

Echoes In Familiar Spaces: Audio Styling and the Audience's Invitation to the Worlds of
Limetown and *Within The Wires*

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Abstract

Podcasts are useful for influencing the way the audience thinks – audio drama especially lends itself to this application, with writers being able to cloak stronger political messages within the fictionalized worlds of their narratives. Podcasts like *Limetown* and *Within The Wires* can effectively tell stories about political and social issues through their involvement of the audience in the world of the work. The familiarity of the audience with the auditory styling of the podcast as well as the clear audio signposting used in both podcasts gives the audience a touchstone to their everyday life that makes it less strenuous to situate themselves in the fictional world and focus on the narrative despite other potential distractions. Through close listening examinations of both podcasts, I analyze and discuss the impact that the scripting and use of audio elements have on the audience's perception of the narrative and the implications for audio drama and podcasting as a whole. While *Within the Wires* is slightly more effective in the use of formats that are fairly universal in their recognizability to the audience, *Limetown* is more familiar to those who have listened to other podcasts before; this combined with *Limetown's* similarities to the critically acclaimed investigative journalism podcast *Serial* had significant impacts on each podcast's popularity.

Keywords: podcasts, audio drama, *Limetown*, *Within the Wires*, *Serial*, audience perception

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"Audio is supposed to be a fleeting, spectral thing—gone the very instant it's born. But it leaves its traces. There's something about the act of listening intimately which lets the stories and voices we hear get under our skin" (Spinelli and Dann, 2019, p. 8).

Podcasting has seen a rapid rise in popularity in the past decade, and with the release of WBEZ and Sarah Koenig's hit-podcast *Serial* in 2014, an even larger portion of Americans are listening to podcasts than ever before. With a download rate of 4 million downloads per episode of the first season within the first month of its release, *Serial* rapidly became a cultural phenomenon that changed the face of podcasting forever, and even spawned a resurgence of the "listening party" from the days of communal radio-listening past (Spinelli and Dann, 2019, p. 14-15, p. 253). While *Serial* cornered the market on nonfiction podcasts, *Welcome to Night Vale* (released two years earlier, in June of 2012; from here shortened to *Night Vale*) was circulating heavily in online fan spaces like Tumblr (see Spinelli and Dann, 2019 ch. 3 for more on *Night Vale*'s popularity and relationship to its fans). Many fans can, to this day years later, quote the opening section of episode 1, "Pilot," by heart: "A friendly desert community where the sun is hot, the moon is beautiful, and mysterious lights pass overhead as we all pretend to sleep. Welcome to Night Vale" (Fink and Cranor, 2012, 0:00). Both podcasts had enormous cultural impact, especially on young people heavily involved with social media. To that audience of podcast fans, both *Serial* and *Night Vale* are touchstones to understanding other podcasts and audio media. So iconic and recognizable are both, that – especially in the case of *Serial* – many

podcasts that came after tried to emulate their styles. In the case of the podcast audio drama, their impact was even more immense.

The two podcast audio dramas used as case studies for this work are Night Vale Presents' – creator of the extremely popular *Welcome to Night Vale* podcast – third podcast, *Within the Wires*, and Two-Up Productions' *Limetown*. *Within the Wires* (from here occasionally referred to as *WTW*) is a serialized audio drama about a dystopian alternate universe society, where many personal freedoms have been lost after both family units and governments have been abolished in the wake of a cataclysmic world event. The episodes are presented in the format of other types of audio media, with each season taking on the stylistic conventions of a different kind of audio recording: season 1 is presented as guided meditation tapes, season 2 as audio museum guides, season 3 as dictated office notes, season 4 as recorded letters, and season 5 as voicemails.

Limetown is another serialized podcast drama, focusing on a fictional investigation into the mass disappearance of the citizens of the titular city of Limetown. Without context, *Limetown* is functionally indistinguishable from podcasts like *Serial* and other true investigative journalism; it is one of the many “post-*Serial* podcasts” that take on the audio styling and conventions of Sarah Koenig's critically acclaimed work (Hancock and McMurtry, 2018, p. 82-83). Both podcasts present themselves as either “found” (as in the “found footage” genre in film) or “broadcasted” audio, physically or digitally present within the world and narrative of the podcasts themselves.

Much analysis has already been done of *Serial*'s impact on the field of podcasting, from its arguably unique format and audio editing decisions to its innovations in journalism (see Spinelli and Dann, 2019, ch. 1). *Serial*, despite its nature as a piece of journalism, leans heavily on storytelling conventions and techniques to present their cases each season. The editing style is

also fairly recognizable, with an opening “quick dense montage” of audio relevant to the investigation and a pseudo-NPR-like semi-conversational tone (Spinelli and Dann, 2019, p. 51; Hancock and McMurtry, 2018, p. 98). The personability of Koenig’s narration and the credibility she brings with her association with NPR – not in actuality, but in the minds of the audience according to Spinelli and Dann’s (2019) research – and with her journalism background endear her to listeners. *Serial* also notably recreates “the passive listener as coinvestigator, and responded to their fans’ evidence and input as the series progressed” (Spinelli and Dann, 2019, p. 204). The fan interaction has become a staple and requirement of popularizing podcasts, with the fan communities and involvement being in large part what spreads smaller or more niche podcasts to other podcast and audio drama fans.

Much work has also already been done on intimacy in podcasting, including an excellent chapter in Spinelli and Dann's book on podcasting, *Podcasting: the Audio Media Revolution*. For the purposes of this paper, I will refer to their phrasing: "When we talk about podcast intimacy we refer to efforts to create and reveal emotional experiences and personal connections in a comfortable space between interviewers and interview subjects, between the producers themselves, and between listeners, producers, and subjects" (Spinelli and Dann, 2019, p. 105). Intimacy is an incredibly important part of building and maintaining a podcast’s audience, and the inherent intimacy of the earbud-listening experience only heightens this. Podcast listening tends to be a solo activity undertaken while doing other work, and many podcasts go out of their way to achieve the effect of seeming to be in conversation with their listeners (Burkum, 2021). This intimacy is also important to the idea of “truth” and authenticity in podcasting.

From McMurtry's 2015 work on "framing errors" in radio audio drama, there are several extremely interesting ideas about "truth" in fiction and audio drama especially. As with long-running British radio drama *The Archers* and the long history of the narrative's presentation in the style of a "true" work causing listeners to really believe (even when presented with evidence to the contrary) that the characters in the broadcast are "real people," as McMurtry discusses in that paper, *Limetown* similarly does not credit the actors involved at the end of an episode as seen in other popular podcast audio dramas like *The Magnus Archives*, *Wolf 359*, or even *Within the Wires*. Writers are also uncredited, with the episodes of the first season instead being presented alone. Even the podcast description avoids describing it as a work of fiction, though it is listed in fiction categories on several podcast hosting apps and sites. When presented as a documentary or journalism piece, it becomes unclear to a casual listener how "true" *Limetown's* narrative is.

The presentation of their creation as "real" things within the context of the narrative – and, as this paper will discuss later, sometimes within reality as well – lends itself to what Leslie McMurtry terms "framing errors" in the aforementioned 2015 article "Framing Errors: Reality and Fiction in Audio Drama." A "framing error" as McMurtry discusses it is a "blurring of reality" due to the realism of the narrative's frame, or its presentation to its audience. *Limetown*, for example, could quite easily be taken as a piece of true investigative journalism, and the podcast's presentation encourages this assumption in its online paratexts and social media presences. Even Jessica Biel, who starred in the television adaptation of the podcast's first season, was originally under the impression it was a true story: "I just thought I missed it because our world is so insane that anything is possible really, right?" (qtd. in Hume, 2019). In this essay,

I will be examining both *Limetown* and *Within the Wires* through the lens of the framing error and how the encouragement of them impacts the audience's perception of the themes and narratives of the podcasts. Close listening analysis and interpretation of both audio dramas will be used to illustrate my points. I will also discuss the implications of their utilization on those political and social themes, and how the podcasts' success (or relative lack thereof) changes and challenges audience perception.

Audio Signposts and Audience Familiarity

The familiarity of the audience with the auditory styling of the podcast as well as the clear audio signposting used in both podcasts gives the audience a touchstone to their everyday life that makes it less strenuous to situate themselves in the fictional world and focus on the narrative despite other potential distractions. When a listener hears audio cues they know and recognize, they do not have to devote as much mental effort to comprehending the audio as they must to understanding and following the actual narrative. In a country where people primarily listen to podcasts in their cars – as a "secondary activity," with many distractions both auditory and mental – the familiarity serves to "signpost" the narrative and make it easier to follow (Spinelli and Dann, 2019, p. 23, p. 143). The success of these podcasts can, I argue, be in part attributed to their wider listenability in this way; while they are also well written, and in *WTW*'s case produced by a fairly famous podcasting network like Night Vale Presents, the writing itself is of almost secondary importance to the audience's ability to follow the narrative on a practical level.

The cues of *Limetown*'s *Serial*-styling allow the listener to know when to focus in on particular moments, and also what to expect and what *not* to expect from the narrative itself.

Though there are 11 audio files considered to be a part of *Limetown*'s first season, only 6 of those are considered within the narrative universe to be "real" episodes (denoted by their titles, with only the 6 canon "episodes" having their titles begin with the word "Episode"), with others being treated as in-universe short clips released in a similar fashion as the case files and images available on the *Serial* website for fans to peruse. Interestingly, *Limetown*'s creators deliberately recreated *Serial*'s unpredictable release schedule, with episodes sometimes coming out several weeks apart and smaller segment episodes like "The 911 Call" releasing apparently at random in between the "canon" episodes; uploads could be as far apart as a month and a half or as close together as a few days (Hancock and McMurtry, 2018, p. 89). While listeners now may not even notice the release dates as they binge-listen to the full season at once, listeners at the time would have to wait for each episode to come out and have no idea when exactly that would be.

While *Limetown* frames itself for a podcast listening audience, *WTW* moves beyond podcasts to draw analog elements of the real world into the narrative world of the podcast, which may be familiar to some listeners and unfamiliar to others. The script uses heavy repetition of both phrasing and imagery throughout the first season especially, as the narrator lays the groundwork for the mid-season twist. The logo's stylized dragonfly ties into this, as one of those repeated images is of a dragonfly having its wings torn off by a child. The strange emphasis, helped along by the repetition of certain phrases, draws the listener's attention to things like specific doors and the layout of the facility the first season takes place in. *WTW* draws on more physical mediums: going as far as to include the click of a tape player as the halfway mark of a first-season episode is reached, at which point the narrative moves from the implied "side A" of a tape to the "side B." In a story that is laden with hidden layers and meanings as a major part of

the narrative – the listener-protagonist of the first season is receiving covert instructions on how to escape a kind of asylum, and those instructions are hidden within the descriptions and repetitions of the “meditation tapes” she is listening to – this overt and sensory reminder of the narrative’s duality is striking.

The physical action implied and projected upon the audience in this moment is also especially interesting in that, as it is obviously not reflected in a listener's own physical experience of the podcast, it is a disorienting reminder of reality. This ties into one of the larger problems with *WTW*'s first season and its effectiveness as a narrative, as the established character being "spoken to" by the narrator is unable to be fully embodied by the audience for several reasons. First are the aforementioned immersion-breaking reminders of the actual listener’s experience of the podcast’s audio; second is the fact that *Within the Wires*' first season presents a clear, named, and distinct character as the “canonical listener” of the recorded tapes.

Inviting the Audience into the World of the Podcast

Over the course of the first season, the narrative's subject – Oleta, as it is later revealed – is almost reembodied in herself as the audience is disembodied from the narrative: as the protagonist gains a clearer identity, the audience is left stranded in a narrative they no longer belong in. Unlike *Limetown*'s faceless mass audience protagonist and narrator Lia Haddock is broadcasting to, and even unlike the second season’s Roímata’s museum-going listener, *WTW*'s first season has a remarkably distinct “canonical listener.” Oleta has a family (despite the in-universe ban on traditional family units), a relationship to the narrator that the audience is initially unaware of, and even the ability to make her own decisions. Hester, the narrator,

acknowledge actions Oleta has taken off-screen between episodes; some of those actions are fairly innocuous, but do after a certain point also include an off-screen murder.

By assigning the listener a particular role, the writers of *WTW* ironically alienate the audience instead of drawing them in further. The incongruity of identity between listener and character has the unfortunate effect of reminding the audience that they are *not* part of the world, in a way that a less incongruous (and relatively featureless) “listener character” does. The ability to project and imagine themselves onto a nameless and faceless “character” of the in-universe audience allows the audience to feel like they are part of the story alongside the other characters, participating in the mystery or adventure, despite the boundaries of fiction and reality. The stylistic invitation of the audience into the narrative world of the podcast creates a special level of intimacy with it; since the intimacy of an audio drama must usually come from connection to story and character instead of a parasocial relationship to a host or hosts, the implication and treatment of the audience as a physical part of the narrative's world creates the closeness to the material that may otherwise be lacking.

Honesty in Fiction: Manufactured Authenticity

One of the easiest ways to invite a sense of intimacy into a podcast is to invite authenticity into it: “it is simply more honest to 'let the audience hear and know that you are manufacturing a version of events'" than it is to create a completely perfect piece of audio, as (qtd. in Spinelli and Dann, 2019, p. 48). The “brief inclusion of slips, gaffs, mistakes, or conventionally ‘unwanted’ audio” into a podcast increases the sense of the audio’s realism, as well as giving the audience a parasocial impression of closeness with the hosts or narrators – in a sense, the audience is “allowed” to hear the potentially embarrassing “mistakes” of the speakers

(Spinelli and Dann, 2019, p. 58). By presenting itself as something that could possibly exist in reality, as opposed to *Within the Wires'* (later) overtly fictional setting, *Limetown* makes careful use of immersion-breaking audio techniques in order to paradoxically make their story more believable. Krulwich's idea of "honesty" quoted here explains this technique, though *Limetown* layers their narrative's manufactured details to achieve this effect.

The “extra” clips outside of the “canonical” episodes of *Limetown*’s first season give us that glimpse into the more harrowing parts of Lia’s investigation, with “The 911 Call” being presented as “unedited” in the fiction of the podcast, alongside the impromptu nature of several other portions. The narrative goes as far as to have one of those episodes be a “public apology” from Lia Haddock, where she apologizes for the “mistakes” of the previous full episode (Akers, 2015). Characters interrupt each other, shout, and cry audibly as part of the story, and the inclusion of what feels like potentially embarrassing content in what is presented as a polished piece of journalism adds realism and depth to the narrative. Lia also often directly addresses her in-universe listeners, revealing that the story is a “personal” one (Akers, 2015, “Episode 1: What We Know” 04:35). This is a reflection of Sarah Koenig’s own acknowledgement of her personal feelings about Adnan Syed’s case in season 1, as the invitation into the host’s personal life certainly allows the audience to form a parasocial connection with them (Spinelli and Dann, 2019, p. 234-235).

Conclusion: The Dangers of Audience Engagement

“...the fact that podcast listeners, with ever greater control and precision, curate their own listening experiences and engagement according to their own tastes and assumptions about the world certainly contributes to contemporary concerns about media-siloing (i.e., the

self-selecting of media sources that confirm our existing assumptions)" (Spinelli and Dann, 2019, p. 56).

Keeping a finger on the pulse of popular podcasts is useful for making stories that resonate with audiences and also stories that will actually spread beyond the confines of the surprisingly insular fan communities surrounding audio dramas on social media sites. *Limetown's* success, despite Night Vale Presents' stronger presence as a podcast network, is attributable in significant amount to *Serial's* popularity in the year prior to *Limetown's* 2015 release. *Limetown* released to audiences primed for and desirous of content with similar themes and narrative stylings to Koenig's podcast, and while *WTW* certainly has a fair fanbase of listeners, it is not nearly on the same level as either *Limetown* or even the other audio dramas produced by Night Vale Presents.

The utilization of framing errors has massive implications for podcasting and the world beyond it: in an age of declining digital literacy and increasing online misinformation, the blurring of reality and fiction can become dangerous if not presented carefully. While it can be used as a non-harmful narrative technique or even an education tool, it can also cause confusion to be spread among its listeners who may not know immediately or be able to tell without more serious research whether or not a story is true. Nowhere on Two-Up Production's website, beyond their mention of the prequel novel, does it acknowledge overtly that *Limetown* is a work of fiction. While podcatcher apps (apps known for hosting podcasts as part or the entirety of their content; Apple Podcasts and Spotify are some of the most popular examples) do list it under fiction, and as on Apple Podcasts often quite prominently, a more casual listener may not pay as much attention to that; additionally, given that many podcasts are recommended between

listeners, a new fan may not even think to read the descriptions or categorizations and may simply jump right into the podcast.

There are also discussions that must be had about the social media presence of these popular podcasts, and how it may change or influence perception of and engagement with the podcast itself in return. Spinelli and Dann claim that podcasts have created “new and distinctive modes of audience engagement” and position podcasts as “not merely dependent on social media, but integrated into it as a new form of social media in and of itself” (Spinelli and Dann, 2019, p. 15). The more negative aspects of podcast fandom spaces on social media sites are understudied, despite their proliferation.

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