

Embodied Voice and Artificial Narration:  
Investigating Presence, Authenticity, and Audience  
Perception in Human and AI Audiobook Storytelling

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# Acknowledgement of AI Use

I acknowledge the use of ChatGPT (<https://chat.openai.com/>) on multiple occasions between February 2026 and March 2026 to assist with editing, idea generation, and structural guidance during the development of this dissertation.

The AI tool was used to support the organization of written sections, clarify academic phrasing, and generate suggestions for structuring arguments related to the research topic. The tool was not used to generate original research findings, analysis, or final written content for submission.

Example prompts used include:

1. “Can you suggest ways to connect theoretical research with my practical audiobook project?”
2. “What elements should be included in a discussion of collaboration within a rehearsal process?”

I confirm that I have not presented AI-generated text as my own work. All final written material, analysis, and conclusions presented in this dissertation are my own. I also confirm that I retain drafts, notes, and supporting materials used before and after the use of AI tools and can provide these if required.

## Abstract

This dissertation explores the relationship between artificial intelligence and human vocal performance within audiobook storytelling. Through theoretical research and a practice-based creative project, the study investigates how audiences perceive authenticity, presence, and emotional resonance in narrated stories. Element One examines existing research surrounding embodiment, vocal performance, and storytelling traditions, alongside the emerging use of artificial intelligence within audio narration. These theoretical perspectives informed the development of Element Two, which consists of a practice-based audiobook performance and a listening exercise comparing AI-generated narration with human narration. Audience responses were collected through an anonymous survey designed to evaluate listener preference, emotional engagement, and perceived authenticity between the two forms of narration. The findings suggest that participants consistently preferred human narration due to its ability to convey physical presence through breath, tone, articulation, and emotional nuances. While AI narration demonstrated technical efficiency in pacing and clarity, listeners frequently described it as lacking emotional depth and an authentic connection to the story. This study highlights the importance of embodied performance within storytelling practices and suggests that human vocal performance remains central to creating emotional resonance for audiences. While artificial intelligence may continue to evolve as a technological tool for narration, the research indicates that human performers currently provide a more compelling and authentic storytelling experience.

## Table of Contents:

|                                                                 |    |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Titles & Course.....                                            | 1  |
| AI Acknowledgment.....                                          | 2  |
| Abstract.....                                                   | 3  |
| Introduction.....                                               | 5  |
| Element One – Research and Investigation                        |    |
| Orality, Storytelling and the Human Voice.....                  | 7  |
| Performance, Technology, and the Changing Nature of Voice.....  | 10 |
| Embodiment, Breath, and Vocal Presence in Performance.....      | 13 |
| Element One – Summary.....                                      | 16 |
| Element Two & Methodology                                       |    |
| Practice-Based Development, Application, and Collaboration..... | 17 |
| Development and Collaboration: Human Narration.....             | 18 |
| Collaboration in Practice-Based Development.....                | 19 |
| AI Narration: Generative Process and Technical Parameters.....  | 21 |
| Audience Perception: Survey Design and Data Collection.....     | 22 |
| Analytical Framework: Interpreting Audience Perception.....     | 23 |
| Reflexive Positioning.....                                      | 24 |
| Findings: Audience Perception and Emerging Patterns.....        | 24 |
| Discussion: Embodiment, Mediation, and Perceived Presence.....  | 26 |
| Limitations and Scope.....                                      | 28 |
| Element Two – Summary.....                                      | 29 |
| Conclusion & Bibliography                                       |    |
| Conclusion.....                                                 | 31 |
| Bibliography.....                                               | 33 |

## Introduction:

Storytelling is one of the world's earliest forms of passing down history through oral tradition. Stories were shared as a way for people to connect, reflecting a collective desire to understand culture, tradition, and the human experience, while honoring those who came before us. A human voice is essential to storytelling as it can embody and communicate emotion, thoughtfulness, breath, and life. The rise in the development of artificial intelligence has increased the use and creation of AI-generated voices in audio-based media, Such as audiobooks, voice-over recordings, narration, digital assistants, and storytelling platforms. This has posed threats to modern-day voice actor's careers, as well as raised suspicion about whether artificial intelligence can authentically replicate the human experience, empathy, and compassion embedded in oral storytelling.

This project investigates the importance of the human experience through oral storytelling by comparing audiobook narration generated by artificial intelligence opposed to human-recorded versions. This research aims to provide a clearer understanding of the emotional depth, personal expression, audience response, and authenticity an AI voice can achieve versus how a human voice can. Achieving this information through the same chosen Welsh literary material –poetry written by Dylan Thomas and a folklore story by Gwilym Roberts– in the form of narration. This project seeks to explore how voice, presence, breath, and performance may change the way the story can feel to an audience.

As an acting student, this research is important because of the increasing risk of AI replacing the demand for live actors within the industry, but also because of how critical the voice is to performance. Acting training relies heavily on the ability to control breath, emotional intention, the capability to connect to the audience (physically and emotionally), and replicating

lived experience. These contribute to the overall quality of performance. Therefore, it also affects the quality of the storytelling. It is unclear if AI-generated voices can or will truthfully emulate these crucial humanoid mannerisms or convey lived experience. On the other hand, AI can appropriately produce good quality pitch, speed, and overall speech clarity through narration. This project is intended to be a bridge between actors and ever-growing technology by using audio performance as a lens into the limitations and possibilities of artificial intelligence.

The rise in artificial generation has directly impacted creativity within the industry. Especially as AI becomes more widely accessible and a more cost-effective choice for production. There is concern that AI-incorporated media will replace working/paid actors and career opportunities because of the seemingly “cheaper and faster” results of an artificial voice. By investigating audience feedback on both AI and human-recorded audiobooks, I aim to provide a clear distinction between audience preference and contribute to the conversation within the controversy of voice work in a very digital age.

This project serves as an investigative foundation for a practice-based project. Element one relies on pre-existing research and literature, following traditional oral storytelling, the power of the human voice, and AI narration. Exploring oral tradition and its impact on society, how it primarily functioned through word of mouth, and an analysis of acting training/performance focusing on voice control and emotional connection through voice. Element one also considers artificial intelligence’s automated voice technologies ability to replicate human authenticity through the audience’s experience.

Building on this, Element Two applies these ideas through the creation of six small audiobooks featuring two Welsh poems by Dylan Thomas and one Welsh folklore tale by

Gwilym Roberts. Each story showcases one AI-generated narration, and the other one features a live actor with real equipment. Equivalent to six audio narration samples –three AI generated and three human recorded versions– This allows for a direct comparison of both types of art. Element Two also showcases audience feedback through a short survey attached to all six audiobooks/recordings, along with a rating system and qualitative short answer questions for each recording. This gathers valuable evidence and data to provide a thoughtful reflection. Together, these elements will provide an understanding of how AI can replicate human storytelling and highlight the importance of actors in keeping oral tradition alive through performance.

## Element One – Research and Investigation:

### Orality, Storytelling and the Human Voice

Oral tradition refers to the communication of stories, memory, culture/history, and lived experience through spoken interaction rather than written text. Walter J. Ong (2013) explores the relationship between spoken language and technological mediation within modern communication. Ong introduced the concept of *secondary orality* to describe the resurgence of spoken communication through electronic technologies such as radio, television, and digital media. Unlike primary oral cultures, this technologically mediated form of orality emerges from literate societies while still retaining characteristics of spoken interaction. Ong characterizes oral storytelling as participatory, memory-based, and dependent on the shared presence of the listener and the speaker.

In oral cultures, communication is “empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced” (Ong, 2013, p. 45-46). Ong’s central argument is that storytelling in oral traditions is

not a detached individualized activity, but a communal practice through which shared history and cultural knowledge are collectively sustained. Meaning, therefore, emerges through the relational engagement between storyteller and audience, rather than through fixed textual representation.

Ong further argues that oral storytelling is inherently participatory because it is embodied. He states that “spoken words are always modifications of a total, existential situation, which always engages the body” (Ong, 2013, p.66). This suggests that communication in oral tradition cannot be separated from physical expression. Stories are not conveyed solely through narration, but through the storyteller's voice, presence, and gesture. Ong also highlights the physiological grounding of oral storytelling, noting the “intimate linkage between rhythmic oral patterns, the breathing process, gesture, and the bilateral symmetry of the human body” (Ong, 2013, p.34). As a result, storytelling functions as a performative act in which voice, physicality, and breath actively engage the listeners.

Building on this, Ong distinguishes oral memory from textual memory by establishing that “Oral memory differs significantly from textual memory in that oral memory has a high somatic component.” (Ong, 2013, p. 65) This suggests that remembering within oral cultures is not solely a cognitive process, but one that involves physical response, gestures, and certain bodily rhythm. Stories are therefore retained through repeated performance, requiring the storyteller to re-engage physically and vocally with the narrative each time it is told. This process also reactivates the listeners engagement, reinforcing memory as a continuous, performative act shaped by embodied presence and audience interaction.

From a performance perspective, storytelling functions as a means of exploring and communicating human experiences. Within acting practice, performers frequently inhabit

narratives that are not their own yet are often grounded in recognizable human emotions and realities. Konstantin Stanislavski's approach to acting places emphasis on the actor's inner process, encouraging the use of memory, imagination, and emotional truth to create authentic and meaningful expression. This focuses on internal engagement and suggests that effective storytelling arises not from technical reproduction alone, but from the performer's human connection to the narrative.

Stanislavski argues that a truthful performance depends on the actor's believability and their ability to inhabit the character's given circumstances, without the audience doubting the actor's ability to emotionally recall the experience. Rather than reproducing emotion mechanically, the actor is encouraged to respond emotionally in the moment, allowing the experience to feel lived rather than recited. For Stanislavski, the audience's belief in the story was shaped by the actor's emotional presence and responsiveness, rather than by narrative content alone. This reinforces Ong's theories that storytelling gains its meaning through the active participation of the storyteller—or, in this case, actor—rather than through narrative delivery in isolation.

Ong's assertion that oral storytelling is inherently participatory aligns with Stanislavski's method of actor engagement and presence. Both perspectives highlight the importance of shared experience between storyteller and audience, in which meaning is co-produced rather than disconnected from its experiential origin. Participation is therefore central to the transmission of stories, history, and cultural memory across performance, oral tradition, and other expressive forms.

## Performance, Technology, and the Changing Nature of Voice:

Media scholar Elena Lamberti (2012) examines how storytelling is increasingly reframed across different media forms rather than solely as a narrative one. Lamberti suggests that oral tradition and storytelling function as mechanisms through which individuals remember, interpret, and respond to significant historical events and cultural change. Building on Ong's concept of secondary orality, Elena Lamberti examines how contemporary technological media reshape narrative voice practices through mediated forms of storytelling, such as podcasts, audiobooks, and social media, which extend oral practice through technological platforms. Although secondary orality differs from face-to-face storytelling, Lamberti argues that it continues to encourage audience participation and memory-oriented narration. This perspective highlights how storytelling remains rooted in human experience, even as it becomes increasingly shaped by media and technological mediation.

Lamberti emphasizes that storytelling is not a fixed or universal process, but one that evolves in relation to cultural memory and historical change. She argues, "storytelling is not a static concept per se: its meanings and function evolve through time and space because the functions and meanings of memory evolve, too." (Lamberti, 2012, p. 281) This suggests that storytelling operates as a means through which societies navigate and interpret periods of change, with memory functioning as an active and adaptive process rather than a passive archive. Through performance and repeated retelling, stories are reshaped in response to shifting social contexts and lived experience, allowing past events to be continually reassessed in the present. In this way, storytelling enables audiences and listeners to process historical change through engagement rather than detached observation.

She extends this discussion by introducing Ong's concept of secondary orality to examine how storytelling functions in contemporary media environments. Secondary orality refers to forms of voice-based communication that emerge through electronic and digital technologies, such as radio, podcasts, and audiobooks, which reintroduce oral characteristics within technologically mediated contexts. Lamberti argues that these forms of storytelling offer new ways for audiences to engage with narrative and memory, allowing stories to be experienced from different perspectives while remaining rooted in oral expression. She states,

Knowledge of storytelling processes in various cultural and technological contexts will, in fact, help to better understand the role of storytelling in the making of cultural memory and trauma, the final goal being to understand and probe individual and collective identities living in our high-tech world. (Lamberti, 2012, p.241)

In this sense, Secondary orality functions as a tool through which collective memory and cultural identity continue to evolve, even as storytelling becomes increasingly mediated by technology.

Secondary orality also raises questions about the way technology sits between the storyteller and the listener, shaping how the message is received and experienced, and altering the embodied presence central to traditional storytelling. While electronic media enables stories to be widely shared and reposted –encouraging new forms of participation– it simultaneously removes the storyteller from the immediate physical space of the listener. Unlike traditional oral practices, which rely upon physical embodiment, breath, and co-present participation, mediated forms introduce a spatial and experiential distance between speaker and audience. Contemporary media theorists have also examined how automation and artificial intelligence reshape human communication. For example, Mark Andrejevic argues that automated systems increasingly participate in processes that were once considered uniquely human, including communication

and cultural production (Andrejevic, 2019). This distance inevitably affects how narrative meaning is constructed and perceived. Such a shift invites consideration of whether contemporary technologies, specifically artificial intelligence, can replicate the embodied presence and participatory engagement that Ong identifies as fundamental to oral tradition.

Lamberti reframes traditional storytelling by examining how secondary orality – Technological mediation– plays a significant role in contemporary narrative practices. She suggests that although audiobooks, podcasts, and other forms of digital narration were not part of primary oral cultures, they continue to influence oral tradition and contribute to the shaping of cultural memory. However, questions remain regarding how these mediated forms compare to the embodied presence and shared connection between storytellers and listeners that characterize traditional oral exchange. This dissertation, therefore, extends Lamberti’s framework by investigating whether AI-generated narration can sustain the participatory and embodied qualities associated with oral tradition. Through a comparative listening study, the project explores how audiences perceive presence, emotional engagement, and authenticity within both human and artificial narration.

### Embodiment, Breath, and Vocal Presence in Performance:

Patsy Rodenburg is a British voice and acting coach whose book *The Actor Speaks* was written as a training guide for actors, offering exercises and methods to release and develop the voice. Rodenburg argues that spoken words naturally engage the whole body and insists that actors must acknowledge this physical involvement within their performance. She states,

When you speak well, every cell of the body should be engaged naturally and without thinking in the act of speaking. Watch a baby cry, a bird sing, or a dog bark. In each instance, you can see the whole body is fully

involved in generating sound. You can see the same sort of involvement of sheer physical energy in speaking whenever great actors perform. (Rodenburg, 1997, p. 14).

This description positions the voice not as an isolated vocal mechanism, but as a fully embodied act. For Rodenburg, voice is an extension of inner life; it expresses inner psychological state, emotional truth, and intention through physical sound. In this sense, vocal performance becomes evidence of lived human presence rather than mere technical reproduction. Breath supports authenticity, serving as a link between the actor's emotional life and their physical expression. When the body is tense, breath becomes restricted, and vocal delivery can appear forced or disconnected from the emotional truth of the given circumstances. In contrast, grounded and responsive breathing enables the actor to embody the text more truthfully. The importance of emotional truth within performance also reflects the work of Konstantin Stanislavski, whose acting system emphasizes psychological realism and the performer's authentic engagement with the emotional circumstances of the text (Stanislavski, 1936). The body's alignment and tension, therefore, directly affect vocal expression, reinforcing the idea that the voice is evidence of embodied presence. Rodenburg's theory consequently strengthens Ong's argument that oral expression is rooted in somatic engagement rather than detached verbal reproduction.

She introduces the idea that although stories can be communicated visually through design, lighting, and costume, the spirit of the play comes alive through the actor's ability to fully understand the text and remain present in the moment. When performers rely too heavily on spectacle rather than embodied engagement, the depth of the story is diminished. Full realization of the narrative depends upon physical, emotional, and intellectual presence. This presence is not generated by the actor alone: it also depends upon the audience's active attentiveness. An

overdesigned production may encourage passive consumption, allowing the audience to absorb the story visually without deeply listening or engaging intellectually. Performance, therefore, becomes a symbiotic exchange in which both actor and audience must remain present for meaning to emerge. When vocal truth and textual understanding are absent, energy weakens, empathy declines, and the audience disconnects. Performance scholar Richard Schechner similarly describes performance as an embodied act in which meaning emerges through the interaction between performer and audience (Schechner, 2003). Storytelling consequently becomes an active, shared experience rooted in reciprocal awareness. Like oral tradition, it depends upon the relational closeness between speaker and listener for stories to be remembered and carried forward. This framework raises further questions about whether Elena Lamberti's interpretation of Walter J. Ong's secondary orality –and, by extension, artificial intelligence– can authentically replicate such embodied presence.

Rodenburg's conception of presence depends fundamentally on the actor's quality of attention. The performer must be alert not only when speaking, but from the moment they enter the stage space. Presence requires embodied preparation, in which emotional development and textual understanding are internalized before performance begins. This readiness enables the voice to access its full power when needed. In contrast, a distracted or self-conscious performance creates physical tension that restricts breath and vocal freedom, weakening both vocal and physical presence. Grounded and outward-focused attention allows the body and language to respond authentically to the moment. Presence, therefore, emerges not merely from confidence but from the attentiveness that extends beyond the actor's inner psyche towards the text; the character's lived truth, and the shared space with the audience. Vocal expression shifts depending on where attention is placed, whether inward in self-doubt or outward in relational

awareness. Presence, then, is intentional rather than accidental. As in oral storytelling, meaning depends upon the mutual attentiveness of speaker and listener: without it, the story loses vitality. This framework raises further speculations as to whether artificial intelligence can genuinely simulate such intentional and context-responsive awareness.

For Rodenburg, presence is rooted in the close relationship between the performer and audience, achieved through attentive vocal and physical embodiment of the text. An actor's presence depends upon intentional voice and the capacity to embody the character's given circumstances and lived experience with authenticity. When physical and vocal embodiment are absent, the story loses impact. Likewise, the audience must remain responsive and actively engaged with the unfolding narrative rather than passively relying on visual design. Artificial intelligence, however, lacks a living body, raising questions about whether it can exercise conscious awareness or make intentional vocal choices in the present moment. If AI cannot reflect upon a character's lived experience or respond attentively to textual nuance, can it truly be considered present? While AI systems may replicate tone, rhythm, and clarity with increasing precision, replication does not necessarily equate to lived intention. The distinction between vocal simulation and embodied presence, therefore, becomes central to this project. These uncertainties inform the comparative listening exercise, which investigates whether audiences perceive differences in authenticity, presence, and emotional truth between human and AI narration.

## Element One – Summary:

Collectively, these theorists emphasize that storytelling is fundamentally embodied, relational, and present. Ong establishes that oral tradition depends upon participatory exchange between speaker and listener, grounded in physical presence and shared cultural memory. Stories

are not transmitted through narration alone, but through the body's expressive engagement in the act of telling. Lamberti complicates this framework by arguing that contemporary technologies reshape yet do not eliminate oral exchange, suggesting that formats such as podcasts and audiobooks continue to sustain cultural transmission in mediated forms. Rodenburg further deepens this discussion by asserting that vocal presence relies upon intentional embodiment and attentional awareness of text, breath, and lived experience. Together, these perspectives position presence not merely as sound, but lived, relational, and context responsive expression. This convergence frames the central inquiry of this dissertation: whether artificial intelligence can authentically replicate embodied presence within audio narration. Element Two, therefore, presents a comparative listening exercise designed to investigate the audience's perceptions of authenticity, emotional truth, and presence in both AI-generated and human-recorded narration.

Presence may extend beyond a purely physical construct and function instead as a perceptual experience shaped by emotional response. While traditional theories of orality emphasize bodily co-presence, authenticity may also be evaluated through how presence is experienced by an audience. If listeners perceive emotional truth and intentionality within narration, embodiments may operate differently within mediated forms. This raises a critical distinction: is presence ontological, requiring a living body, or phenomenological, emerging through the listener's lived experience of performance? Artificial intelligence complicates this boundary by challenging assumptions about whether authenticity must originate from embodied consciousness. Rather than presuming a fixed definition, this project investigates how presence is perceived and interpreted by audiences. Audience response, therefore, becomes central to this inquiry, as it provides insight into how authenticity, emotional resonance, and embodied engagement are experienced in both human and AI-generated narration.

## Element Two – Practice-Based Development, Application, and Collaboration:

Element two of this dissertation transitions from theoretical exploration to the practical application of embodied presence, participation, authenticity, engagement, and emotional truth. It investigates human experience as conveyed through oral tradition and storytelling in contrast with artificial intelligence's capacity to recreate such experiences authentically. This exploration takes shape through the creation of audiobooks and a comparative narration survey.

Audiobook/audio narration was selected as the primary medium due to its reliance on vocal delivery and the recent rise of artificially generated narration within the voiceover/acting industry. This format provided a focused context in which to examine both human-recorded narration and AI-generated replication. Human narration was developed through directed rehearsal and collaborative exploration with another actor. The process was participatory and interactive, involving sustained discussion, repeated takes, and close textual analysis to deepen interpretive understanding.

This collaborative practice consciously applied theoretical principles established in Element One, particularly those of Patsy Rodenburg, by directing attention toward textual truth, intentional rehearsal, and the cultivation of embodied vocal presence. In contrast, AI narration functioned as a model of generated vocal delivery aligned with Walter J. Ong's concept of secondary orality, alongside Elena Lamberti's assertion that mediated voice can continue to hold cultural value.

Audience perception was gathered through a structured listening survey consisting of qualitative and quantitative questions designed to capture participant responses. The purpose of

this section is to investigate how presence, authenticity, and emotion are perceived across artificial and human-recorded narration.

## Development and Collaboration: Human Narration

Human narration requires a structured rehearsal process prior to the production of the final versions. During rehearsal, I fostered a collaborative and flexible environment that allowed interpretive exploration to shape performance choices. The actor was encouraged to consider the emotional circumstances of the text and to read each passage in alignment with the imagined internal state of the character. Following this initial exploration, I evaluated which choices most authentically reflected the underlying meaning of the story and poem, offering adjustments that further aligned performance with emotional truth.

This process generated a sustained discussion of textual meaning and how it informed both directorial guidance and the actor's embodied performance decisions. After interpretive exploration, multiple takes of each section were recorded. With each repetition, the performance becomes increasingly refined as the actor develops greater confidence in both the given circumstances and in making deliberate, meaningful choices. This gradual growth in assurance reduced tension and enabled a more authentic physical and emotional embodiment of the text.

The evolving nature of rehearsal and performance demonstrates how embodied presence emerges through collaboration, reflection, and refinement—an organic development that contrasts with AI narration, which cannot adapt, deepen, or grow in response to textual exploration.

## Collaboration in Practice-Based Development:

The rehearsal process extended far beyond the functional act of vocal delivery. It operated as a collaborative inquiry into the interpretive possibilities of each text. Rather than

imposing a fixed meaning, both the actor and I examined and deconstructed the material through sustained dialogue. Our individual responses to the stories frequently differed, generating productive tension that depended on analytical engagement. Variations in tone, pacing, and emotional emphasis become sites of exploration rather than conflict, allowing the text to be interrogated from multiple perspectives.

While artistic co-creation defined the process, moments of disagreement were equally formative. Certain passages were interpreted by the actor as vulnerable and subdued, whereas I perceived them as restrained yet internally forceful. These interpretive divergences require justification, discussion, and eventual synthesis. For example, in *The Hand That Signed the Paper* by Dylan Thomas, the actor initially approached the poem with heightened melancholy and softness. Although compelling, this reading diverged from my understanding of the poem's underlying authority and restrained frustration. Through discussion, we restructured the delivery to incorporate greater confidence and controlled intensity, while retaining elements of the actor's emotional depth. The resulting performance reflected a negotiated interpretation rather than a singular vision.

This exchange demonstrates that embodiments emerged relationally. The final recordings were shaped through dialogue, redirection, and mutual adaptation. Although I maintained responsibility for overall coherence, the actor's creative instincts significantly influenced the interpretive outcome. The narration, therefore, became a co-authored construction of meaning rather than a hierarchically dictated performance.

Collaboration strengthened the embodied quality later perceived by audiences. Through iterative rehearsal and reflective adjustments, the performance evolved across multiple takes,

gradually integrating emotional nuance with textual precision. This relational refinement contrasts with the AI generation, which can respond only to technical input rather than dialogic exchange. While AI may adjust pacing or formatting, it cannot negotiate interpretive meaning. In this study, collaboration itself appears to have contributed to the audience's perception of presence, suggesting that embodied authenticity is not solely physiological, but relationally constructed.

### AI Narration: Generative Process and Technical Parameters:

The AI-generated audiobooks differed structurally from the human rehearsal-based method of creation. Unlike the extended collaborative rehearsal process, AI narration was produced through direct text input into a generation platform, followed by the selection of a pre-existing synthetic voice. Several platforms were tested before identifying one that provided high-quality, downloadable audio within accessible constraints.

Once the narration was generated, the platform *ElevenLabs* did not allow for interpretive modification. Adjustments were limited to technical alterations rather than expressive development, including pacing playback speed, punctuation, and the insertion of pauses. AI does not rehearse, reflect, or refine performance through embodied experience; instead, any refinement occurs externally through user-controlled technical settings.

The absence of rehearsal and interpretive growth fundamentally alters the developmental process of the narration and limits the director's capacity to shape emotional progression. In relation to Walter J. Ong's concept of secondary orality –where technologically mediated voice can still foster a sense of communal immediacy– the AI model presents a more complex

dynamic. While it operates within a technologically mediated framework, it lacks the spontaneous, participatory responsiveness that characterizes oral exchange.

As Elena Lamberti suggests, mediated voices may still retain cultural and communicative value; however, the contrast in generative process between human and artificial narration becomes central to how audiences perceive authenticity, presence, and emotional truth.

## Audience Perception: Survey Design and Data Collection

To investigate audience perception, a structured anonymous listening survey was designed to gather unbiased responses to both forms of audio narration. The survey featured six recordings drawn from Welsh literary material, *Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night*, and *The Hand That Signed the Paper* by Dylan Thomas, alongside the Welsh folklore story *Little Yellow Cheese Fetches Yeast for His Mother* by Gwilym Roberts. Each text was recorded twice –once by a human actor and once through AI generation– to control textual variation and ensure that differences in audience response could be attributed to vocal delivery rather than content.

After listening to each version, participants responded to an identical set of qualitative and quantitative questions. Quantitative data were collected through a five-star rating scale and multiple-choice responses, while short written answers invited more nuanced qualitative reflections. This mixed-method approach strengthened the research design by combining measurable evaluation data with subjective emotional interpretation.

Additional reflective questions were introduced at the conclusion of the survey to assess whether participants identified AI involvement and whether this awareness influenced their evaluation. The recordings were presented neutrally, without labels indicating their origin, to

prevent bias. Participants were recruited from varied backgrounds, including peers, classmates, and members of the wider community, and all responses were collected anonymously to encourage honest feedback. This methodology ensured that audience perception, rather than the researcher's assumption, guided the subsequent analysis.

## Analytical Framework: Interpreting Audience Perception

Analysis will focus on patterns of perceived presence, authenticity, emotional engagement, and clarity across both forms of narration. Quantitative rating questions will be used to measure levels of engagement and identify measurable trends between AI-generated and human-recorded audio. Qualitative responses will be examined for recurring descriptive language and reflective commentary on participants emotional and interpretive experiences while listening.

Participant language will be treated as insight into perceived authenticity, immersion, and preference, with specific words and phrases grouped thematically to identify areas in which each form of narration may succeed or fall short. These thematic groupings will support comparative interpretation and provide representative quotations to illustrate broader patterns.

Perceived presence will be evaluated through indicators of connection, immersion, emotional resonance, and vocal naturalness. As recordings were presented without identifying labels, instances in which participants struggled to distinguish between AI and human narration will be considered particularly significant. Such moments of uncertainty may complicate assumptions about artificial mediation and authenticity.

This analysis does not presume the superiority of either form; rather, it evaluates audience perception comparatively. The analytical framework is therefore designed to ensure that conclusions emerge from participants responses rather than researcher bias.

## Reflexive Positioning:

As the director of the human narration and the survey designer, I occupy a dual role in this research. My close involvement in directing the actor, offering feedback, and shaping performance choices introduces the potential for bias. While the research process encouraged creative freedom and interpretive exploration, the final recording remained influenced by my directorial decisions.

To mitigate this, the survey was intentionally structured to remain neutral. Recordings were presented without identifying labels, and identical questions were used for each audio excerpt to prevent participants from being guided towards a particular evaluation. The selection of the AI voices was also carefully considered to ensure comparable quality and clarity. Both narration styles were shaped through human decision making –whether through directing performance or selecting and technically refining AI output– to ensure parity in presentation.

Reflexive awareness is essential within practice-based research, as it acknowledges the research's influence while safeguarding analytical integrity. By foregrounding audience perception rather than personal preference, this study prioritizes participant's responses as the primary source of meaning. This reflexive positioning strengthens the project's credibility by transparently addressing potential bias rather than overlooking it.

## Findings: Audience Perception and Emerging Patterns

The survey was distributed publicly for one and a half weeks and yielded thirty-one complete responses. Both quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed to examine audience perception of narrations. Ratings were averaged to identify measurable trends, while descriptive language within written responses was reviewed and grouped thematically to establish recurring patterns.

The opening section of the survey gathered contextual information regarding participants' familiarity with narrated content, exposure to AI-generated audio, and experience in acting or voice work. This demographic framing provided insight into the range of perspectives contributing to the data. Following this, participants engaged in structured listening exercises. Across all three texts, the primary finding indicated a consistent preference for human narration. Human-recorded audio received higher average ratings for emotional engagement and perceived authenticity.

Qualitative responses reinforced this trend. One participant noted that the human narration “had a sense of presence. The narrator’s inflection, pace, and tone attributed to feeling connected.” (Audio narration Survey, Q8). Descriptors associated with the human recordings frequently included “natural,” “dynamic,” “emotion,” “breath,” “inflection,” and “authentic.” In contrast, AI-generated narration was commonly described as “monotone,” “robotic,” “flat,” “emotionless,” and “lacking nuance.”

Although the majority of participants preferred the human recordings, a small number indicated neutrality or occasional preference for the AI version, particularly noting its clarity and consistent pacing. The second audio sample, *The Hand That Signed the Paper*, generated the

strongest AI support, with some participants identifying clearer articulation and sustained flow as strengths.

In the concluding debrief section, participants were informed that AI had been used for half of the recordings. Most respondents reported that the distinction between AI and human narration was readily identifiable, suggesting a pronounced perceptual difference between embodied and generated vocal delivery. Collectively, these findings indicate a strong audience's sensitivity to vocal presence and emotional nuance.

## Discussion: Embodiment, Mediation, and Perceived Presence

The survey findings demonstrated a clear perceptual distinction between human and AI narration. Across the thirty-one responses, human recordings were consistently rated higher in emotional engagement and perceived authenticity, while AI-generated narration was frequently described as lacking emotional nuance. This outcome aligns closely with Patsy Rodenburg's conception of presence emerging from the integration of body, breath, and voice. Participants repeatedly referenced breath, inflection, accent, natural pauses, and emotional variation as elements that enhanced their connection to the text. Such descriptors suggest that embodied performance is not merely theoretical but experientially perceptible. The physiological and interpretive choices made by the actor appear central to the audience's sense of immersion and relational engagement.

While clarity and consistency were acknowledged as strengths of the AI narration –and, in isolated cases, preferred for its steady pacing– emotional depth was widely perceived as diminished. Several participants suggested that AI narration was technically competent yet lacked the expressive subtlety required for storytelling grounded in human experience. This

distinction reflects Walter J. Ong's concept of secondary orality, in which technology facilitates the transmission of voice while altering the conditions of presence and immediacy. AI narration, as an advanced form of mediated voice, successfully reproduces linguistic content but does not possess lived memory, embodied empathy, or conscious intentionality. As a result, listeners may perceive a structural absence of experiential depth, even when vocal clarity is maintained.

At the same time, a small minority of participants expressed neutrality or occasional preference for AI narration, particularly in relation to articulation and sustained flow. This complicates any absolute claim regarding authenticity and suggests that evaluative criteria may vary depending on listeners priorities. For some, smoothness and clarity were sufficient to sustain engagement, indicating that technological mediation can still produce meaningful reception, albeit through different perceptual values.

Overall, presence within this study was experienced as relational rather than purely technical. Audience connection appeared to depend not solely on vocal delivery, but on the perceived embodiment underlying it. The findings, therefore, suggest that while AI can replicate the structure of narration, embodied human performance remains more consistently associated with emotional resonance and authenticity in listener perception.

Elena Lamberti argues that meditated voice continues to transmit meaning, even when filtered through technological systems. Mediation, in her view, does not inherently eliminate authenticity; rather, it reshapes how narratives are circulated, received, and interpreted. This perspective introduces important nuance into the findings of this project.

Although the majority of participants preferred human narration, a minority expressed neutrality or occasional preference for the AI recordings, citing clarity, sustained pacing, and

accessibility as strengths. These responses suggest that technological mediation may prioritize efficiency, consistency, and immediacy over emotional depth. In this sense, the distinction revealed in the survey is not one of value versus lack of value, but of depth versus immediacy.

AI narration appears functionally effective in contexts requiring clarity and informational delivery. However, when applied to storytelling rooted in emotional resonance and lived human experience, participants frequently perceived a reduction in expressive nuance. This does not negate AI's cultural function; rather, it positions it differently within the spectrum of narrative transmission.

Lamberti's framework, therefore, complicates any binary opposition between embodied and mediated voice. While embodiment may enhance relational connection and perceived authenticity, mediation expands the potential for cultural circulation and accessibility. Within this study, AI did not displace human narration, but it did demonstrate an alternative mode of vocal dissemination—one that privileges structure and clarity over emotional immediacy.

## Limitations and Scope:

Although thirty-one responses provided substantial insight for a practice-based study, the sample size remains limited in scale. Participants consisted primarily of peers, students, acquaintances, and a small proportion of individuals reached through social media. While this produced a range of mixed backgrounds, a notable percentage of respondents reported experience in acting or performing arts. This may have influenced sensitivity to vocal nuance and embodiment. A larger and more demographically diverse sample could yield further insight into how different listener groups perceive AI and human narration.

Additionally, audiobooks represent only one form of vocal storytelling. Other performance mediums—such as live theatre, film, or podcast narration—may generate different audience responses due to visual context, physical presence, or production style. The chosen texts, including Welsh poetry and folklore, may also have shaped emotional reception. Cultural familiarity, particularly among participants from the United Kingdom, may have heightened resonance with both the martial and the Welsh performer. While responses from participants based in the United States introduced broader perspectives, the literary and cultural specificity of the texts remains a contextual factor.

Finally, artificial intelligence technology continues to evolve rapidly. The findings of this study reflect the capabilities of contemporary, publicly accessible AI narration platforms rather than the potential of future developments. As commercial AI services expand and refine vocal synthesis, audience perception may shift accordingly. This research, therefore, captures a particular moment in the progression of AI-generated voice. Despite these limitations, the study offers meaningful insight into how embodied presence and mediated narration are currently experienced and evaluated by listeners.

## Element Two – Summary:

The purpose of Element Two was to apply theoretical ideas explored in Element One through the creation of a practice-based audiobook project alongside an AI versus human narration listening survey. This process aimed to explore audience perceptions of authenticity, presence, and emotional resonance within narrated storytelling.

The key findings from the survey suggest that listeners overwhelmingly preferred human narration due to its ability to convey physical presence through vocal nuance, breath, tone, and

emotional variation. Participants frequently described human narration as more authentic and engaging, highlighting how subtle shifts contributed to their sense of connection with the story being told.

A secondary aim of Element Two was to explore the role of collaboration within a practice-based research process. Working with an actor during rehearsals demonstrated how storytelling performance develops through dialogue, interpretation, and shared creative decision-making. The collaborative rehearsal process revealed that co-creation allows performers and directors to refine emotional interpretation and deepen the embodied delivery of the text.

While AI narration demonstrated certain functional strengths—such as consistent pacing, clarity, and technical efficiency—it lacked the emotional connection and interpretive depth present in human performance. This absence of embodied experience reduces the sense of presence that audiences often associate with authentic storytelling.

Ultimately, this research suggests that embodiments remain central to narrative performance. The physical and emotional engagement of a human narrator contributes significantly to how audiences interpret and emotionally respond to spoken stories. Although AI narration may serve useful technical functions, it currently lacks the experiential and emotional understanding necessary to replicate the depth of human storytelling.

## Conclusion:

This dissertation explores the relationship between artificial intelligence narration and human vocal performance within audiobook storytelling. Through theoretical research and a practice-based creative project, the study investigated how audiences perceive authenticity, presence, and emotional resonances in narrated stories. By comparing these two formats of

narration, the research explored the role that embodiment plays in vocal performance and how stories are understood and received by listeners.

The key discoveries made throughout this study revealed that a majority of participants preferred human narration, particularly because of the embodied delivery of the words and the unspoken emotional connection that humans can bring to storytelling. The physical connection to the text contributes to what makes a story compelling. Humans possess the ability to transform emotion, imagination, and historical understanding into believable narrative truth, even without directly experiencing the events themselves. In contrast, AI lacks the organic empathy and emotional awareness necessary to authentically replicate this experience, as reflected in both the research findings and participant feedback.

This research evaluated AI narration within its technological capabilities as of 2026. While the study does not dismiss the possibility that AI may evolve into a more advanced and reliable tool for storytelling and audio narration in the future, the findings suggest that human storytelling remains highly valued by audiences. The embodied presence, emotional nuance, and empathic resonance that human performers bring to narration continue to create a deeper sense of authenticity and connection for listeners. Although AI can technically optimize clarity and pacing, human performers remain the most effective at conveying the depth and complexity of the human storytelling experience. Future research could further explore how advancements in artificial intelligence narration may interact with human performance practices, particularly within collaborative or hybrid storytelling formats.

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