

# G O I N G SOLO

With popcorn, drinks, and the help of an unobtrusive MP3 file, Jeff Thompson and his family could finally enjoy a movie together, at home, just like most people do. "The neat part is, I had an earphone in and I was doing it all on my own," says Thompson, who is blind. "I didn't interrupt anybody else." The Minneapolis-based blogger, who writes on IT and the blind world, is optimistic about the recent arrival on the market of a new audio description MP3 file called Solo-Dx.

In the past, Thompson either watched movies while having to infer the visuals, or he watched them with audio description, which is an extra narration track embedded into a film to describe the visuals for blind and low-vision users. Neither option offered the best of both worlds for Thompson and his wife and daughter, who are not blind. Embedded audio description plays along with the film, aloud, which meant his wife and daughter had to hear it as well. It also requires some assistance to navigate the DVD player, so Thompson had to rely on others.

"I was impacting them by having it on, so they were subjected to me," he says. "Obviously they don't make films so you have to hear that [audio description]; they make films perfectly normal and then the audio description enhances my experience. But I don't have to enhance everybody else's, which is usually not enhancing theirs."

But Solo-Dx is poised to change the viewing experience of the blind and those around them. Created by Hollywood Access Services, LLC, Solo-Dx can be downloaded to any standard media player. It's convenient, affordable (.99 on Amazon and \$1.99 on iTunes), and perhaps best of all, fosters greater independence for blind and low vision entertainment users. "I did not have to worry about adjusting my TV, reconfiguring the DVD, or anything like that," explains Thompson, who downloaded the file to his iPhone. "It was a seamless experience. I just had to sync it up, listen to the countdown to a certain point, and then hit play and adjust the volume."

As someone who is neither blind nor tech savvy, and new to audio description, my own experience with the technology was refreshingly straightforward. I downloaded the Solo-Dx MP3 file of *The Hunger Games* to iTunes on my MAC, and plugged in my earphones to listen to instructions, which were concise and clear. A

beep told me when to pause and a guitar strum signaled when to proceed. With *The Hunger Games* ready to go in my DVD player, I held the DVD remote in one hand and my computer on my lap. My only challenge once the film began was synchronizing the audio description track to the film, which took me a few tries.

As the movie played and the description began, only then did I fully grasp the revolutionary impact of Solo-Dx. To watch the screen while listening simultaneously to both the film's audio and the audio description track was an exercise in sensory overload. My head spun; it was a lot of information to process at one time. I now understand the significance of having a supplemental track for blind users who want to enjoy movie night without impacting sighted viewers. For a while, I closed my eyes and just listened, and the experience reminded me of Reader's Theater in which actors read a script with great inflection and theatrical flare, except in the audio, a singular female voice narrates throughout.

The quality of Solo-Dx's description in *The Hunger Games* is vivid, dramatic, and well written. The narration is well paced, an important feature Thompson notes. "I've listened to films [with audio description] in movie theaters a couple of times and people critique how they over-talk and describe too much. Solo-Dx's track was a good balance; they didn't squeeze too much in there, so you're playing ping-pong in your head."

The descriptive narration is also precise, including characters' facial expressions, dress, and actions. For example, in *The Hunger Games*, when the main character, Katniss, finds her friend, Rue, mortally wounded, the narrator says:

*"In a clearing, Rue writhes on the ground, trapped in a net tied between two trees. (pause) Catniss cuts the net's rope with her knife, freeing her. Rue embraces her tightly. Marvel appears and he uses his spear. Catniss fires an arrow into his torso, dropping him, then turns around and gapes. Rue stares down numbly at the spear tip embedded in her own chest. She slowly withdraws it. She falls backward into her friend's arms."*

The implications of the Solo-Dx technology appear far-reaching and could potentially be applied to wherever digitized audio description is needed. According to Mathayu Warren-Lane, one of Solo-Dx's creators, the company is currently working on a trial with Universal Studios Hollywood. What the company eventually hopes, however, is that their technology finds its way into movie theaters, which is what Thompson wants too. "If I knew we were going to a movie theater, if it was that far ahead of the DVD, I would sneak it in," he says. "I know they say turn off all equipment, but I could have it in my pocket and have my earphones in and listen perfectly...if that's where it goes."

by Paula Fitzgerald