Pigeonhole Episode 27

[bright ambient music]

Introduction

CHORUS OF VOICES: Pigeonholed, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole.

THOMAS: So, in the beginning.... [chuckles] Let me tell you, someone would ask me, "How do you like this movie? What did you think about this movie?" And I told them every time, I said, "Look, the movie automatically starts off with like three stars if it has description. I don't care what the movie is." Because I was just happy for that access. And so, I think there's still some of that, right? They say you're not supposed to notice the description, but I kinda like when I do notice it. Because it might be a small phrase, and it really paints that picture. And so, I'm like, "Aw! That was good." Like, I got that image. I know. I'm like, I don't even need to see that! This is better than me seeing it! Like I got it, right?

But I've seen a couple of things where they include the camera angles, and I really do like that. Because it was a choice. It was a choice made by the director, and there's meaning behind it. So, me knowing it, I form that image in my head. So, if they say, you know, "It's a camera angle from above, and the two people are talking in a park," that's what I see. They don't necessarily need to tell me the rest of the park. But I have an image of that park in my mind. So, I'm there. I'm riding along with everyone else, right? Because they gave me that camera angle. Now, I think that one's tricky because I don't want every camera angle, right? [laughs] I don't need that.

[electronic music break]

What should you describe and how?

CHERYL: OK, this is good. This is really, really good to get the opinion of an Audio Description user of what they like to hear. Yes, this is one person's opinion, but it's where you start because the book learning of Audio Description training can't be considered enough. And things like camera angles was something we talked about in my classes. Is that too mechanical? Is it useful? Or is it distracting? The other thing was facial expressions. Ack, with the facial expressions!

So, I asked him well, I know what my teachers taught me. But what do you think? Am I supposed say, "The person looks sad?" Or should I say, "The person has their eyebrows furrowed, their lips held tight, and their eyes cast downward?" I was taught I'm not ever supposed to tell you how someone feels but to just focus on what I see on their face.

[electronic music break]

THOMAS: Some of that detail of the face could be good, but I guess it's gonna depend too, because there's other cues for me to know that the person is sad. So, I might not need you to tell me that. Like if I'm following the story line, I should know that the person is sad at this particular time. But if it's not for the viewer to really figure that out just yet, then I kinda don't want that to be spoiled. I wanna find out the way everyone else finds out, right? I always say I wanna ride the movie with everyone else. And so, I like those facial descriptions. I form those images in my mind. And what's funny is that I'm pretty sure that if someone was to have a camera on me while I'm watching a audio described movie, like when those descriptions are given, I probably do the same thing with my face 'cause this is a thing for me. Yeah. [laughs]

Pictures, I think, are a little bit different because I'm almost fine with whatever the person comes to it 'cause it's really kinda hard to determine that because you're posting the picture. I feel like it's almost like with the movie, you're the director here because you're looking to get a reaction or send a message or whatever the case is. So, yeah, just tell me what that message is. And regardless to what you heard about Facebook, you know, describing stuff, they don't do that. They don't get into that. So, you know, they supposedly do like automatic descriptions or whatever the heck they do.

[mellow music plays through next two sentences]

CHERYL: Like, "image may contain: two people, smiling, sunglasses, sky, outdoor, water." I got that from an article talking about this feature. But Tasha Raella, a blind person I follow on social media wrote an article and showed an example of the auto-generated description that said, "Image may contain…outdoor." Hmm. For what it's worth, the first one was two smiling people in sunglasses posing for a selfie on a cliff overlooking the beach! The second one was a waterfall shot with a slow shutter speed so that the water looked like a smooth blur, rather than individual drops falling. But I digress. May contain outdoor!

THOMAS: Yeah, it's like thanks. [laughs] Yeah.

In a way, it's like a challenge, and you know, it's an art. And that, to me, is cool. I always thought about accessibility like that. If you give a challenge to a programmer, man, they're gonna go for it. And so, I always thought, you know, when it comes to access to information and accessing the web, if we posed it like a challenge, maybe we would get more. I don't know. Maybe we would.

Leaving out image descriptions during the COVID-19 pandemic

[chill music plays through whole section here]

CHERYL: By the by, this recording of Thomas is from late 2018. And while everything he talks about is just as relevant as it was when we recorded, there's something that I wanna add before this next thing he says. Here we go.

Right now, an enormous number of people who can are sheltering in place to avoid contracting and spreading COVID-19. This public health crisis and the U.S.'s miserably inadequate response are leading to ever-soaring rates of people living in fear, panic, trauma, grief, and anxiety. And in recognition of this, lots of folks are posting feel-good images to assist in any way they can to ease people's minds. You know what I'm talking about: the baby sloths in a bucket. The kitten toe beans. The lion hugging the guy. Ridiculously satirical memes. Or do you know what I'm talking about? Because this trend of posting feel-good images has gotten even more inaccessible. I'm not talking about the posts that are just a photo or a drawing with no explanation in writing at all. [pause] That's the garden variety ableism that's always been there. I'm talking right now about posts that say things like this: "Too perfect to caption…. I'm just gonna leave this here…. 10 day challenge: post an picture every day with no description!" [slow, deep breath and sigh, then pause]

This idea that words will dilute the picture or ruin the moment or detract from the perfect cuteness of the baby lamb in unicorn pajamas, no. That's not fair. I'm not saying that people wake up in the morning saying, "I have to share the mama dog nursing orphaned kittens today, and I truly hope no blind people take joy from my post!" But to continue to be unaware of this issue in 2020, and especially as much of life, work, education, and socializing has moved fully into the digital world—and disabled, blind, and Deaf people have been talking about this, this

[whole time](#)—well, you gotta find this out sometime. Sooner is better than later. So, we are telling you right now.

I know that not everyone can translate things they see into words. Some people can, but their writing won't be super descriptive. I'm not critiquing any that. Some people I know will post a picture and then tag somebody who's better at this and ask that person to write a description in the comments. The poster can then copy the description back into the original post, and bam. Or you could just say any old thing. "Here's a baby animal. I love this duck. Sunsets like this are pretty." At least then we know what the picture has in it. Non-visual learner and artist Carmen Papalia once told me there 1,000 entry points to access. So, I say to just try one. Any one that you can think of. But if you say that your photo is just too perfect for words and that to attempt to translate the visual into the verbal would ruin the experience, well, [sucks teeth] that's anti-access and can feel hostile to people who need visual access. As people visit social media and continue to come across unwelcoming messages like this and continue to be pushed out of the opportunity to find ease and relief in the cute things that people share, they are taking note.

THOMAS: I just don't understand how to get people— And I.... [sighs] You know, here's what bothers me about the Facebook thing and just social media and describing images. The other day I got so much joy from this one! It was just amazing to me how I got joy out of it. Because, you know, it was just I was just like waking up, and I think I grabbed my phone. And I opened up Twitter, right? And the first thing, it was a image, and the person described it. And it was a image of a baby. And I don't remember how they worded it, but it was like a baby with this look, like the person was trying to coochie coo the baby. And the baby had this look like, get outta my face, right? Like [laughs] you see that? And it's like, who would not laugh?! I know what that looks like! And even just even if I didn't, I mean, you can imagine, whatever. But it was so cool. And I was like, wow, this was really nice. I had access to that. It did what it was supposed to do for the person who would just open it up and look at it. It made me laugh, right? Made me laugh.

I just get so upset when it's people that I know who know, and then may even come and ask me about, you know, mention it. And they post a picture with nothing. With nothing! And it's like, I'm not gonna ask you 50 times to post a picture with a description. I'm just not gonna do it. But it bothers me more if people are posting, knowing that I might be on the other side of this, and you don't describe it. You don't make it accessible for me. And then especially if you're gonna refer to it later. You know what I mean?

A new way of doing Audio Description

CHERYL: Then, he turns it around and asks me a question. During his interview! Can you believe it?! He asks me what I would think of—

THOMAS: Synthesized Audio Description?

CHERYL: —on a test run that Netflix was doing on this one show called *Shot in the Dark*. I gave my gut answer that, ugh, no, I would not like that! I would be so turned off by a computer voice doing the Audio Description! How computery!

TEXT TO SPEECH VOICE: This is what I mean by a computery voice.

THOMAS: The thing that jumped out at me, first of all, that I like without even listening to it because I'm a proponent of this, is the fact that they're experimenting. To me, that's good, right? Because they're thinking about Audio Description. The way I look at it is that most likely—and I don't know this, but I'm thinking that—this would give access to older content that was not described. It's a faster way to produce that, and it's a more economical way to produce it. So,

that was my first reaction. So, I'm open. I'm open to it. Now, I'm probably more familiar with synthesized speech because I use it. For folks who do use that, our reactions are gonna be different. So, if you're not familiar with it, you're not gonna like it at all! [laughs]

And I mean, there's so many different voices available now. And they really do have a human sounding voice, more so than before. My entry into screen readers was about 15 years ago. They've improved. I don't even wanna say improved because it may not necessarily be an improvement. Because although they sound, like some sound more human, it doesn't mean that you're necessarily gonna understand. I find myself defaulting to the screen reader, to the voice, it's called Eloquence, and it's like a default voice that comes with the screen reader JAWS. Most people would describe it as robotic, but to me, it's very clear. And when I end up hearing some of the other voices that are more human sounding, they don't necessarily articulate the same way that Eloquence does. Now, other people may find that different. So, a lot of screen reader users make the speech really fast, right? OK. Because you're just used to listening. So, when you talk to a person, it's like, oh, come on. Hurry up. [laughs] Because you just used to listening at a fast pace. So, I kind of fall into that, too.

But what they did, they tried to use that during a portion of the film that they didn't have much time to squeeze it in, and it was real abrupt. I didn't even get it. It was just it was really weird because it wasn't consistent, right? So, you know, first thing, scene one, let's just say, it was at a pretty standard pace, right? Scene 3 or 4, it was [brrrrrrp]. [laughs] I was like, what did they say?! I did not get that one at all! I wasn't expecting it, you know? But I see where they're going. And based on what I saw right now, I would be OK with it, especially if it's to give me access to things that I currently don't have access to. Not necessarily going forward.

I know there's gonna be a lotta development with screen readers, right? They have some voices out there that imitate, you know, there's one that sounds like Barack Obama. I mean, you can look them up. They're incredible. They really, really are. You could tell they're not real, but they're getting to a point, right? So, I could see where it is. But if is gonna say, hey, we're gonna go back and audio describe all of these movies from the past that currently don't have anything? Oh, man, I'm all for that. You know? I'm definitely all for that.

Wrap-up
[chill music under Cheryl's section]

CHERYL: Point taken. Remember: Audio Description isn't for me. Yeah, it's my job, and yeah, I get indescribable joy from watching films with the description on, so I can get more immersed in the story and revel in the sounds of spoken imagery. Ah! The word choices some people make. Wow! But it wasn't invented for me, and neither were screen readers. And who the hell am I to say what makes a good voice?!

THOMAS: I think that having those opportunities for folks who are doing the description, right, who are writing it, who are performing it, to have conversations with consumers, I don't know how often it happens. I don't know. It could only get better for everybody. And I think that's what everybody really does want at the end of the day. So, why not have those conversations?

[upbeat theme music]

CHERYL: Every episode is transcribed. Links, guest info, and transcripts are all at www.whoamitostopit.com, my disability arts blog. I'm Cheryl, and…

TWO VOICES: this is Pigeonhole.

CHERYL: Pigeonhole: Don't sit where society puts you.

Music in the episode

"Guiding Light" and "Multiverse"by Ketsa. (Source: freemusicarchive.org. Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 License) and

"Speaker Joy" by Blue Dot Sessions. (Source: freemusicarchive.org. Licensed under a Attribution-NonCommercial License.)