



Hello and welcome to Dialogue 101. We've got a lot of ground to cover in this session so let's get cracking!



# Overview

- Introduction
- Preproduction
- Casting
- Recording
- Q&A

DIALOGUE 101

MICHAEL CSURICS

I'm going to approach this session assuming you have this scenario; "I have been asked to get our games VO squared away, but I have no idea what I'm doing".

Do not panic. Dialogue is fun!

Here is the high level view what we'll be talking about today.

Hopefully by some miracle we'll have time for a good Q&A following the talk.



# Introduction

Michael Csurics

- Founder at Brightskull
  - Narrative and Audio Production Services
- Bioshock 2, Minerva's Den, XCOM: The Bureau, The Vanishing of Ethan Carter
- Dad, Musician, Magician, Motorcycle Mechanic

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It's me

Not important



# Preproduction

what happens first

- Script Analysis
- Budgeting



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Preproduction.

Now that is important

Before you can even begin you need to gather metrics and provide data for you, your team, and your development partners.



# Script Analysis

- What is it?

ClipDealer  
www.clipdealer.com



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So, the first thing I do when approaching a new project is run analytics on the scripts and extract the information.

In case you were wondering, this is NOT the fun part.

# Script Analysis

1	Actor Character	Code	Sex	Age	Accent	Role	Notes	SYS	NAR	m1	m2	m3	m4	m5	m6	m7	m8	TR1	TR2	TR3
2	M1 Agent 13	A13	M	40		Player, high ranking officer. Cool under fi	Skarsgard in generation kill	280	61							39	15			
3	F1 Duke Orange	DOR	F	30	British	Player's Aide, relays information, officer, Major Jones in XIII		112	137	28	40	40	19						10	
4	F2 Major Chef	MAJ	F	40	Swedish	UN Comissioner, oversees Chimera, Play	Luride Holden (X-Files), Catherine De	112	85					41	44					
5	M2 General Powers	POW	M	60		US General	Colin Powell	112	38			4	8	16	2			8		
6	M3 Russia Love	RUS	M	30	Russian	temporary aide for one mission, professional, helpful		0	9							6				3
7	M4 Buffara Buffara	BUF	M	35	South African	Minor Villain in "good campaign"/Player i	David James (district 9)	136	25	7	4	2	7	4	1					
8	F3 Meow Set Sun	MOW	F	30	Mandarin	Minor Villain in "good campaign"/Player i	Maggie Q (die hard 4)/Bing Bing Li (Tr	136	37	19	3	7	6	2						
9	M1 Dee Sanchez	DEE	M	40	Mexican	businessman, smuggler, politico warlord	Joaquim de Almeida (clear & present	0	4	4										
10	M5 Hans Gruber	HNS	M	60	German	pragmatic, level headed, evil boss	Kevin McAlalley (life on mars)	136	35	12	8	5	3		7					
11	F3 Marsha Hu	MHU	F	30		fem news anchor		0	16	16										
12	M3 Peter Brightskull	PBR	M	30		male news anchor		0	16	6	6	1						3		
13	M1 Senator Baron	SEN	M	50		american senator, conspirator (cold feet)	scrambled voice (use previous actor)	0	6	6										
14	F1 Doctor Darkside	DOC	F	40		american scientist, conspirator	scrambled voice (use previous actor)	0	6	6										
15	M3 Minister Filthybig	PIG	M	50		europcean politician, conspiracy leader	scrambled voice (use previous actor)	0	4						4					
16	M1 Cobra Hiss	HIS	M	40		pragmatic, leader of 2nd conspirator cell	scrambled voice (use previous actor)	0	1					1						
17	M1 Jeff Hardy	JEF	M	50		tough, soldier/officer	scrambled voice (use previous actor)	0	2									2		
18	M2 Zartan	ZAR	M	40		politician, 2nd cell conspirator, cunning	scrambled voice (use previous actor)	0	1	1										

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Here is an example of the end results of the analysis. I'm going to give you a quick walkthrough of what information is extracted to help forecast budget and casting.

[click]

These columns here are a list of every character that speaks a line in the project and any relevant information I may need for early casting.

In this example you'll see the sex, age, accent, the unique code used in the scripts and engine, and some high level information on the role.

[click]

These columns are the sums of all lines spoken by each character tallied by level/mission/or however else the game is broken down.

I break it out like this so when we're casting actors to play

multiple roles I can be sure we get good spacing and variety.

[click]

This column is the sum total count of all the systemic or combat dialogue.

This type of dialogue is generally much shorter so maybe 4 words per line versus 12-20 words per line for narrative.

Come to my talk on Thursday at 11 if you want to learn alot more about that.

[click]

Finally, once all that information is gathered I can use it to make loose early casting predictions for multiple voicings.

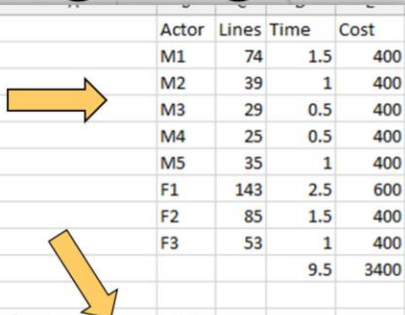
Now, every developer in the industry has a different way of delivering scripts, so you have to adapt your method every time.

Excel scripts are pretty straightforward for this type of work, but then need to be translated to readable formatting later.

Word scripts are not too bad either, but protip: I usually use find and replace to seek and count character names in the line headings then have it highlight which ones I've done so I don't lose track.



# Budgeting



	Actor	Lines	Time	Cost
1				
2	M1	74	1.5	400
3	M2	39	1	400
4	M3	29	0.5	400
5	M4	25	0.5	400
6	M5	35	1	400
7	F1	143	2.5	600
8	F2	85	1.5	400
9	F3	53	1	400
10			9.5	3400
11				
12	Talent	3400		
13	Studio	2000		
14				
15	Total	5400		

## •Union Actors:

- \$890.23/session
- Sessions are 4 hours

## •Non-Union Actors:

- \$200/hr
- 2 hr minimum

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Now that you have all that data, you can project budgets for time and money.

[click]

These rows and columns here show totals by actor for the early casting projections from the analysis in the previous slide.

[click]

Displaying the data like this allows us to see how many total lines we have to record for each actor

[click]

which allows us to see how much total booth time each actor needs

[click]

which allows us to project costs.



[click]

For union (SAG/AFTRA) actors you need to budget \$890.23 per session, I usually round up an even thousand on larger projects. This includes the actor's session fee and the agency's 10% on top. Each session union work is metered out as a four hour block of time.

For non-union actors you should expect to pay \$200 per hour with a two hour minimum.



# Budgeting

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## •Studio

- \$200/hr
- Includes engineer
- Most do day/half day rate

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Studios generally cost \$200/hr.

This includes the room, the engineer, coffee, snacks, bottled water, massages, and foot rubs.

Only some of those things are true. I will let you figure out which.

Most studios will bill by a day or half day rate.



# Casting

the most important step

- Designing Sides
- Finding Talent
- Picking a Winner



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Now that you know how many actors you need. It's time to find them.

The casting process breaks down in to three distinct phases. Making casting materials, auditioning talent, and making selections.



# Casting Sides

- Character Info
- Audition Lines

## Project Title: Space Run

**Character Name:** Brown Beard

**Setting:** A sci-fi tower defense game set in the far future. The story centers on intergalactic freight ships and their crews competing for clients, fighting off pirates, and delivering payloads.

**Physical:** Male. Early 40's.

**Voice:** Traditional Pirate Accent. Rough. Gravelly. Dirty.

**Background:** Brown Beard is a techno-pirate who travels through space and pillages unsuspecting cargo ships. He is not the most effective pirate, but he still creates havoc and problems wherever he may be.



BROWN BEARD  
Avast ye Matay. This be Brown Beard the pirate. You will  
 surrender your cargo to me or suffer the consequences.  
 BUCK  
 {sarcastic}  
 Brown-Beard?  
 BROWN BEARD  
Blimy! It's 2525. All the good pirate names be trademarked.  
 BUCK  
 {sarcastic}  
 Sure thing Brown Beard?

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"Casting sides" are the materials that actor sees when they are auditioning for your project.

They contain information about the character and some sample lines for the actor to read and submit.

I am going to bestow some quick tips for writing casting sides, which is an art form unto itself.

# Casting Sides

- 1 to 2 pages
- Relevant character info ONLY
  - Sex, Age, Race, Accent, Vocal Traits

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Casting sides should be short. 1 to 2 pages max.

The character information should be succinct, focused, and most importantly useful to the actors.

They do not need to know that the character has a twin brother from another mother who is revealed later on in the game to be his father.

What they need to know that he is male, 30 years old, Caucasian, mean, gravelly, bitter, and has a slight Texan twang.

A short list of adjectives will go much further than a full character bio.

Basically, it is important to put yourselves in the actor's shoes.

Peeling back the curtain - Many full time actors set aside one or two days a week to focus on auditions and will have a stack of auditions to go through.

If you want the best reads, you need to respect the actor's

time and help them get to the character as quickly as possible.

# Casting Sides

- Pick good lines
- Give emotional range
- Always include combat efforts

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When choosing your sample lines pick good ones.  
 You don't need to hear every dramatic moment in the game.  
 You need to hear the entire emotional palate of that character.  
 Do they have a couple awkward moments? How about some  
 funny quips? Put it in there.

And if the game is a FPS, RTS, Fighter, or any other genre  
 where a character may or may not become a combatable, ask  
 for a set of combat efforts.

One set of punching, one set of punches, and some short  
 deaths.

EVEN IF THE CHARACTER THEY ARE AUDITIONING FOR  
 DOESN'T ENGAGE IN COMBAT.

Just trust me. You will thank me someday.

With beer

[click]



# Casting Sides

- This is not the final shippable content
- Write whatever you need to get the read that you need

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 {eccentric}  
 Sure thing Brown Beard?

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One last protip. Casting sides are not the final shippable content.

What?

Get creative with the audition material.

You do NOT have to use accurate character descriptions and copy.

You DO have to get good auditions.

Write whatever you need to get good reads.

It does not matter if it is fictionally accurate to story as long as it gets the concept across.





# Sourcing Talent

- Agencies
- Casting Director
- Online Casting Sites
- Local theater, craigslist, friends



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Now you have everything you need to find voice talent for your game

where do you find actors?

Talent agencies are a great place for that.

However, not all agencies work with voice talent.

Agencies specify. There are on-screen agents, theatrical agents, commercial voice agents. And more.

What you want are agents that represent VOICE TALENT that does INTERACTIVE or animation.

Working with a casting director is another, fantastic choice.

A good casting director will handle everything from developing those casting sides to sourcing the talent and filtering the top auditions for you

Most importantly though they have relationships and a network so they can give you access to talent you will NOT HAVE ACCESS TO OTHERWISE.

There's online casting sites too.

Most of them let you post a project and set the rate and get auditions from tons of actors.

It's entirely up to you, but I wouldn't recommend it.

For every great diamond in the rough you'll find out there you'll get a couple hundred that are way off.

Lastly there are other shoestring methods. Local theatres, craigslist, your friends.

Sure, it can work, sometimes, but you are going to invest way more time and not get anywhere near as good results in the end.

Even if you think you did.

soapbox

Audiences are becoming much more sophisticated and expect more even out of small indie games.

They will be very forgiving for graphics and gameplay, but not sound. And especially not voice. Remember, these are the only "real" assets in the game.



# Selecting Talent

- Pick the Right Voice for YOUR project
- Experience
- Availability



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Well, congratulations. Now you've got a bunch of auditions to go through.

But who is right for your game?

That's up to YOU. And I mean YOU.

Don't pick the audition, or worse the actor, you think the fans want and may sell more copies of your game.

Consider this too, does the actor you've chosen have experience?

And more importantly, is that experience relevant to your project?

Maybe they've done a ton of on-screen work but never done voice-over.

Maybe they've done some video games, but they're all in simlish and you're making XCOM.

Maybe that's from personal experience.

Maybe they've done a ton of drama, but no comedy. Guess

what? Those are two different skill sets.

Is the actor currently working on a TV show? Or a play?

Will they be available when it's three days to cert and you need to pick up the rewrites, or will they be on a junket in Mexico?



# Recording

- Find a Studio
- Preparing the Scripts
- Directing the Talent



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Now that you've got a cast, you have to record them. First stop – find a studio.



# Studios

- Close to the talent
- VO is not Music
- Dead rooms sound dead



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Find a studio that is close to your talent, not you.

It is far more cost effective to fly yourself to the talent than it is to fly them to you.

Also, VO is not music, which means that the equipment we need to record it is different than the equipment used to record musicians.

The studio you like has all the beautiful tube mics, vintage Neve pres and a rack full of EL8's?

Bookmark them for your next solo album and move on.

Transparency is king in VO. U87's, GML or John Hardy mic pres, and that is it. That's your signal path.

On the flip side of that there are lots of studios claiming to be "VO" studios that have dead, lifeless coffin rooms for suffocating talent.

I don't like these either.

You can spot them from a mile away.

Stuffed to the brim with pointy foam and a 416.

These are not creative vessels, these are studios where voice goes to die.

Give them a clap test. Does your clap sound like a clap, or a weird fart?

Look for large rooms.

Look for rooms with good mood lighting.

Look for rooms that make you feel good and empowered and most importantly creative.

Guess what?

The actors will feel the same way and it will make your game sound better.

# Scripts

- Spreadsheets are not scripts
- On-Screen Text is not a script
- Theatrically formatted scripts are scripts

```

SCENE 2
Chad is laying bricks in the door frame of the crypt (Ethan is
inside, unconscious), the idea is to bury Ethan alive. Missy
stands nearby and lights up the area with an oil lamp.

                                MISS_DALE
DALE
(crying)
You know he's harmless. You know
this is wrong.

                                MISS_MISSY
MISSY
(still somewhat possessed, but a teensy bit of
humanity breaks through)
Chad, finish those bricks before
he wakes up.

MURDER 2: THE MINE
SCENE 1
Dale and Missy are looking for Ethan (so Dale did not manage to
keep Missy away and has failed Ethan like always), Dale keeps
stalling, but Missy keeps on going. They reach a larger room.

                                MISS_DALE
DALE
(stalling)
Honey, he probably ran! Why
wouldn't he? Why would he be
here?

```

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Let's talk about the scripts for a second.

The actual thing the actors will be looking at.

Let's say you have a favorite tool that you use every day for work.

For our metaphor we'll say a screwdriver.

You are fast and reliable with a screwdriver.

You are very good at screwing.

Now let's say you get hired for a job and your new boss says they don't have screwdrivers, but they have these hammers.

Just use those.

On screws.

Same thing happens when we give actors a spreadsheet or anything that is not a theatrically formatted script.

And for gods sake make sure the script includes the other character's lines in any scenes they are working on.





# Directing Talent

- Collaborate not Dictate
- Create a safe space
- Have a vision



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For working with the talent you need to remember a few golden rules:

Actors are neither parrots, nor magicians.

The best way to break an actor, is to beat them down on every last nuance of their performance to get it to sound the way it is in your head.

You hired professionals. Listen to them.

On the flip side, they aren't working on the game nearly as closely as you are.

You're going to need to give them some context and guide their performance.

Basically, collaborate, don't dictate.

Your job is to create a bubble around the actor to make them feel engaged and safe.

Protect them from the producer, the writer, the engineer, and all other noise in the studio.

Have a vision and communicate it effectively. You must listen to your actor and discover how they want information communicated.

Are quick adjectives enough?

Do they need deeper knowledge?

It's on you to figure it out.

The actor director relationship is built on trust, respect, and sharing.

Break any of these and you've lost.



# When In Doubt

- Voice Directors
- Casting Directors
- Voice Production Houses
- Script Supervisors
- Editorial and Mastering Engineers



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Lastly, if all this seems a little daunting, you can always phone a friend.

There are people who exclusively do every part of this, some even do it explicitly for games, and they can help you through every step of the process.



## Q&A

- Use the microphones
- Ask me anything
- Thank the CAs and AV staff
- Fill out your surveys
- VO Session Live!!
- Thursday at 11:30 in W3002



[mike@brightskull.com](mailto:mike@brightskull.com)

@mCsurics

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Now let's get some questions going. Please line up at a microphone. You can literally ask me anything.

Everyone is invited to ask questions. That includes the volunteers.

On that note, please don't forget to thank the volunteers and fill out your survey.

Lastly, if you want a more boots on the ground look at voice production, specifically directing and managing recording sessions, please come to my main conference talk on Thursday at 11:30 in room 3002.