

Open Descriptions for The Connect Project Documentary Film

Intention

To create audio descriptions for the Connect Project Documentary Film in an experimental fashion that disrupts the usual way this access feature is currently used in film. This feature is intended for a Blind/Low-Vision audience and for those who wish to engage with the content of the film without the use of screens to ensure an equitable experience.

Unique Considerations

- **Visually Rich Language:** There are many detailed visuals in the film, as it pertains to the connection between two visual artists and their physical creative output. How and what do we choose to communicate with the time we have?
- **Bilingual:** There is both Spoken English and ASL used throughout the film by the two protagonists. The simultaneous use of two languages throughout this film adds an additional layer of complexity.
 - An additional question that came up: How do we approach the visual form of communication that is ASL in an audio format?
- **Visual Access Features:** Animations appear throughout the film as a point of access. For example, some are included to visually describe sounds. Others, including avatar animations, are used to bridge language and disrupt traditional subtitles and captioning. How do we navigate equitable access and necessity without being redundant?

Team Composition

Traditionally, independent third-party service providers are contracted to create an Audio Description script once a film has been cut and mastered.

- **Team Support:** For this project, we chose to involve the screenwriter of the film as part of our Audio Description team. The screenwriter created a detailed transcript of over 30 hours of raw footage that was used to storyboard the film. What we learned is that even the versions of the film that don't make the final cut are important and provide useful information for telling the story. Our choice to engage the screenwriter was based on this person's thorough knowledge of all of the footage captured for the documentary, the characters of the film, and the content that may not be immediately apparent to someone external to the project.

- **Writing:** Our lead writer has a background in radio broadcasting and podcasts and was chosen due to their experience and knowledge of audio storytelling to mass audiences and for their potential to bring a different perspective than the typical model.
- **Team Management:** Our production manager had been working closely with one of the co-directors as an assistant and access support. Managing online communications for Kanika, she had experience working with and sharing information between all of the different teams on the Connect Project, with people of all different abilities.
- **Feedback and Consultation:** We involved Audio Description users from the Blind community as part of our team to consult throughout the process and to ensure a well-rounded approach with the sighted members of our team. These team members are also artists themselves and have a background in experimentation and creation, which complements the nature of this project. We worked with a trained professional with extensive experience in Audio Description at the start of this project, who helped guide our initial planning and connected us with people in the community who could contribute. They facilitated our focus group and attended the Toronto team meeting to provide insight and guidance on the next phase, and also introduced us to the software used to create the audio drafts.
- **Leadership and Direction:** Kanika, one of the Co-Directors of The Connect Project and protagonists of the film, provided creative direction and leadership at every stage of the audio descriptions process and development. Kanika has a sensitivity to screens and prefers audio-based media and communication. In addition to ensuring all relevant stakeholders were engaged effectively throughout this process, she was able to support and guide the script development through the sharing of each draft. This does create a complexity to the project where one Co-Director can guide this process while one cannot. Jenelle cannot use audio description, so her input was limited beyond the written script. However, we made sure to run drafts by her to confirm she was happy with her portrayal.

Development of Original Script to Supplement The Connect Film Project

The first iteration started with creating 3 versions of the AD script. One of our goals in this film was to engage the five senses of our audience. How do we do this when we have removed the visuals? Our trained AD user and creator made several preliminary scripts based on the current cut of the film at the time.

These scripts were very simple but followed the standard conventions for audio description. The scripts were passed along to our writer to then use as a starting point from which to build. We tasked our writer to create a short, medium, and long version of the script to give our audience options for how much detail they want to receive from the story. The shortest version gives all of the essential content from the film, with minimal descriptive detail for the most clarity and focus, and it is shorter than the length of the film. The medium version is the one that is synced up with the film and gives more descriptions and dives into the emotions and details expressed on screen. The long version is the most descriptive and creative of the three. These scripts were taken to a focus group of AD users for feedback. The focus group was facilitated by someone with formal training and a background in AD.

Focus Group Key Takeaways:

- **Be specific:** Provide more detail in descriptions of people's actions, especially when it comes to expressions of emotion. If someone is happy, describe what they are doing that shows that they are happy.
- **Avoid embellishment:** In this specificity, cut out unnecessary details; the action of the scene is what needs to be clearly described. This will allow more focus, clarity, and breathing room so that the audio is less overwhelming.
- **Provide context:** We need at least a brief description of each person who appears on screen, and make sure to differentiate who is who. Some of the supporting characters were unclear in terms of who they were and what their relationship was to the protagonists.
- **Avoid providing interpretations of actions:** Allow the audience to come to these conclusions on their own as you would when they watch the film. If an action is meant to symbolize something, unless it is said or shown explicitly, do not say what it symbolizes, otherwise you are not allowing the audience to make their interpretation, and you are also giving them more information than an audience who cannot hear the descriptions.
- **Merge the scripts:** Having 3 separate versions would mean that the tracks would be included in the film as closed descriptions, which you have to turn on. This creates an imbalance with the visual access features that are embedded in the film. The best course of action is to include one track that is synced to the film as an open description.
- **Visual descriptions of characters:** Clarify how you are going to approach visual descriptions of people, and make sure it is consistent.

Make sure to confirm with your subjects about how they wish to be described. Remember not to give out information that cannot be gleaned from the visuals. For example, heritage can be a good descriptive indicator, but if it is not being explicitly disclosed in the visuals, then it shouldn't be in the audio.

July 10 Focus Group Notes

Deliberation

Until this point, our team was working remotely, some working in different time zones. We felt it was necessary to bring everyone together in person to decide on the next part of the process. It was important to have everyone in the room at the same time, especially when discussing experimentation. We met up in Toronto for a few days to process all of the feedback and plan out the next steps of the project. The focus group Facilitator and the Connect Project's Research Assistant were both present as well to provide additional insights and support.

We focused on the change in approach from having three scripts that audiences could choose from to having one script track. A big consideration moving forward was how much to include in this final chosen track. Key questions asked include:

- How to provide a detailed and engaging script without privileging the audio audience over the visual.
- What creative leeways can we take, and how far can we push the boundaries with the descriptions?

The Decision To Use Open Descriptions

Having this script included as an open track was also a big consideration. Traditionally, they are included in films as closed descriptions, they are an access feature that needs to be turned on and opted into. Our choice to include these as open descriptions was done to standardize access across the board; the visual access features are integrated into the film, and therefore, so should the audio. We could also use this as a way to introduce this feature to an audience that may not normally use it or be familiar with it. In order to include the AD as part of the film, we had to scrap the idea of creating 3 scripts. We would only include one reading of the AD script in the film, so we decided to stick with one. This was also for ease of access, so that all the information was available during the viewing of the film, and audiences would not need to seek out further scripts or information elsewhere.

Implementing Feedback from Focus Groups and Team Meetings

- **Obtaining access to each cut of the film:** We had the film sent to us before it went through final cuts so that the writer could get familiar with the pacing, storyline, and visuals. We didn't have the timelines to stagger work, so we had things come to us a little earlier so we could write while the film was being finished.
- **Soliciting feedback and reviewing the work:** Our writer worked closely with a consultant who is Blind to ensure that the script worked and was understandable to someone with experience engaging and working with audio descriptions. We also had the screenwriter do a final pass over the script to ensure the tone was consistent with the film and accurate in its portrayal of the story.
- **Creating different audio drafts to test the progress:** Our project manager used a software called Closed Caption Creator to create drafts of the scripts using artificial voices that were synced to the film. This was so we could check our script length against the film and adjust it as needed, where there was space for more context, and where we needed to cut down. This task was originally intended to be outsourced to an independent service contractor. However, we were not able to pursue this option. There was a learning curve to this software, especially for someone without extensive editing experience, however, the company provides thorough guides and video instructions as well as live customer service. It is also the most economical way to run quick tests. This service was a huge asset to our team and gave us the ability to control the drafting process ourselves. This allows us to work more freely as we were not engaging an external service provider for this task, so we would be able to work according to our own timeline without the boundaries of a more traditional method of creating AD.
- **Ensure all information is communicated:** In order to provide the same context to all our audiences we chose to include a 'primer'; a brief introduction outlining the visual access features that appear in the film. While this information is contextually irrelevant to the track, it was important for us to give our audience the information of everything that is on screen, to make them aware of the considerations we have made for a visual audience.

Key Challenges

- **Integrating the descriptions into a film that had already been largely cut:** Our original script included much more detail and description of the scenes in the film. However, we had to cut most of it to get the audio to match the video. This is how we ended up creating the art index at the end of the film. Several pieces of art made at the Connect Project workshop were shown throughout the film, but only for a few seconds at a time. In order to describe them accurately, we had to include longer still frames at the end of the film to give time for the full audio. We also were not able to describe some of the animations that appear throughout the film with full accuracy.
- **Butting up against existing standards for AD:** There were many different opinions on who had the authority and training to write the descriptions. The scriptwriter is a sighted person with extensive experience in audio-based storytelling & radio, and we worked with Blind and Low Vision team members and external consultants to provide feedback and guidance, as well as professionals with formal AD training and experience. We received feedback that if we weren't pursuing the standard AD model we could not call our work "Audio Descriptions" because it would be misleading. We also received opposing feedback that this sort of mentality could be considered gatekeeping and that we should pursue our plan as intended. It became clear that, beyond simply producing this project as intended, much of the work required in this initiative would involve having to open people's minds beyond the standardized access features that they are used to in order to provide something more creative and experimental.
- **Casting voice actors to speak aloud what is being signed by Deaf participants in the film:** We needed to cast an actor to essentially be the voice of Jenelle Rouse in the audio descriptions. Firstly, ASL to English is not a direct translation; like with any language, there will be context that is lost in the process. And secondly, we wanted to give Jenelle the choice to select who she would like to be her voice. We did not have as much variety as anticipated, as we were limited by the number of actors who had submitted auditions. We also had to figure out how to communicate the quality and tone of the voices to someone who could not hear them and would have to decide who would represent them based on limited information.
- **Describing people's appearance with accuracy and sensitivity:** We had several conversations during the writing process about how to visually describe Jenelle and Kanika. We needed to detail their appearance for a Blind/Low Vision audience, which would include detailing their heritage/ethnicity. We needed to do so without tokenizing our subjects, and so a certain level of detail was needed.

But we also could not get so into the weeds with detail and accuracy that we are providing context in the descriptions that are not in the film itself or would be inaccessible to a Deaf/Hard of Hearing audience.

Outcomes/Features of the Final Product

- **Open Descriptions:** An original audio description script is included in The Connect Project Documentary Film as open descriptions.
- **Real Voices:** This script is read by a cast of voice actors. Different actors are used to distinguish the captioned dialogue from the visual descriptions.
- **Primer:** It includes a brief introduction to the accessibility features at the beginning of
- **Index:** The creation of an audio index at the end that contains longer descriptions of the artwork shown throughout the film, which required further time to detail accurately to a blind/low-vision audience.
- **Use of Language:** The tone of the language used in our description track is more evocative to mirror the creativity displayed by the two artists in the film. The script is more intimate and provides more detail as opposed to covering the basics in a matter-of-fact tone.

Final Lessons and Takeaways

- **Ensure that audio description is a part of the post-production process from the beginning:** This allows for collaboration between the teams. Do not limit yourself in time or creativity by writing the script after the film has been cut.
- **Involve the film's screenwriter/storyboard artist in the AD scripting process:** This will ensure important contextual information is not lost and considered in the process.
- **Use real voices:** It creates a deeper connection between the listener and the work when the message is being delivered to them by a real human voice.
- **Consider open description:** Put access at the forefront to increase awareness and use of these features by your audience.
- **Work with professionals:** When taking creative leeways in descriptions and not working with trained industry professionals, involve AD users throughout the scripting process. Ideally, you would want to collaboratively involve them with each draft.

- **Budget extra time:** Working collaboratively with AD users through each version of your draft and the film editors for pacing will undoubtedly prolong your timelines.
- **Find creative workarounds if things don't all fit at the same time:** For example, the use of an Index and Primer.