

Voices in Action

Ashley Zeldin | Jun. 20th, 2011

The developers of tactical space combat simulation game *The Bridge* learned quickly the value of quality voice-acting. No voice-acting, they found, bored play-testers. Computer-generated voices, while more engaging, were laughable. Finally, the team decided to record its members' own voices for everything from the navigator to the ship's artificial intelligence.

“Most of the team found that pretty fun to do, and it added a lot of interesting content to the game for relatively little effort,” explained technical lead Greg Lieberman, a recent graduate of University of Southern California's game design program.

He conceded the quality of the voice-acting was mixed: “We are game programmers, not actors.”

One team member, sounded “absolutely awesome,” whereas another, he admitted, sounded “absolutely terrible”; most were “middle-of-the-road.”

Regardless of the quality, the addition of real voice-acting garnered positive feedback, Lieberman said.

“Players seem to appreciate the voice-acting effort we put in,” he said.

In addition to the existence of voice-acting, gamers care about its quality, says voice actor D.B. Cooper a.k.a. Deirdre Williams; gamers, too, can be vocal about their opinions.

Poor-quality voice-acting contributes to negative perceptions of games, such as that featured on AudioAtrocities.com, an online compendium of “truly terrible video game voice-acting.”

“You’d think that in the 20 years since the first video game with full audio dialogue was created, bad game dubs and acting would have been wiped out, but hey, the movies have been around a lot longer and there’s still plenty of bad movies,” the site introduction stated.

“It’s the bane of the business,” Cooper said. “That’s where bad audio goes not to die, but to live forever in infamy.”

As Morla Gorrondona, co-chair of the Game Audio Network Guild’s Voice Actor Coalition, explained, voice acting has come a long way, as demonstrated by the likes of Bioshock, God of War and Red Dead Redemption—which has won awards for dialogue—though still has room for improvement.

“I think we can all remember a time when it was almost painful to listen to [voice-acting] in games,” she said. “It’s hilarious—and also very educational.”

There’s still a long way to go in terms of making game developers and publishers aware that the audio component needs consideration throughout the development process. GVAC works to improve standards and practices as they relate to voice-acting

“A lot of focus remains on the visual, but that’s just half the story. The other half is the tale that is told through audio,” Gorrondona said.

The onus of delivering solid voice-acting doesn’t fall exclusively on the voice actors.

“The way that games are written, it’s practically reinventing the wheel every time the game is made,” Cooper said. “When you’re doing a game with a company

that's not used to working with large budgets or having all the parts done in-house what happens is you get guys who really don't know how to write dialogue writing the dialogue. They're able to write instructional stuff, but they're not playwrights."

In many visual media, such as film, television and, of course, theatre, the plot is driven by the narrative. Not so in video games, where plot is driven by gameplay.

"So much of the gameplay is about the programming, the art, the engine, the lighting, the effects. The script is a separate element that is not innately married to gameplay," Cooper contended. "The script has to get integrated in there somehow, but it's usually not the driving force. It's important but it's not as primary as gameplay mechanics. Audio has been fighting in the game development world to be part of the primary game development for a while."

Not only is the importance of the script itself overlooked, but also its context and application, said voice actor Marc Graue.

"If you're lucky you'll get a very bad description of what it is that they're looking for. A lot of the time it's very broad and, depending on the game, very secretive. Sometimes they will have a huge history and background: 'He was raised by a tribe of "sklergies" on the planet "Sklog", and when he was 6...' And I'm thinking, 'Well that's great, but what kind of voice do you want?' " said Graue, better known as the voice of Mr Zurkon in the Ratchet & Clank games. "I remember playing a troll and the direction was, 'I like the size, now make it sweatier.' And I was keeping a straight face going, 'Yeah, yeah, sweaty troll voice,' even though in my brain I was thinking, 'What the hell does that mean?' "

Over the years, Graue, whose credits also include World of Warcraft, the Fallout series and the upcoming Resistance 3, has become accustomed to such directions, as "everything I play is either dead or mutated," he said.

Coping with vague directions is a matter of professionalism and communication for voice actors.

William “Chip” Beaman, manager of voice over and talent services for Soundelux Music Design Group, agreed that developers and publishers can place undue pressure on voice actors.

The issue of unclear directions during recording sessions, he said, may be a sign of disagreement amongst the design and writing teams or perhaps inexperience or inability communicating the teams’ vision of a character.

Another common problem, rushed writing leads to actors not receiving scripts in advance, limiting their preparation to brief rehearsals during session time before recording begins, he said.

Beaman, who has worked with such clients as Sony, Microsoft, Capcom, Konami and Square Enix, cited the God of War team as one of the most exemplary—albeit not perfect—cases in regard to the treatment of audio.

For instance, he recalled the team having done table reads internally before even approaching him to hire a casting director to bring in voice talent.

“You can suss out a lot of problems early on if you hear the words spoken aloud,” he said.

The team also called on key voice actors beforehand to participate in rehearsals.

“There are some clients that put great store in the style and quality of the voice, and they want to hire the very best. There are others that really don’t care,” said Graue, who owns and operates a voice-over recording studio in Burbank, Calif.

Balancing quality and affordability is a big decision in game developers’ and publishers’ minds.

The goal should be “finding best person who’s going to encompass the character you’re trying to portray,” Beaman said, but that’s often affected by a voice actor’s union membership status.

He estimates that 80 percent of the game industry uses non-union talent, fearing work restrictions and provisions imposed by unions; the competing fear is that non-union talent isn’t as high-quality.

Union and non-union talent can’t be mixed on any one title, however, so “once you go union you have to go all union for that title,” Beaman said.

Voice actors, who receive no residuals on games, can expect \$1,000 for a session if registered with the Screen Actors Guild or the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, or slightly less if non-union, Graue said.

And some game developers attempt to offer credit only, no pay.

“That’s really where you run into problems with quality,” Graue said.

The scope of the roles voice actors play, too, is expanding.

Actress Olivia Henry went through a rigorous audition before earning the roles of troubled heroine Adela Seawell, seductive villain Gloria and prototype wizard Wizard in Square Enix’s *Final Fantasy XIII-2*.

Not only was her voice-acting talent of interest but also her acting chops; her turns as Adela and Gloria, as well as the portrayals of other main characters, were motion-captured.

“It was a very different way to record voice-acting,” she recalled.

During the process, she learned that the creative team was planning to use a computerized voice for the Wizard character and submitted herself for consideration in the role; her roboticized version was favored over the computer,

just as the team of The Bridge learned that their voices were preferred by players to the computer-generated voices.

Once she earned the roles, Henry experimented with different styles in her initial recording sessions before honing in on the distinct voices for Adela, Gloria and Wizard which she explored over the six months she was called upon to reprise her roles. She chose tonalities that resemble her own for her depiction of Adela, and infused Gloria with a more seductive and dangerous persona. The differentiation was important, as the two female characters interact throughout the game in adversarial roles.

Henry said her childhood playing video games with her father lent her an “appreciation for the theatrical basis of video games”, and the knowledge of what kinds of sounds and voices fit into their fantasy worlds.

Cooper ascribed a familiarity with gaming as being one of her strengths as well.

“Part of the skill set of being a voice actor for video games is understanding how the player interfaces with the game,” said Cooper, whose sons introduced her to such games as the Final Fantasy and Grand Theft Auto series. “I really think that the best voice actors are the guys who play games.”

Voice-acting is now standard in most console games.

“Any 3D, dialogue-driven game needs voice-acting to be an engaging experience,” Lieberman said. “With 2D games, voice-acting is not essential because the camera will almost always look at the dialogue bubble of the speaking character.”

This philosophy warranted voice-acting in The Bridge.

“In 3D games, I like to let the player wander around as characters converse. Voice-acting allows the player to listen to the dialogue without being forced to look at the speaker itself,” Lieberman said.

Lieberman and his team realized that once voice-acting became a given for their 3D space simulation game, adding, removing and changing content in the various missions required dialogue to be rewritten and rerecorded.

“The key to our voice-acting effort’s success was that we didn’t start recording lines until everything else in the mission was finalized,” he said.

One way to plan for dialogue without committing time and resources is temporary audio, said Alex Kerr, a writer on Vicarious Visions’ *Marvel: Ultimate Alliance 2*. Kerr pointed to *Portal 2* as a notable example where this tactic led to superior audio quality.

“Temporary audio” Kerr said, “can help developers identify issues with pacing as well as find places where audio clashes with the gameplay.”

But Cooper cautioned that temporary audio is just that—temporary.

“If it needs to be a girl’s voice, they’ll get the girl in the copy room to do it,” Cooper said. “There’s really no excuse for it when there are so many people who are so good, who are ready and capable and affordable. You don’t need to hire superstars to do your game if you’re not a AAA.”

Good voice-acting practices, Gorrondona said, “can catapult video games—and the voice actors themselves—to the next level of performance.”

Gorrondona, who parlayed her theatre background into roles in titles such as *Bioshock 2*, *Infamous 2* and *Iron Man 2*, believes that the art of voice-acting for video games can be just as legitimate as acting for the theatre.

“Just as theatre characters are unique and developed and nuanced, so can be video game characters given the opportunity,” she said.

Those opportunities are coming, Kerr said.

“As time goes on, more game developers are understanding the full impact that voice-acting can have on a game,” he explained. “While examples of standout writing and audio in games have been around for years, they’re becoming increasingly more common.”

The consequences of not considering audio throughout the game development process are lost opportunities for emotional connection between players and characters, and a reduced sense of realism.

“It disengages you when you have a horrible voice over,” Beaman said. “It jars you out of the experience and reminds you that you’re sitting in your living room playing the game rather than being immersed in the world.”

But Graue places some of the blame on the impatience of the players themselves.

“A lot of the time games will have this huge intro, like, ‘The year was 3042, and all of mankind.’ But kids are like, ‘How do you get past this crap? I want to kill stuff!’ They want to get right into playing.”

Gorrondona said that the existence of games where dialogue isn’t necessarily important is all the more reason to ensure that when voice-acting is done, it’s done well.

But, as Lieberman conceded: “As long as the voice-acting is neither repetitive nor irritating, so-so voice-acting is better than none.”

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Ashley Zeldin (@snidelyhazel) is a freelance writer from Los Angeles. In her childhood, she voice-acted in educational videos. Video game voice-acting was in its childhood, too. More recently, she contributed her voice to Single Player Game, developed at the 2011 Global Game Jam at her alma mater, USC. Her lines were cut.

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