer could compete with "the multimedia extravaganza to be found on a home computer or a smartphone" (Balick 2013, p.16). It seems obvious that audio drama in the coming years will need to strive for and address such aspects as simplicity of access, quality of content, and platform neutrality in order to survive. Furthermore, it seems that future satellite audio drama in English will need to increase its talent pool, organize on a larger scale, and uniformly negotiate fair use policies in fan audio production in order to evolve as a form.

Phases of audio drama

One cannot begin to describe audio drama without first understanding radio drama. For the earliest listeners of radio, content was not as important as the experience of *tinkering*, though such antics often fell afoul of governing and licensing bodies in the US, the UK, and continental Europe. This explains the somewhat late emergence of original radio drama. Ever since the development of longer and more sophisticated plays in the late 1920s, radio drama has been described as a *Cinderella medium*. One of radio's virtues has always been its portability and ease of accessibility. Although audio drama existed before the Internet, the Internet has made dissemination much easier and has led to other practices that have changed the landscape of radio and audio drama.

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1) The phrase originates with audio drama producer Jack J. Ward, as identified by Robyn Paterson of Kung Fu Action Theatre.

Why the need for audio drama, as opposed to radio drama? Examining the radio landscape of the three countries in my case studies, Britain's terrestrial drama landscape is the most established and the most prolific. At the time of writing, the BBC broadcasts approximately 564 hours of original drama each year[2]. The United Kingdom is therefore one of the most consistent and prolific providers of high quality, studio-based (though increasingly bulwarked by location recording) radio drama.

The United States' radio drama production has been inconsistent. The radio landscape is characterized by commercial format radio, which generally does not find drama profitable and therefore does not produce it. The US public radio situation incorporates many strands including NPR (the former National Public Radio) among others. Most public radio stations in the US are members of several strands concurrently. Individual stations have access to independently-produced drama, but it is by no means certain that drama slots are regular and repeated. Furthermore, with no nationally sanctioned programming, there is a real lack of continuity for drama-seekers.

Despite being "born in the finest traditions of the BBC," New Zealand's current radio scene is characterized by commercialization, therefore resembling that of the US more than the BBC (Shanahan 2006, p.35). By 2004, New Zealand, with a population of roughly four million, boasted one of the world's highest per capita "in use" radio frequencies in the world (ibid). After deregulation in 1989, the rush for commercial licensing of radio in New Zealand made the radio landscape begin to resemble that of the US. Radio drama could be found exclusively on the public broadcaster, Radio New Zealand (RNZ).

So these are the radio drama environments into which audio drama has emerged. What are the modes for recording audio drama in English? The first method is the relatively traditional approach, studio-based recording. The advantages of this method are greater control and an increased interaction between the actors, directors, producers, sound recordists, etc. The disadvantages of this method is that it is relatively expensive, requiring upfront capital that is unlikely to be an asset of most current audio drama-makers in English. Location recording follows a more cinematic method. Recording equipment follows the actors and director/producer to locations where content is recorded live.

What is satellite audio drama?

"Today's modern [American] radio drama scene can be characterized as an orphaned medium with a lot of guts but not a lot of polish," Frederick Greenhalgh, audio drama-maker and theorist wrote in 2007. He continued: "the dropping costs of equipment and the interconnectivity of the Internet certainly has allowed for more communication and community-building of this niche than ever before." (Ibid)

Greenhalgh's characterization emphasizes the role of the Internet and community in audio drama. Though Greenhalgh, in making his production company FinalRune's science fiction audio drama epic *The Cleansed* (2011-), favored location recording, his emphasis on Internet community shows the imperatives of satellite audio drama, a method of recording and producing not possible twenty or even ten years ago.

Satellite audio drama does not, by necessity, require actors and drama-makers to live in geographical proximity. No budget is necessary for hiring premises. A writer/director in this

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2)   Statistics come from *Radio Times* listings for calendar year 2012 as analyzed in author's unpublished doctoral thesis.

method uses computer software (often Freeware such as Audacity or commercial versions like Adobe Audition) to record and edit vocal performances, sound effects, music (often, again, Freesourced), and other audio tracks and then export into downloadable data files such as MP3 and OggVortis. Actors sometimes record their lines in isolation, mixed in only by the director/ producer/mixer, and sometimes take advantage of audio/visual communications applications like Skype or Gizmo5 (formerly GizmoProject) to interact with other actors real-time. Actors are sometimes even cast online via forums like Audio Drama Talk. Interestingly, this focus on using free software translates to the proliferation of the end product as well. It is rare to find any of the proponents of satellite audio drama offering their work for sale. This mode of production simultaneously balances an attempt for high quality production with a democratic access policy. At its best, this means, to quote Fiona Thraille (2013a), one of the drama-makers at Cooperantem Audio, "a very large number of people are able to tell their stories and find an audience without any commercial pressure." She believes this contributes to their being "truly creative and experimental" (Ibid).

There are several ways to consume satellite audio drama. Live streaming (which was available in all three of our case studies, see below), can be convenient but also a less desired mode of consumption if a potential listener has a slow Internet connection speed. More saliently through podcasting because according to the Edison/Triton Digital (2014, p.12) survey of American media users, almost 39 million of those surveyed had listened to a podcast in the last month, a significant increase from years before.

Case study selection criteria

Although attempts have been made to create a database for freely-available audio drama (such as The Audio Drama Directory), it is difficult to link producers of amateur and independently-produced audio drama across such a disparate and geographically large area as the US, the UK, and New Zealand. Independent online audio drama's provenance, form, production values, and manner of dissemination are myriad. It is difficult to draw conclusions or hold up a single prototype of the form. I have therefore chosen three case studies, which not only attempt to tell their stories artfully, but also embody the speculative nature of the purest audio drama. Current Head of BBC Radio Drama, Alison Hindell, defines pure radio drama as that which "feeds the imagination, and you have to contribute to it and make the pictures up yourself" (quoted in Wride 2013, p.173). This kind of envisioning of "pure" audio drama has been echoed by the late British writer Angela Carter (1985, p.7), who characterized it in her radio work as "that magical and enigmatic margin, that space of the invisible, which must be filled in by the imagination of the listener." I will keep this in mind as I look at the extra/inner/terrestrial worlds of 1) Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry; 2) a supernatural contemporary world; 3) an alternate-universe Maudelayne College at Oxford in the 1930s.

The three case studies I have chosen all create worlds that do not exist. This is the element they hold in common. What separates them is that they each represent a different country of origin (US, UK, and New Zealand), though as hinted previously, most large independent audio drama productions are multi-national. If broadly linked by telling stories of a speculative nature, by mode they are a fan audio (*Snape's Diaries*), a stand-alone one-shot (*Der Tickentocker*), and an original serial (*Maudelayne*). Two of the production companies (BrokenSea and Misfits) are well-established, while Cooperantem was only formed in 2013.

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Snape's Diaries

Snape's Diaries by Misfits Audio is a fan audio based on the *Harry Potter* novels by J.K. Rowling and, to an extent, the Warner Brothers films. Fan audio-makers take their cue from (text) fan fiction, traditionally the "literature of the subordinate" (Derecho, 2006, p.73). M. Mackey and J.K. McKay (2008, p.133) summarize fan fiction as "one relatively democratic version of that impetus to rework, to open up a previously finished story." As Melissa Beattie (2014, p.4) has noted, "the degree to which a text, its producers and its fans create meaning is open to argument." Nevertheless, among the reasons proposed is affective play (Hills 2002, p. 106), which is one framework in which to consider *Snape's Diaries,* given the performative aspect of a fan audio drama. Fan fiction works in several genres, including text, graphic novels/comics, and .GIFs. While text fan fiction usually involves only one writer, fan audio uses the source texts of media, literature, and culture and "democratically reworks it," using actors, composers, writers, directors, producers, sound recordists, and mixers in a joint effort. One of the appeals of what some might call derivative creation is in the "endlessly deferred narrative" which is, after all, one of the selling points of serial fiction (Ibid, p.128).

   Snape's Diaries takes place in a time period referenced in the novels but before the birth of Harry Potter as their main inspiration. Moreover, they emphasize the point of view of anti-hero Severus Snape and Harry Potter's mother, Lily Evans. Although critics such as Anupam Chander and Madhari Sunder (2007, p.599-626) have tried to celebrate fair use in fan fiction in the legal sense, the law is still open to interpretation. There has been a recent trend in fan studies to depathologize fans. To that end, it is worth noting that J.K. Rowling has been unexpectedly magnanimous in her interpretation of "fair use" by not threatening legal action against fan fiction archives like FanFiction. net where stories based on her settings and characters number in the ten-thousands. However, "the word 'fangirl' still carries pejorative connotations of crazy, hysterical, and stalker," as Zubernis and Larsen (2012, p. 228) discovered. The author of *Snape's Diaries,* while neither necessarily female nor a fangirl, is pseudonymous, and several of the cast members are not credited by their real names. This suggests "there's [still] shame about being a fan (. . .) shame over certain fannish practices" (Ibid).

   In the years since its inception, Misfits Audio has produced several fan audios. This sub-genre of satellite audio drama adheres very closely to the ethos of using Freeware and distributing audio drama for free: in essence, fans take ownership of the original text and rework it. In several instances, *Snape's Diaries* takes its cues from the Warner Brothers' films. The musical scores from the films, with their accompanying *leitmotifs,* often seem to be used indiscriminately in the soundtracks of episodes of *Snape's Diaries,* competing with post-production effects. The scores' use here seems obvious: an almost effortless setting of the scene and putting the listener in all the correct sites without having to rely on copious and tedious SFX (or expositional dialogue). The makers of *Snape's Diaries* expect that, reasonably enough, their audience has seen the *Harry Potter* films. This level of fan understanding is especially crucial if the listener is to grasp the significance of certain spells. In the *Harry Potter* universe, a spell is performed (usually) with a wand and a verbal command. In the case of *Snape's Diaries,* only the verbal command can be heard while imagination, based on either the books' representation of these spells or the films' depictions of them, must provide the missing information.

Der Tickentocker

The audio drama world would appear to be heavily biased toward the serial and the fan property. As Julie Hoverson (2010), creator of 19 Nocturne Boulevard audio productions, suggested in her first *making-of* audio drama podcast, the difficulties involved for the small-scale, independent audio

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drama producer mean that many operations do not succeed beyond producing a single play. A new fan audio production will have less difficulty ensnaring listeners, as it will have a ready-made fan base, thus it is more likely for the production to continue and make the effort worthwhile.

"An open arena for original, diverse audio drama" was how Cooperantem Audio advertised itself in July 2013. Although Cooperantem Audio has only so far produced two short audio dramas, its self-stated reliance on original scripts represents a somewhat unusual direction for contemporary satellite audio drama in English. *Der Tickentocker* was a short, one-shot original drama in the horror genre, appropriately released on Halloween 2013. To borrow the findings of Julian Hanich (2010) in the realm of cinema, there are differing modes of attention in watching horror films, *aesthetic attitude* for active attention and *aesthetic absorption* for passive attention, though a viewer is neither wholly one or the other at any given point in time. "The more I lay myself open to the film," he writes, "the more sensitive I will be to its effects" (Hanich, 2010, p. 53). Furthermore, Robin Nelson distinguishes in tele-visual terms between the cinematic *gaze* and the TV *glance*, (Nelson, 2007, p.15) and although this appears a relatively untried approach in audio drama, the history of radio drama is replete with the degrees or modes of listening intensity. With horror audio drama, the audience needs to have an aesthetic attitude to enjoy it fully. *Der Tickentocker* helps to invoke this with its opening.

Brigid Cherry suggests that the *predominant aesthetic* (2009, p. 88) for any horror film will be set up from the beginning. This also holds true for any audio drama horror story. Despite its short length, *Der Tickentocker* used a framing narrative of the past, an imagined 1920s film trailer, to set up its aesthetic. While no listener could mistake *Snape's Diaries* for reality, the opening framing device in *Der Tickentocker* could be mistaken for an extant piece of film narrative. This blurring helped establish the mood and bring an added *frisson* of "this could happen to you" to *Der Tickentocker.*

Cherry goes on to use the example of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* film to describe how viewers are expected to empathize with its protagonists in their journeys of horror and pain (Cherry, 2009, p. 88-93). Notably, this admittedly bloody film did not always need to be visually explicit in order to evoke greater horror. Although scenes of horror "are shot economically," the implication is that this is the "perverse sublime" (Cherry, 2009, p. 92). *Der Tickentocker* also examines the relationship in speculative audio drama between visualizing horror and the use of inner-eye imagination to bring to life a monster much more effective on audio, where it cannot be literally seen but imagined, a perverse sublime. This is appropriate because the Tickentocker monster steals intangible time rather than mangles the body physically. When the monster makes its appearance, we have the sense that the characters have as much difficulty seeing it (and describing it) as we (the listeners) do, and yet we can derive clues from their dialogue that are enough to create an image in our own minds.

"Given that images are both private and nonverbal," as Stephen Kosslyn (1983, p.37) wrote, "there is no way of knowing whether all of us attend to them and interpret them in the same way." Kosslyn has suggested that the fact we can instantly imagine a horse jumping over a house – even though we have never seen this in real life – supposes we generate images, not retrieve them. "The mind's eye consists of the various tests that evaluate and interpret the information in a matrix" (ibid, p.25). This makes studying the way humans visualize audio drama potentially quite difficult, as the intensity of the image can vary from person to person. This is one of the reasons that speculative drama can work so well on audio, as *Der Tickentocker* demonstrates.

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Maudelayne

Maudelayne series 1 is the first series of an adventure story that is a playful pastiche of pre-Second World War Oxbridge with specific homages to the Inklings (J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, *et al*) as well as referencing folklore and myth. Despite the frequent cameos of historical characters like Tolkien and Lewis, *Maudelayne* is very different in tone and content to more straight-faced productions on this theme. With relatively short episodes, which do not function in serial form (each episode stands alone and does not explicitly link with the end of the last episode), *Maudelayne* is free to posit almost any characters and situations within the realm of the imagination. Frances Gray (2009, p.268) noticed that audio can create "Ancient Rome or the planet Mars simply by mentioning them, and the listener can be transported from one to the other in seconds," and in *Maudelayne*'s case, mythological beings and monsters visit Oxford with alarming regularity and then vanish.

Though speaking mainly in terms of TV game shows, Karen Lury notes that successful narratives "have often been those which produce entirely expected, but specifically unknown, outcomes" (2005, p. 118). In *Maudelayne,* a supernatural occurrence or creature(s) will descend upon Oxford, the three students will battle it and/or deal with it, and everything will be fine and back to normal by the episode's end. To counteract the formulaic nature of the conflict, *Maudelayne's* characters pre-empt any observations on plot holes and other inconsistencies with sarcastic comments which help to smooth away any lasting impression of hearing a story very similar to the last one. To use the words of Peter David (2006, p.57), a writer of comics, "when your heroes openly acknowledge that this is like something out of a horror movie/SF flick/comic book, it's a tactic designed to deny the very medium they inhabit." Simon Malpas (2005), using Jean-François Lyotard's concept of the grand narrative, suggests, that in attempting to define postmodernism, "the grand narratives of modernity, albeit often in different forms from earlier times, still exert a huge influence on contemporary culture" (p.99). *Maudelayne's* approach can therefore be termed postmodern.

This notion is made all the more apparent in *Maudelayne's* credits, which were read out normally by writer Alexa Chipman in episode 1. Beginning with episode 2, the credits became interactive: the characters seemed to deny the fact that they were here being named as actors and continued to push the story forward with bickering, asides, grumbling, and general meta-text, not essential to understanding the episode itself, but often the most amusing moments of each 20-minute story. This approach to credits was far more innovative than *Maudelayne's* behind-the-scenes podcasts for series 1, most of which are longer than the episodes themselves, and feature extended, straightforward interviews with Chipman and Farnaby.

Sound engineer/director/producer Stevie K. Farnaby regularly created in *Maudelayne* series 1 the sounds of things that don't exist in this universe, from the voices of gods and goddesses of the ancient Greek, Norse, Hawaiian, and other traditions, to the sounds of dragons, dryads, djinn, and, possibly most memorably, a hard-boiled PI who exists only in the novels of a Dashiell Hammett ripoff. The strategies for making these creatures convincing (to the point that their introduction doesn't adversely affect the flow of the story) are in combining existing sound recordings (such as sword blades striking, bubbling liquid noises, and rocks crumbling), actor performances, emotive/scene-setting music (for example, in episode 4, "It's No Lamp," special music to represent a Middle Eastern harem was provided by Solace), and special effects like filters (for the voices of Aphrodite and Ares in episode 2 and the voice of the Jinn in episode 4, for example).

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Although made by BrokenSea, which is based in New Zealand, the majority of those involved in *Maudelayne's* production are based either in the UK or the US. Furthermore, *Maudelayne* series 1 illustrates that the producers of English-language audio drama often poaches its talent from a very small pool of performing artists and producers/directors. This has implications for the future of audio drama in English, and in particular the satellite audio drama; such small talent pools risk creating an atmosphere of Old Boys Network as well as giving the productions a somewhat homogeneous sound (though a frequent listener to BBC Radio 4 may sometimes experience a diluted version of this phenomenon). Audio drama-makers in English are in a difficult position, for although their product is offered for free and no one makes a profit on the production, the relatively sprawling nature of audio drama, cascaded over the Internet, means that drama-makers need to have name recognition in order to build up a listener base. As suggested earlier, one way to do that is by making audio remakes of fan properties; another is to use cast and crew who already possess a track record of delivering good quality.

Conclusion: can we predict the future?

In spring 2014, Audible.co.uk, Amazon.co.uk's arm of *talking books*, mounted an aggressive public campaign in London's transport system. The heart of the campaign suggested that commuting Londoners would find themselves immersed in worlds far more exciting than the 9-to-5 grind by putting on headphones. Visually, they would continue to connect with the reality around them, but through their aural senses engaged by the talking book mediated through headphones, they would find themselves 1) "Travelling with a Killer," advertising a woman listening to a thriller by Thomas Harris; 2) "Off to a Distant Galaxy" in Douglas Adams' universe in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. Most saliently, one of the London commuters "became" the character within the audiobook by transforming into a First World War soldier while listening to Sebastian Faulks' novel *Birdsong*. The widespread use of headphones has prompted Evan Eisenberg (1987, p.65) to link them with the belief "that the kingdom of music is within you," further underlining audio drama's remarkable, sometimes disturbing, intimacy.

Critics of the radio and audio drama in English continue to suggest that in our age of visual dominance, with television practically ubiquitous and the Internet not far behind, audio drama is at best superfluous and at worst, aesthetically bankrupt and commercially bereft. Other trends emerge which satellite audio drama can fulfill. Commuting by car is a fact of daily life for most Americans, for example. How do most drivers pass the time on long and tedious commutes? Certainly a great deal of them listens to the radio, and increasingly not terrestrial radio. Pedro Portela (2011, p.51) reported in 2011 on Portuguese drive-time audiences, suggesting that Internet-car-radio "may neutralize radio's loss of reach among itinerant users, who are seduced by iPod and MP3-capable car radios."

There is no doubt that speculative fiction is popular in satellite audio drama in English today. Its link to radio drama of yesteryear is that it effortlessly moves listeners between locations, which do not currently exist, but it does so with new distinctions, such as playful examination of the symbiotic relationship between audio and other media, and using meta-fictional techniques (such as "making of" features and interactive credits). The future of continued innovation in satellite audio drama in English is implicit in creating better organization, larger talent pools, and negotiating fair use policies in fan audio production.

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