



Telling Story Through Sound: Building an Interactive "Radio Play"

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Michael Lee





The Baker Street Experience

- Released by Schell Games on September 8th, 2016
- An interactive audio adventure (that uses voice!)
- Available on all Alexa-enabled devices





A Quick 'Alexa' Primer



*"Alexa, play
Baker Street Experience"*



Echo



Echo Dot



Kindle Fire





The Baker Street Experience



Not This





A demonstration, Holmes...





Takeaways

- Audio games are a new market for classic techniques
- Lessons learned from developing Baker Street
- Advantages of building for Alexa and “smart speakers”





What is a “Radio Play?”

- Classic and enhanced storytelling
- Incorporates
 - Strong writing
 - Exciting foley work and sound design
 - Dynamic and varied cast
 - Fun and charm from live performance





Still Popular Today!

- Recorded episodic adventures
 - Doctor Who
 - Hitchhiker's Guide
 - Welcome to Nightvale
- Live radio play performances
 - Midnight Radio program
 - Hear Now Festival
 - And Nightvale again





Advantages of Audio “Plays”

- Wider accessibility for groups
- Narrative iteration and freedom
 - Environments (sound design and music)
 - Characters (dramatic storytelling)
 - Viewer has guides to picture the scene, but the rest is up to imagination



A painterly illustration of a 19th-century dining room. The room features several round tables with dark wood frames and high-backed chairs. In the background, a doorway leads to another room, and a large window on the right is draped with heavy curtains, letting in warm light. The ceiling has decorative moldings and two pendant lights. The overall style is soft and artistic, with a warm color palette.

Designing the Play



Setting the Scene

- Two weeks... in two years



week

- Focus on characters and scenarios, not new settings

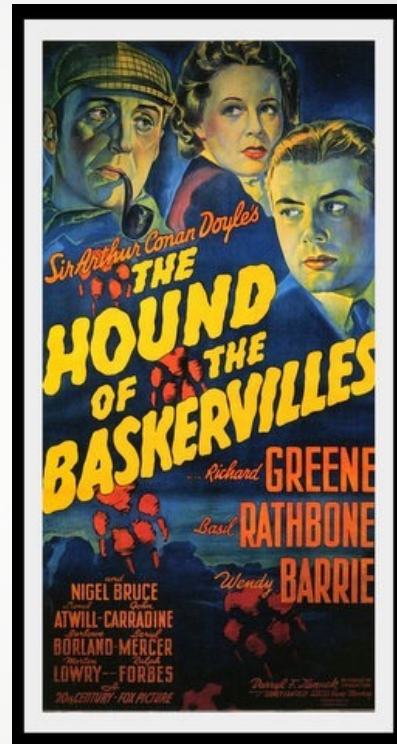


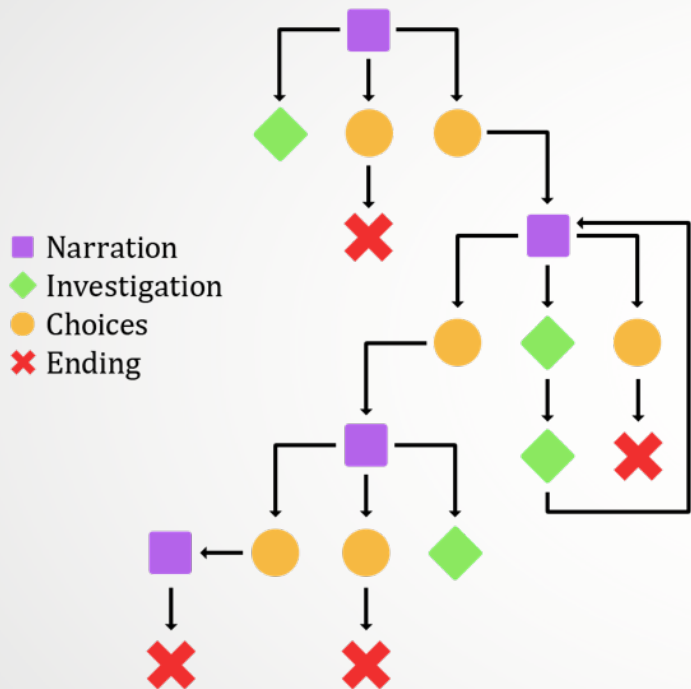


Elementary, My Dear Watson (never said)

- Why not Sherlock Holmes?
 - Focus on creating a good game instead of inventing new setting
 - Freedom to explore and expand on existing characters, plots, and settings
 - The Sherlock-verse is very popular!
 - Fans are open to new interpretations







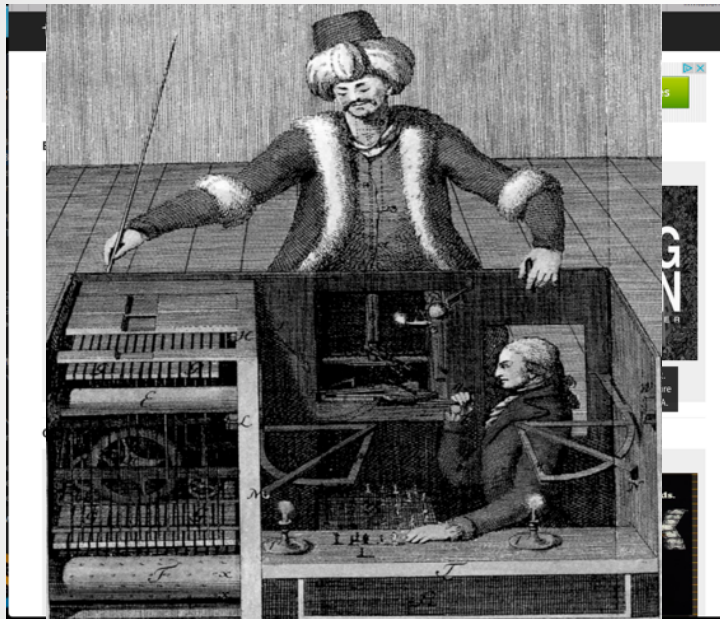
Connecting the Pieces

- Finalized narrative with paths and branches
- Actors had a chance to shine
- Sound designers had a blast
- Playable 15-25 minutes experience





Jumping to Alexa



Before Alexa

- Simple prototype
 - Mechanical Turk-esque
- Thinking ahead to voice
 - Examined different options
 - But really just waiting for Alexa



A high-contrast, black and white photograph of a person sitting in a chair. The person is wearing a light-colored shirt and dark pants. They are looking down, with their right hand raised to their face, possibly covering their mouth or resting their head. The background is dark and indistinct. The overall mood is somber and reflective.

Just One Week Later



Hearing the Echo... echo... echo...

- Revisiting Baker Street
 - Amazon released Alexa Skill Kit right after our 1st jam week!
 - Increased support and documentation for new developers
 - And games started to show up!

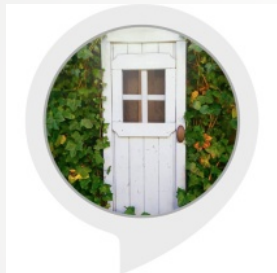


Alexa Skills Kit (ASK)





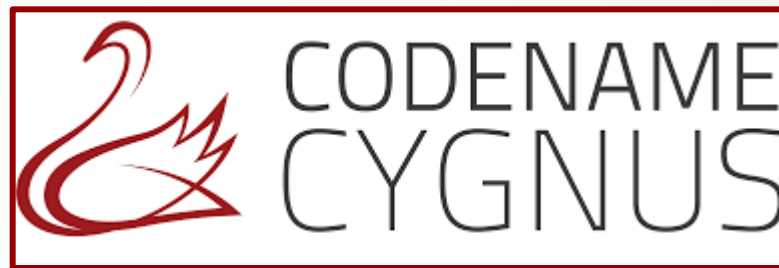
The Alexa Adventure Ecosystem



Magic Door



Wayne
Investigations



Codename Cygnus





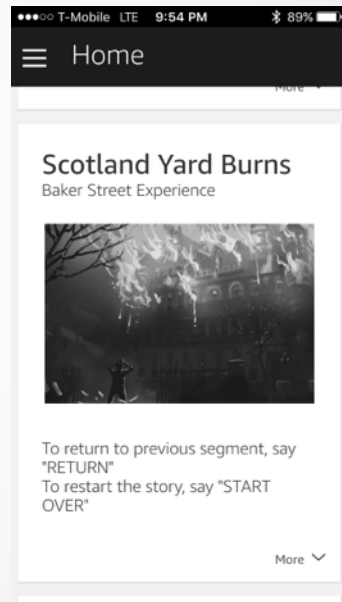
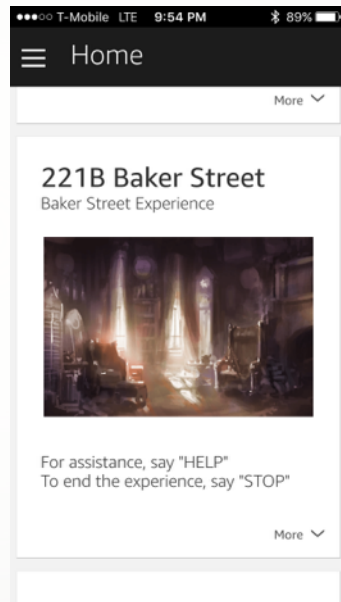
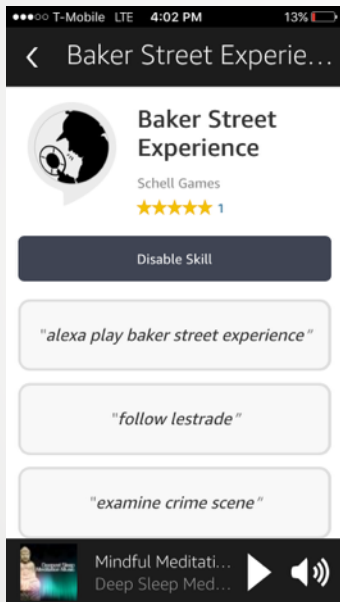
Taking Advantage of Alexa

- Avoid robotic Alexa speak by incorporating audio
- Build voice prompts to feel like natural conversation
- Utilize new features like Home Cards





Using the new Home Card system





Porting Complications



Voicing Some Constraints

- Not (originally) designed for long-form Skills
- Only supports 90 seconds of audio per “prompt”
- Misinterpreted input causes repeats and errors
- Skills automatically timeout after 15 seconds





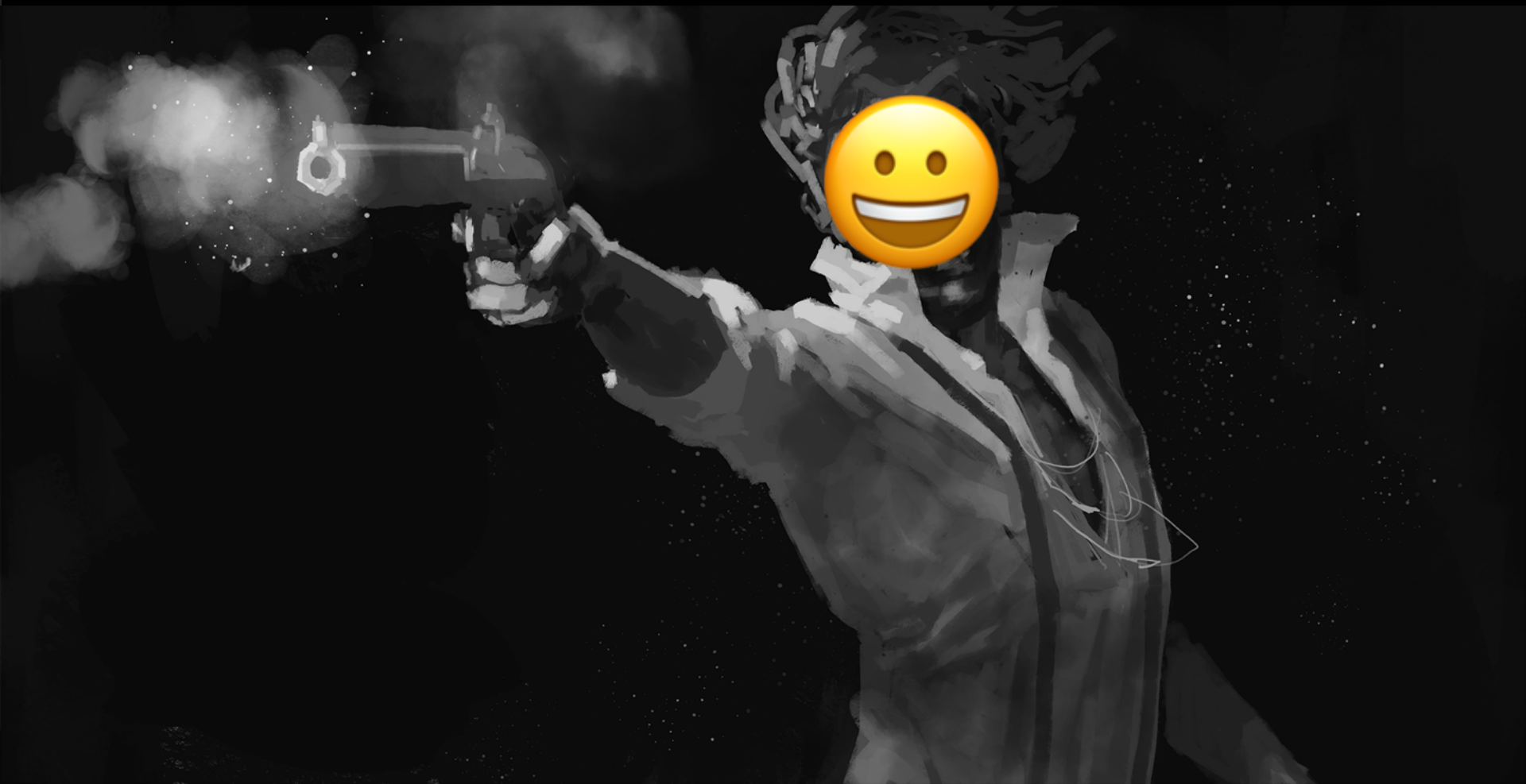
Working Within Limitations

- The 90 second limit
 - Rework prompts to add more interaction points
 - The time limit helped keep prompts focused
- Adding Watson witty responses
 - Misinterpreted feedback
 - Timeout issues





And Released!





Alexa, Care For More Adventures?



The Growth of the Smart Speakers

- Greater hardware adoption
 - Echo/Dot/Kindle (Alexa)
 - Google Home (Google Now)
- Enthusiastic support
 - Audience is responding
 - Skills are being highlighted





Barriers are Low

- Requires little ramp-up
 - Amazon provides basic framework
 - Focus on writing and sound
 - Visuals are secondary

* Monetization still a work-in-progress

Announcing a New Tool for Building Interactive Adventure Games on Alexa



August 02, 2016

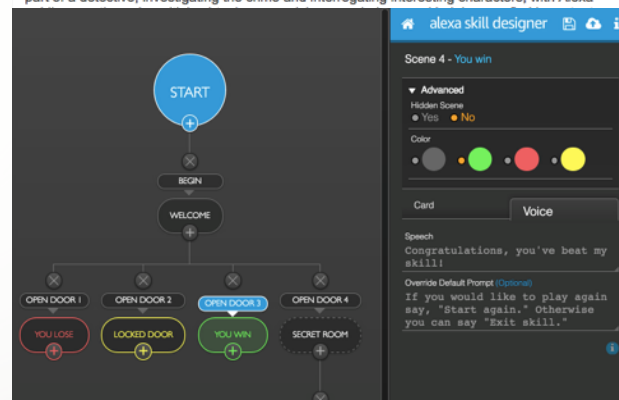
Robert Jamison

Alexa

Announcements

How To

Today, we're pleased to make a tool with source code available to allow you to graphically design interactive adventure games for Alexa. Interactive adventure games represent a new category of skill that allows customers to engage with stories using their voice. With these skills, you can showcase original content or build compelling companion experiences to existing books, movies and games. For example, in [The Wayne Investigation skill](#) (4.7 stars, 48 reviews), you're transported to Gotham City a few days after the murder of Bruce Wayne's parents. You play the part of a detective, investigating the crime and interrogating interesting characters, with Alexa





New Market for Classic Techniques

- Most Skills utilize basic text-to-speech systems
- Design your stories with traditional radio play concepts to create a better story
 - Voice actors, foley, and background ambience
- Growing landscape with desire for content
 - Lots of opportunities for partnered experiences
 - If you're stuck, remember the public domain!





Thanks and Credits

Thanks to Jon and Eddy from Earplay and Susan O'Connor

CAST

James Moriarty — CHRISTOPHER ARNOLD
Irene Adler — BONNIE BOGOVICH

Sherlock Holmes — RYAN HALL
John H. Watson — BOB JONES

Inspector G. Lestrade — TOM QUITONI
The Narrator — TIM ROSKO

PROJECT ROLES

PROJECT DIRECTOR
TOM QUITONI

DESIGN
CHRISTOPHER ARNOLD
BONNIE BOGOVICH
BOB JONES
JOSH LIPPERT
TOM QUITONI

ENGINEERING
MANOJ ANAND
MICHAEL LEE

AUDIO ENGINEER
BONNIE BOGOVICH

HOME CARD ART
BEN GREENE

WRITERS
CHRISTOPHER ARNOLD
BONNIE BOGOVICH
BOB JONES
JOSH LIPPERT
TOM QUITONI

ORIGINAL CONCEPT
BONNIE BOGOVICH
MATT MAHON

SPECIAL THANKS
REAGAN HELLER
ANA BALLIACHE

PRESENTED BY
SCHELL GAMES





Thank You!

Bonnie Bogovich
@BlackCatBonfeed

Michael Lee
@drinkycode

*Alexa, play
"Baker Street Experience"*

More examples at: tinyurl.com/bakerstreetvids
Please remember to fill out your surveys!