

Can You Hear Me Now?

In this month's column, Cory Doctorow discusses audiobooks

BY CORY DOCTOROW

I just flat-out love audiobooks. There's nothing like a story being read aloud to you as you go for a long walk or go for a drive. For years, I've been reading my short stories, articles, and even a couple of my novels for my podcast, which has thousands of weekly listeners. So I was delighted when my agent sold audio rights to my fourth novel, *Little Brother*, to Random House Audio. RHA does great books, and the actor they tapped for the reading, Kirby Heyborne, did a superb job.

Unfortunately, distribution hasn't gone smoothly. RHA didn't want to do physical CDs—understandable, perhaps, as time was too short. Besides, CD sales are in free-fall while digital delivery using Audible is skyrocketing. Why sell antiquated CDs to an audience that mostly wants to play them on portable MP3 players?

I'm great with that in theory, but in practice it's more complicated. I used to be a huge Audible customer. When I switched operating systems, however, I discovered that Audible's DRM wouldn't work on my Linux computer. I've spent thousands of dollars on my Audible collection, so I set out to convert it all to MP3. That required playing each book in real-time through the computer's sound card, recapturing it with the AudioHijack program, and then saving it as an MP3. It took a solid month of running three old Macs 24/7 to get all of my audiobooks out of Audible's proprietary wrapper and into the universal MP3 format so that I could take my investment with me to a new digital home.

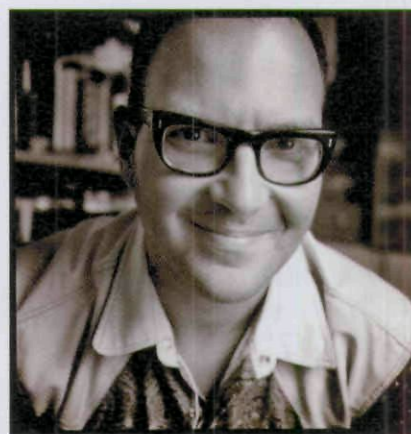
Of course, I probably could have

"pirated" the same audiobooks more quickly—after all, it's not hard to find cracked Audible titles on the Internet. This is why I can't understand why publishers or writers opt for DRM. It clearly doesn't stop real pirates from copying, and it locks good customers into the DRM vendor's ecosystem. I wouldn't sell my books through a bookseller who demanded readers only enjoy them on a chair from Wal-Mart; why would I sell my audiobooks on terms that insist my listeners only use devices approved by a DRM vendor?

So, RHA and I went to Audible and politely asked them to sell *Little Brother* without DRM. They turned us down flat. And because Audible is the only retailer who can sell on iTunes, that closed the door on the largest distribution channel in the world for audiobooks.

For my next book, *Makers*, we tried again. This time Audible agreed to carry the title without DRM. Hooray! Except now there was a new problem: Apple refused to allow DRM-free audiobooks in the Apple Store—yes, the same Apple that claims to hate DRM. Okay, we thought, we'll just sell direct through Audible, at least it's a relatively painless download process, right? Not quite. It turns out that buying an audiobook from Audible requires a long end-user license agreement (EULA) that bars users from moving their Audible books to any unauthorized device or converting them to other formats. Instead of DRM, they accomplish the lock-in with a contract.

I came up with what I thought was an elegant solution: a benediction to the audio file: "Random House Audio and Cory Doctorow, the copyright holders to



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this recording, grant you permission to use this book in any way consistent with your nation's copyright laws." This is a good EULA, I thought, as it stands up for every word of copyright law. Random House was game, too. Audible wasn't. So we decided not to sell through Audible, which I was intensely bummed about, because I really like Audible. They have great selection, good prices, and they're kicking ass with audiobooks.

The other audiobook vendors, meanwhile, are also turning out to be a mess, requiring customers to use some special "downloader" software just to get an MP3 over the Internet. Listen up—kids solved the problems of getting MP3s over the Net a decade ago. All you need is a browser to do it. But now vendors require a multimonth subscription and special software just to get one audiobook. I can understand why a retailer would want to use my copyright as bait to lock in readers—but exactly how is this good for me?

This is why I'm not selling digital downloads of the professional readings of *With a Little Help*. With so much friction and goofiness in the marketplace, I'd rather give the MP3s away under a Creative Commons license and solicit donations through PayPal. My listeners don't want DRM. They want to get their books with a minimum of hassle. But, for the record, I'd put my books in Audible and the iTunes Store in a hot second if only they'd sell them on the same terms that I'd be willing to buy them: no DRM and no license agreement except "don't violate copyright law."

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