SOUNDAWG

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CHARACTER VOICES

Conceptualization, Casting, Recording, and the Cultural Reference Point

PHASES

1. CONCEPTUALIZATION

2. CASTING

3. SESSION PREPARATION

CONCEPTUALIZATION

- VOCAL PALETTE

- CULTURAL REFERENCE POINT

VOCAL PALETTE
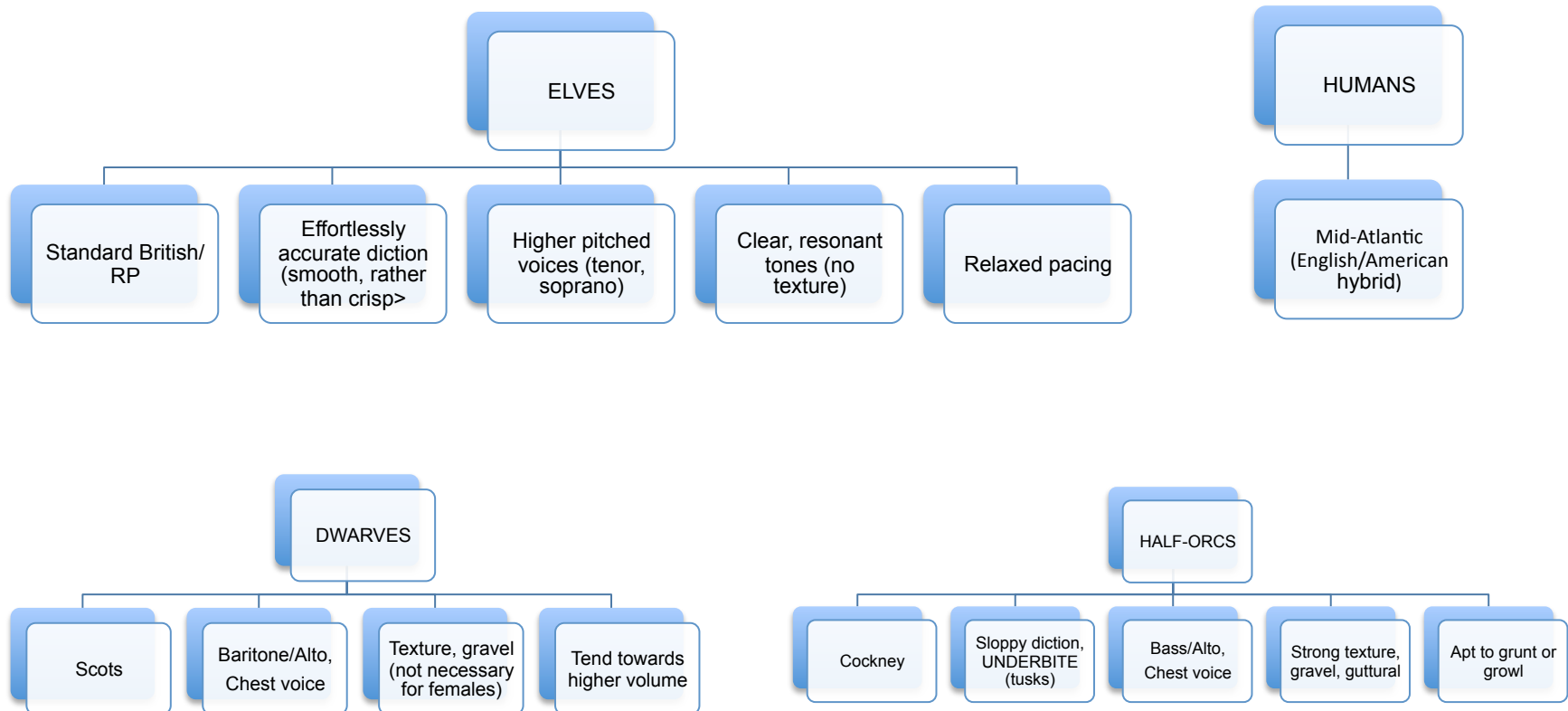
Painting a persona

Painting a population

COLORS OF SOUND – TINTING AND SHADING

- **Pitch**: high/low

- **Loudness** (volume): loud/soft

- **Rate**: fast/slow

- **Intonation** (music of a phrase): varied/monotone

- **Resonance**: Male – chest/head/falsetto, Female: chest/head

- **Qualities**: clear, strident, nasal, de-nasal, texture (breathy, raspy, throaty, guttural, gravely)

- **Accents/Dialects**

- **Contortions**

UNITY OF VISION

- Consistent aspects of each group/race/faction create a distinctive, unified vision.

- What unifies them vocally?

- What in this group's voices or speech pattern makes them different from all the other groups?

- Does the pattern you've selected adequately contrast the speech patterns of the other groups?

Generic Fantasy Game

ELVES
- Standard British/RP
- Effortlessly accurate diction (smooth, rather than crisp>
- Higher pitched voices (tenor, soprano)
- Clear, resonant tones (no texture)
- Relaxed pacing

HUMANS
- Mid-Atlantic (English/American hybrid)

DWARVES
- Scots
- Baritone/Alto, Chest voice
- Texture, gravel (not necessary for females)
- Tend towards higher volume

HALF-ORCS
- Cockney
- Sloppy diction, UNDERBITE (tusks)
- Bass/Alto, Chest voice
- Strong texture, gravel, guttural
- Apt to grunt or growl

CULTURAL REFERENCE POINT

Zeitgeist: the general cultural, intellectual, ethical, spiritual, and/or political climate within a nation or even specific groups, along with the general ambience, morals, and socio-cultural direction or mood of an era

CRUCIAL for making determinations on accents & dialects.

CULTURAL REFERENCE POINT

1. What accent represents each character or group

2. How the accent should sound

3. Whether a native-speaker or an American actor should be selected

FANTASY SETTING

- British History, Myth, and Legend
  - Kings & queens, nobles, princes & princesses, wizards, elves, dwarves, medieval arms & armor, fairies, ogres, trolls, giants, sea monsters, spirits, vampires, werewolves, castles, and dungeons

  Not part of the American cultural <u>zeitgeist</u>! *An American knight is a **cowboy***!

AMERICAN STEROTYPES OF DIALECTS

- **Enemies**
  - **Current**: Middle Eastern/Arabic accents
  - **Historically**: Russian, German (Germany), Upper class English, American Indians (television)
  - **Civil War**: American Southern

- **Sensual**
  - French (France), Spanish (Spain)

- **Lower class/unintelligent**
  - American Southern (except "Plantation" Southern), All NYC, Cockney,

- **Snobbish**
  - New England, "Plantation" Southern, British RP, French

THE MYTH OF AUTHENTICITY

- What must the accent sound like to invoke recognition of a particular regional or linguistic dialect?

- Where does the American cultural reference point for a regional dialect come from?
  - Film
  - Television
  - *NOT FROM THE ACTUAL REGION!*

Company of Heroes - Germans

- **American Actors** *(Los Angeles)*
  - Authentic-sounding accents were in style of America's cultural reference point for German accent.
  - Consistency. Their German accents all sounded basically the same *(unity of vision!)*.
- **German/German-American Actors** *(Los Angeles)*
  - Truly authentic German sound, but using American speech rhythms and stresses.
  - Fluent in German

Company of Heroes: Opposing Fronts – Panzer Elite

- **German Actors** (Berlin, GERMANY)
  - Accents did not sound like the American cultural reference point for German. Many weren't readily identifiable as "German."
  - Inconsistent.
  - Not all spoke English well. Often an actor would say a line without really knowing what the words meant.
  - Incorrect intonations, rhythms, and stresses for American speech. It sounded awkward rather than authentic.
  - Almost all of the voices were replaced by Los Angeles-based American and German actors

- **Conclusion**: Native speakers are often the wrong choice for *foreign language* dialects.

Company of Heroes: Opposing Fronts - Commonwealth

- English troops
  - English Actors (Los Angeles).
    - Various English regional accents
    - Authentic-sounding
    - Consistent
    - Understanding of UK cultural references, slang, rhythms, intonation, stresses, pronunciations ("missile," "barrage")
- Canadian troops
  - Canadian Actors (recorded in Halifax, Nova Scotia, CANADA)
  - *Note: Canadian/Canadian-American actors in Los Angeles couldn't hit the mark!*
- CONCLUSION: Native speakers are the BEST choices for *English language* dialects.
  - Note: Scottish and Irish are Gaelic-influenced, so they can be considered foreign language or English language dialects.

COH/COH:OF Summary

- ***COMPANY OF HEROES*** (Americans vs. Germans)
  - **LA based American actors worked beautifully for the American roles.**
  - **LA based American and German actors worked very well in many ways for the German troops.**
    - Consistency
    - Near uniformity in dialect
    - American intonations and stresses
    - Convenience
    - Economy
- ***COMPANY OF HEROES: Opposing Fronts*** (Commonwealth vs. *Panzer* Elite)
  - ***Berlin-based*** **German talent sounded like a good choice for the *Panzer* Elite, but the results were disappointing, and were replaced by *LA based* American and German talent.**
    - Inconsistent
    - Disparate dialects
    - Awkward intonations, stresses, and pronunciations
    - Inconvenient
    - Expensive
  - **Los Angeles-based English talent worked beautifully for the English troops.**
  - **Canada-based Canadian actors were the best choice for the Canadian troops.**
    - LA based Canadian actors were not nearly as authentic-sounding as Canada-based Canadian actors

CONCLUSIONS – Cultural Reference Point

Always know your audience's cultural reference point and keep it in mind when selecting dialects

- **Foreign language accents**
  - German, French, Russian
  - *Los Angeles-based talent* is the best choice.

- **English language accents**
  - British, Australian, New Zealand, South African English, American, Canadian
  - *Native Speakers* are the best choice

CASTING

1. Character breakdowns

2. Sides

3. Selecting Talent

CHARACTER BREAKDOWNS

- Character Bio's are for you.

- Character *Breakdowns* are for your Casting Director and Director, and for the Talent and their Agents.

Character Breakdowns - TMI

- ## What to omit
  - TMI can *ruin* an audition round
  - Anything not directly relevant to the vocal quality, speech pattern, general attitude, or the audition sides
  - Less is more. Concise is king.
  - *Providing more information than is necessary does not give the actor more to work with. It distracts him from what is relevant, primary, and playable.*

Character Breakdowns – TMI

- ## Personal History
  - These are mostly irrelevant for an auditioning actor.

- ## Place of origin:
  - Never include the character's place of origin unless you want the actor to deliver the dialogue using the regional accent of that area

SECRET LEVEL!

Actors will often fail to give you what you <u>want</u>, because they're too busy trying to give you what you <u>asked for</u>.

Celebrity Actor References

- Often harm more than they help
  - Whatever actor you reference will illicit impersonations of that actor.
  - Impersonations are by definition uncreative.

- Instead, list the *qualities* in the character or actor that you want to reference.

- If you must use them, they can sometimes be helpful for the casting person, director, or agent, but should NOT be on the breakdown the *actor* receives (unless you want an impersonation). Make sure that doesn't happen.

- We WATCH movies. Many film actors are compelling because of what's happening in their *eyes*, not because of what they are doing with their *voices*.

Effective Character Breakdowns

- Picture
- Age and *Vocal Age* (if different)
- Relevant Physical Characteristics
- Race/Ethnicity
- Vocal qualities
- Accent/Dialect
- Overall attitude/perception

Effective Character Breakdowns

- Picture(s)
  - Scale references can help as well for non-human characters.

- Age and *Vocal Age* (if different)
  - Vocal age – how the character should sound.
  - Vocal age can also be "human equivalent" age for long-lived non-human characters.

- Relevant Physical Characteristics
  - Height
  - Weight
  - Build

Effective Character Breakdowns

- Race/Ethnicity
  - Human Ethnicity
  - Non-human races
  - Voice casting is *not* race-blind.

- Overall attitude/perception
  - Examples – distrustful, conniving, manipulator, enforcer, malcontent, naïve, hero, victim, etc.

- Vocal variables
  - Be specific, but not restrictive.
    - Pitch, volume, pace, intonation patterns (music/lilt), qualities (clear, raspy, guttural, throaty, gravelly, textured, nasal, denasal, strident, shrill, etc)

Be FLEXIBLE!

Accents and Dialects

- ## Always list a dialect.
  - Don't put "None" or "Normal." There is no such thing as speech with "no dialect." Say "American."
  - Don't ask for "authentic." Ask for "Authentic-sounding"
    - Request native speakers
    - Don't deny non-native speakers who can give you an "authentic sounding" dialect.
    - *Company of Heroes: Opposing Fronts:* Berlin actors

- ## Specificity vs. Generality
  - Use general regions unless you have an important contextual reason to demand greater specificity

SIDES

The dialogue the actors will perform for their audition.

1. Relevant Context
2. Lines
3. Confidential information
4. Processing

Sides – relevant context

- Environment

- Action

- Volume

- Proximity of listener

- Relationship to listener

Sides - LINES

- **Minimum** - five lines
- **Maximum** - page and a half

- Choose **three to four lines** from four or five different "types" of gameplay dialogue, if applicable.
  - Be specific about how they should read.
  - If the reads for each type should be basically similar, note that on the sides. Actors are taught to provide variety in their reads to showcase their range.

- Provide pronunciations of unfamiliar words and proper nouns.

Sides – confidential information

- The auditioning actors must be allowed to know:
  - The game franchise, if part of a franchise
  - The character, if it is a recurring character
  - The source material, if it is licensed product.
- The actor needs to be able to research the style of the game, the dialogue, and the acting.

Sides - PROCESSING

- Include details about any processing or pitch-shifting that is planned for the character's voice.

- If pitch-shifting is planned, note on the sides that the actor does not have to affect their pitch to a high or low extreme.

TALENT SELECTION

- CASTING DIRECTORS

- CONSENSUS:
  The Enemy of Art

- CELEBRITY TALENT

HIRE A CASTING DIRECTOR

- Familiarity with Talent and Agents

- If possible, include the casting director or director in the final selection process!

- Check with your casting director before you dismiss a great talent because of an issue that can be resolved by your director.
  - Brilliant actors often misinterpret context, character motivations, etc.

- Casting directors' selections are the most risk-free. They will always steer you towards proven, reliable talent.
  - If you choose an untried actor, you are risking having to replace your actor later.

BONUS ROUND!

Auditions are the WORST method of finding talent.

Except for all the others.

CONSENSUS CAN KILL

- Everyone has different tastes, and there's no arguing taste.

- Strong performances are often polarizing – people love them or hate them.

- In reaching for an actor or performance who is NOT polarizing, you are walking away from that which incites and inspires, and walking towards communal ambivalence.

CELEBRITY TALENT

- The most risky choice you can make in casting.

- Film actors act with the eyes, not the voice.

- Celebrities can afford to be difficult.

- Hire a celebrity only if you're sure they will sell more units.

- Ability is not directly proportional to notoriety.

- Seek out actors with game and/or animation experience: Michael Clarke Duncan, Clancy Brown, Mila Kunis, Keith David, etc.

GOING IN PREPARED

- **VOICE DIRECTORS**

- **PERFORMANCE SCRIPTS**

- **SUPPORTING THE TEAM**

HIRE A VOICE DIRECTOR

- "How hard could it be?"

- Your director is an indispensable *translator* and *buffer* between you and the talent.

PREPARING SCRIPTS

- GOALS

    - CLARITY

    - EFFICIENCY

RETAKES

- Every additional take costs time and money.

- Inadequate context clues + misused/misplaced punctuation = 50% more recording time + 50% higher costs

- Always provide context.

- PUNCTUATION - Incorrect, vague, or missing punctuation leads to misread lines and more takes.

PREPARING SCRIPTS

- Provide pronunciations for foreign words and Proper Nouns.

- Separate scripts by character.

- Use a 12 to 14 point font.

- Direct with action verbs.

THE SESSION

- Know what you want . . . in a *general* way.

- *Be flexible.*

- *Let go of how you hear the line in your head.*

- *Perfectionism is another Enemy of Art.*
  - *There are reads that **work**, and reads that **don't work**. Everything else is nitpicking.*

KICKING A DEAD HORSE

- There is a law of diminishing returns when it comes to retakes.

- In general, the best reads are in the first three takes.

- After take nine or so, the reads start getting progressively worse.

- Pick one that **works** and move on.

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