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One story, told week by week: episodic podcast storytelling and *The Habitat*

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Abstract

The rise and success of podcasting introduced episodic storytelling in the world of non-fiction sound narrative. Delivering a story in different entries is very different from producing a one-off piece. What concrete implications does this have for the narrative? And what keeps an audience listening to a podcast, episode through episode? This article offers some answers to these questions via a case study of *The Habitat*, a 2018 podcast by the American network Gimlet.

Keywords

episodic storytelling, podcasting, audio storytelling, Mars

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One story, told week by week: episodic podcast storytelling and The Habitat

By Charlotte de Beauvoir

TITLE: *The Habitat* podcast by Gimlet Media

Host: Lynn Levy

Producers: Lynn Levy, Peter Bresnan and Megan Tan

Editors: Alex Blumberg, Jorge Just, Caitlin Kenney and Blythe Terrell

Music, sound design and mixing: Haley Shaw

Music supervision: Matthew Boll

Listen to the podcast: <https://gimletmedia.com/shows/the-habitat>

A podcast is, by nature, episodic. The syndication system it is based upon implies subscription to serialised entries. I have not yet heard of a podcast that would have been produced, on purpose, as a one-off piece.

The rise of the podcast delivery system in recent years has profoundly transformed storytelling through sound, in many ways. If we consider the pre-podcast era, the non-fiction sound narrative has existed for decades mainly through the genre of the radio documentary, also called feature, which was usually conceived as a one-off piece and delivered through radio broadcasting. Radio documentary is still being produced today but it now coexists and competes with an ever-growing offer of narrative podcasts of real-life stories, told episode by episode. I believe this division of the narration is part of the success of storytelling podcasting. Series work, as *Serial* first showed (it's in the name, isn't it? They allow the producers to play with the audience's addiction and can generate binge-listening. Interestingly, the producers of the first, ground-breaking season of *Serial* (2014) were partly motivated by a desire to emulate in podcast the audience pulling power of the increasingly popular web series being produced for television; 'House of Cards' was their particular inspiration and source of their innovative use of a trailer, introduced by colleague Ira Glass, as "Previously, in *Serial*..."¹

¹ Mentioned by Dana Chivvis, producer, *Serial*, in a panel on podcasting at the Global Editors Network media summit, Barcelona, June 2015.

Let's consider in this article how the fact that a story is delivered in several entries, and not just one, influences the narrative, taking the example of [The Habitat](#), a 2018 podcast by the American commercial podcast network, Gimlet.

First things first: if you have more than one shot, then you can tell more. Documentaries broadcast through the radio have to slot into a program grid and therefore have a defined length. There are fixed formats, varying from one country to another, but duration usually does not exceed one hour. Podcasting blew up this programming system and what determines the length of an entry in this world is not a grid but producers' own decisions (made mainly according to what the story itself deserves, the number of episodes the producers consider optimal, how long they believe the audience can be connected to the story in each episode and – of course – where to insert the break for advertising). Narrative podcasts tend to be marathonic experiences: 8.5 hours of show for the third season of *Serial*, delivered in 9 episodes, the longest one lasting 65 minutes. It's rare to find [a narrative podcast episode that lasts less than 15 minutes](#).

Our case study, *The Habitat*, was delivered in 7 episodes, each lasting roughly 30 minutes, to make about three hours of show, if you don't count advertising and credits. The show is hosted and produced by Lynn Levy, a former producer for Radiolab and today a senior development producer at Gimlet Media. The podcast is subtitled "the true story of six volunteers picked to live on a fake planet" and the pitch as offered on its webpage states: "On a remote mountain in Hawaii, there's a fake planet Mars. Six volunteers are secluded in an imitation Mars habitat where they will work as imitation astronauts for one very real year. The goal: to help NASA understand what life might be like on the red planet—and plan for the day when the dress rehearsals are over, and we blast off for real. Host Lynn Levy has been chronicling this experiment from the moment the crew set foot in their habitat, communicating with them through audio diaries that detail their discoveries, their frustrations, and their evolving and devolving relationships with each other. From those diaries, Gimlet Media has crafted an addictive serialized documentary: the true story of a fake planet." That story, if told as a one-off piece as a radio documentary, would not have lasted three hours. And what you convey in three hours and seven episodes, you don't tell the same way as you would in a one-hour show.

That is, episodic narration does not only impact the quantity of information delivered, it also has a great effect on the applied narrative structure. The slicing

of the story in different entries - and the purpose of keeping the whole audience through all the episodes – forces the producers to adopt an appealing structure that keeps the tension all through the show.

The Habitat focuses on human relationships inside the dome on fake Mars. How will a party of six scientists in their thirties get through a year of confinement in a habitat as small as half a tennis court? To answer the question, the producers chose this topic structure:

Episode one: The day before they enter the dome. Introduction of the location in Hawaii, of the podcast host and of the six imitation astronauts. After the break, focus on disagreement in the team, through a scene and an interview with Kim Binsted, a teacher at Hawaii University and one of the lead researchers behind the whole experiment.

Episode two: In the dome. Description of the place: very small habitat, scarce use of water, dehydrated food, toilet troubles. After the break, how a “little society” is forming inside the dome, with anecdotes, descriptions and daily life scenes.

Episode three: In the dome. About the boredom and monotony of life in the habitat, essentially made of repetitive tasks and surveys to fill. “But one day something happens to break the routine”: how the news of the terrorist Paris attacks affects Cyprien, the French member of the team, and the delayed conditions of communications from fake Mars. After the break, comparison with the NASA mission during the 9/11 attacks and how people in a confined isolated place react to news outside.

Episode four: In the dome. How two members of the team seem to get closer. Context on mission rules about romantic relationships under the dome and how NASA generally prohibits and disregards the subject. After the break, it turns out there is a couple in the dome, though not the one we first thought. How the crew splits and people start to pair off.

Episode five: In the dome, after the six months mark. How the team members are getting on each other’s nerves. They are really starting to get pissed off at each other. After the break, it turns out most of the discontent is focused on one member of the team.

Episode six: In the dome. The group puts on the space suits for an outside fake Mars exploration. Description of how uncomfortable it can get inside the suits. After the break, context on NASA's first space explorations and how it would be different on Mars: any crew would have to be on their own, being unable to communicate live with mission control on earth. Disagreements in the dome about outside missions.

Episode seven: The day they leave the dome. Description of the crowd outside the habitat, audio of the team inside (an argument breaks out between two members). Last minutes and countdown before the hatch opens. The crew re-encounters their families. After the break, the podcast host finally gets to interview some crew members and answers some unresolved questions about the relationships inside the dome. Podcast ends with the scene of a new group entering the dome for another year of experiment.

A classical chronological structure. Though not especially creative, it is very effective: it gives the audience the sense of an entirety. A sensation repeated with the listening to each episode, that also adopts a kind of circular structure: a brief intro, two parts separated by the break usually offer some context of the NASA or the Habitat on a topic developed thanks to interviews, the astronauts' diaries, a scene, etcetera and finally a short outro rounding off the idea developed in the episode. It might sound simple reading these lines or listening to the podcast but good structuring belongs to the category of the invisible yet unforgiving tasks of narration: it demands a lot of effort but if it gets noticed by the audience, it means you failed – the same happens with music in the movies. I can't imagine how many hours of tape sent from the dome *The Habitat's* producers must have listened to during the year of the experiment before they managed to choose and organise all the information they had... They master without a doubt the ability to structure a long story in these different entries.

I also wish to underline the dexterity of character building in this podcast. It's neither usual nor easy to have to deal with six main characters in a narration. *The Habitat's* producers resolved this dilemma in a very inventive manner. They first introduced briefly, in episode one, the six imitation astronauts through a scene², at the 05'50 time mark³:

² A scene is understood here as a moment of interaction between the characters when the reporter is not asking specific questions and her mic acts as a "fly on the wall".

³ Timing from : <https://gimletmedia.com/shows/the-habitat/awhjr/episode-1-this-is-the-way-up>

[All along, light open-air ambient sound]

[Diving splash, foreground]

Carmel, in the water: Oh my gosh it's so warm!

Host, in studio: These are the human guinea pigs.

Carmel, in the water: I was expecting cold water!

Host, in studio: They are doing cannon balls into the warm salty water of Hawaii, enjoying one of their last days on earth.

Carmel, in the water: It's nice. It's so warm.

Host, in studio: This is Carmel. Carmel is 26 years old and she looks like she just stepped off a Wheatie's box. Long shiny ponytail, big smile, rosy cheeks. She's one of those people who is just good at any sports, running most of all.

Carmel, interviewed: Running feels like... hm... forgetting all the things that are going on in your life and just being in the moment and just existing with what you have in front of you which is the road or the trail.

Host, in studio: When the mission starts, Carmel will be the commander. Her crew includes Shey, a doctor.

[Diving splash, foreground]

Host, in studio: Andrzej, an engineer.

[Diving splash, foreground]

Host, in studio: And two European scientists, Christiane *[Diving splash, background]* from Germany and Cyprien. *[Ambient voices: "Alors! Ca va?" "Ca va et toi?"]* He's French.

Host, on ground: Are you going?

Cyprien, on ground: Yeah! Of course. It's the last time I can enter the water, before a year.

[Diving splash, foreground]

Host, on ground: Uhuh! Shit! Backflip!

[Ambient sound of people bathing]

Host, in studio: And finally, there is Tristan, an architect who dreams of building things in space... and who right away takes the role of crew comedian.

Tristan, on ground: Did you hear about the skeleton that didn't go to the prom? Yeah, he had no body to go with.

Host, in studio: He is always ready with a joke.

Tristan, on ground: Why wouldn't a ghost go sky diving?

Host, in studio: or two, or three...

Tristan, on ground: He didn't have the guts! *[woman laughter]*

[Diving splash, foreground]

Host, in studio: Imagine listening to jokes like that for a year.

[Music as a transition]

The composition is smart. It smoothly allows the listener to get in touch with the numerous characters while playing sensitively with the soundscape of a lively scene. The use of different level of materiality on the same voices (Carmel in the water, Carmel interviewed; host in studio, host on ground) is very nice to the ear

and shows how skillfully the producers manage sound production⁴. Each of the next six episodes starts with one specific character, delivering some portrait elements on them. Some characters are more developed than others, some get to figure in the podcast later on, but we never get lost wondering who is who.

So, what keeps people listening to a podcast, episode through episode? It's both content and style: excellent crafting is one thing, the account itself is the other key element. Some stories just catch you. I once produced [a story](#) for *Radio Ambulante*, a Spanish-speaking podcast distributed by NPR, about a young woman who got plastic surgery in an illegal "clinic" in Medellin, Colombia, and things went wrong. *Radio Ambulante* usually only produces one-off pieces (it's a podcast about Latin-American stories, not a podcast on a story in particular) but this time the investigation on Ximena's case was quite long, and the editors decided to split the story into [two episodes](#). They chose to end the first one maintaining the suspense on the young woman's fate, leaving the listener with Ximena in very bad shape, conveyed via horrendous voice messages she had left to her "doctor", begging him to help her. When we aired, the audience had to wait another week to get to listen to the second part. I can remember how anxious part of the audience got, leaving posts on *Radio Ambulante's* social networks, protesting because we had stopped the episode at this point of the story and saying they could not wait for the next one...

Not all stories have such cliffhanging developments. *The Habitat's* producers tried to play with some kind of suspense – in particular with romantic relationship expectations. The host, in episode four: "I have been thinking that romance was inevitable in a situation like this, like a summer camp style crush but at a certain point it seems like it's never gonna happen. [*piano music*] But then I get a recording that convinces me. There is absolutely a couple in the dome. That's after the break." Except the story itself doesn't generate very high expectation. Though interesting, what is being told is just not enough to keep people longing for the next episode. But here, style more than compensates for content.

What kept me listening episode through episode is the pleasure I knew I would feel discovering the next creative invention the producers would pull out of their

⁴ For another example of this kind of use of differentiated voice materiality, see *The Change in Farming*, by Adam Goddard: <https://www.thirdcoastfestival.org/feature/change-in-farming> The program was reviewed in *RadioDoc Review 2 (1) 2015* and can be found at <https://ro.uow.edu.au/rdr/vol2/iss1/3/>

hat. In particular, I took great delight in listening to the compositions around the soundscape and the characters' voices. Here, I must say hats off to Haley Shaw, the music and sound design creator behind *The Habitat*. One of the most hilarious and inspired bits of the podcast is the music composed from Cyprien's diary when he is talking about Christine, in episode four.

There are plenty of other examples in this show of the *savoir faire* Gimlet producers can show when it comes to non-fiction sound narrative. With *The Habitat*, Gimlet Media demonstrates one more time it's ahead of its competitors in terms of content quality... No wonder Spotify paid a nine-figure sum to [acquire](#) the company earlier this year.



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She is a professor at the Journalism Study Center in the Los Andes University in Bogotá and has taught workshops of storytelling in sound in different countries in South America. She is the co-founder of SONODOC, a network for Spanish speaking radio documentaries producers.