

Spot the Difference: AAA Vs. Indie VO Production

Introducing the Session (5mins)

CSURICS: Hello, and welcome to: “Spot the Difference: AAA vs. Indie VO Production”. If you were looking for “How to Program Your Face Off” you are really in the wrong room. Throughout this session we’ll be taking a good hard look at the techniques and methods employed by two game developers at the extreme opposite ends of the budgetary food chain; both with a drive to achieve VO goodness for their respective games.

Session Review PSA

But, before we begin I have a quick PSA for you

Session evaluations at GDC this year are being done electronically. The ever vigilant CA’s have scanned your badge and an email will be sent to the address you registered with near the end of the session. Please take any notes you would have normally scribbled on the page during the session and transfer them to the reply you send with the evaluation. I know it makes it slightly harder to circle all the 5’s and tell us how great we are, but we love hearing your feedback and it really helps to shape the talks.

With that said, on to the session.

Overview

Here is a quick overview of our session’s format. We will be going through each of the major beats of the process of game dialogue development and using our personal experiences to delve in to the similarities and differences between the scrappy cash strapped indie developer and the resource heavy mega studio.

Introductions (5mins)

Michael

CSURICS: So for those of you I have yet to meet I’m Michael Csurics. I am the Dialogue Lead at 2K Marin where we are currently working on XCOM and most recently we shipped Bioshock2. I’ll be representing the AAA blockbuster side of the discussion and showing you all what we can accomplish in voice with our seemingly limitless resources; after we’ve had it all converted it all to gold bullion and swum a few laps in the vault that is.

Before working at 2K I was mostly running Brand X Audio, my audio production company. I’ve been working in audiobooks, theater, music, film, and video games for over ten years now. Throughout it all I have always been happiest working on vocal performances and I am very dedicated to pushing the envelope with voice in video games. When I’m not changing the world through game voice development I’m usually hanging with my super awesome family. Outside of that I’m a huge organization and GTD

nerd. Yes, that is actually a draw in my kitchen. I assure you all others look very similar. With my spare time I write music, cook, and restore old trucks and motorcycles. Right now my pet projects include a '76 Scout II and a '77 Honda CBR 550.

Dave

GILBERT: So, hi. I represent the indies. It feels weird to be here, since I'm sure all of you have more audio experience than I did when I first started out. And by "more experience" I mean "any experience at all." But despite not knowing anything or having any budget whatsoever, I've managed to write, direct, and record VO for eight adventure games during the last five years. And over the course of the next hour, I'll tell you how I did it. A word of warning! My methods may shock you. When I first met Michael here and told him how I did things, I thought he was going to have a coronary on the spot. So, anyone with a heart condition should probably leave now.

GILBERT: I'm Dave Gilbert, and I run a studio in New York called Wadjet Eye Games. We are a tiny company – made up of my wife and me - and as you can probably see by these screenshots, our games don't have the highest budgets. Our first game, The Shivah, had a modest budget of zero. Our most recent game, Blackwell Deception, cost a whopping \$6000 to produce. All our games are old-school point and click adventures, in the style of early Sierra and Lucas-Arts. And though the style might differ from game-to-game, they all have voice acting in common.

GILBERT: Well, now that you know who we are, let's get started!

PreProduction (15mins)

Writing(5mins)

CSURICS: But, where to start? The beginning!

Before there can be voice, there must be words.

At 2K our games are as huge as they are complex. Chew on this; the average play-through time of a modern story driven console title is roughly comparable to an entire season of a 1 hour TV drama. That's a lot of narrative content and that's just barely scratching the surface of a modern game script. On average, for us, the main storyline makes up about 10% of the entirety of the script. The majority is taken up by systemic AI barks, environmental storytelling, and diegetic material. To get this Sisyphean task accomplished over at 2K we've started to borrow from the TV model with a fully staffed writing pool and a support team who answers to the lead writer and are responsible for churning out the thousands of pages that make up our game script.

GILBERT: I always start pre-production using the most technically advanced tools – a marble notebook and a pen. Sometimes two pens, if I'm feeling paranoid. For several weeks I do nothing but write crap down, and eventually something forms. From there I cobble together a design document, and once I know how the game is flowing I start working on the script. Once I have the basic dialog written, I begin

creating the game. It's not until the game is almost complete – and the dialog set in stone – that I generate the VO script and bring the actors in.

Casting(5mins)

GILBERT: And speaking of actors, we move to our next topic: casting!

GILBERT: Living in New York, I'm luckier than most. There are tons of actors around and it's just a matter of finding them. It took a while - and sometimes I lived the producer cliché of going up to someone at a party and saying "I love your voice! Here's my card!" - but over the years I have created a nice pool of actors that I can rely on. Some of them are professional actors, while some just have really nice voices. Here is Abe Goldfarb and Rebecca Whittaker – the two stars of the Blackwell series. He's been acting since he was a kid, and she's a dancer who occasionally does VO for children's books. But they share one common thing – they are both big geeks and have a real enthusiasm for the work. I can't stress that enough. Since I can't pay them very much – in the early days, my "payment" consisted of buying them pizza after recording – I can only work with actors who really love these kinds of games, who think it's really cool to be doing it, and are always eager to work with me. Nowadays, I pay an actor \$50 for a two hour session. This helps me get more actors than pizza used to, but I'd never give an important or leading role to an actor who didn't show that level of enthusiasm.

CSURICS: So, on the flip side, our casting process is long, involved, and comes in multiple stages. We start by generating casting sides. These are developed in collaboration between the narrative and dialogue departments. We create a casting side for each of the leads, for major supporting characters, and for any characters with special requirements such as an accent or other distinctive voice characteristic. Throughout a project sides go out for an average of forty or so characters, or about 20% of our entire cast.

Once the sides are approved we reach out to the major talent agencies and wait for the auditions to come pouring in. Depending on the role we may also identify and reach out directly to any celebrity talent we may desire, which is its own ball of wax. Once the auditions are in one of the junior dialogue team members prepares the mess of files to a by-character folder structure with a rigid naming convention. On average we get around 400 auditions per role so organization is kind of paramount. We then go through and do a wide pass with about 10-20 candidates per role and then a final pass with one top select and two or three backups.

Session Prep(5mins)

CSURICS: So, once we've finalized casting and have scripts in hand we start to prep for our recording sessions.

We can usually tell a few months out when we'll need studio time, so we'll have already reserved holds for the time we'll need. First our script supervisor ingests all of our writer's scripts in to our proprietary database, which is integrated with our game engine, audio middleware, loc tools, faceFX, and a slew of

other tech. Once this is completed our audio implementer then goes through that database and marks up all the metadata attached to each line required to drive all these systems.

While all that is going on I go through and generate metrics from the database to weigh the scripts. Using those numbers I can estimate our studio time requirements for each actor. Once I've got all the estimates calculated out we work with the agencies to schedule all the actor's times in the studio.

The Script Supervisor bundles up the scripts by character and creates a folder for each session containing the scripts, any relevant playback or audition files, contract paperwork, and the character sides for that actor. For most sessions we send the scripts out to the talent a few days ahead of time so they can come prepared and with any questions they may have. Once all this in place we are finally ready to rock in the studio.

GILBERT: Since I record out of my one room studio apartment, prepping for me usually involves housework! I have to make sure the place at least looks decent. Any devices that make noise are turned off. Recording on hot summer days can be brutal, since I have to turn off the air conditioner. On days like that, I run the A/C at full blast for at least a half hour before the session so the room is nice and cool before we have to shut it off. But even still, after two hours of recording we are both sweating buckets by the time we are finished. So I have learned that recording during the winter is preferable!

I have also learned to keep a bag of dog treats on standby. I did not take being a dog owner into consideration when I started this gig. There's nothing quite like having to redo a take because the dog is jumping on the actor's legs and trying to lick their face.

Recording (10mins)

GILBERT: As for the recording itself, my methods have changed over the years but my tech has changed very little.

The Studio Tech(5mins)

GILBERT: Back in the dark ages of 2006, I made my first game and decided to include voice acting. So I downloaded a copy of Audacity and bought a \$20 headset microphone from Radio Shack. I knew nothing about VO production, so I just plopped the headset mic on the actors' heads, gave them the scripts, and told him to go to it. Here are some typical results. *[play clip from Gemini Rue]*. Honestly? I don't have the most well-trained ear, but I think it sounds fine! If you read reviews of the game, they often praise the voice acting. Nobody ever seemed to notice or care that it wasn't recorded in a professional studio, except for professional audio guys like Michael here who bugged me to upgrade every chance he could. So last year, at his insistence, I bit the bullet and bought a \$200 Blue Yeti USB microphone. I used it for my last game, and here are the results *[Play clip from Blackwell Deception]*. The difference is subtle, but it's definitely there. Again, I don't have an ear for this kind of thing, but I definitely noticed that the actors felt a lot more comfortable with this mic than the headset, and the performances improved a lot as a result.

CSURICS: Gods, I think I just died a little on the inside there.

So, on our end, before every block of sessions I prepare a work order/session flow doc outlining technical requirements, session flow outlines, set up requirements, and post-session expectations. This gets sent to the engineers, assistants, and operations departments at the studio. With all this squared away ahead of time, when I walk in I know I can expect the PT sessions to be named exactly the way I want, the rooms to have the mics I want depending on what we need to do that day, and the pres are consistent across studios. For all this top shelf recording equipment and services, we do pay a lot o' money. Why do we do it? Because our 10,000 plus voice assets need to have a consistently neutral quality standard or else we could end up jarring the player out of immersion with not-so subtle psychoacoustic indicators like mismatched room tone or inconsistent microphone coloration.

The Process(5mins)

CSURICS: OK, enough on the obvious differences in what money can buy, how, if at all does working off of a large or small budget affect the actual performances given by talent?

Well, when I was working in music one of the most important lessons I learned is that it's all about the environment. If the performing talent feels comfortable they feel free to engage with the material and experiment. Experimentation is where that artsy voodoo mojo magic comes from and our jobs are, in essence, to bottle that magic up and sell it like crack cocaine. To that end the most paramount function I serve as a director is to make the talent comfortable. I find that one of the easiest ways to do that is by giving them a familiar space to play in and in having a support team that I know and trust. Knowing that some of the best guys and gals in the industry are handling the technical end of the session allows me to fully engage with the talent building a creative relationship that forms foundation for that comfort.

GILBERT: I am a very good position to direct the talent, since I'm the one who wrote their lines in the first place. Recording the VO is my absolute favorite part of the process. It's the first time a character feel truly alive and defined. But as I've done more games and more VO work, I've begun to rely more and more on the talent. If the talent winces or cringes after saying a line, I always ask them why. If they have immersed themselves in a character long enough, they will often have a better sense of what a character will say or do better than me! I've learned to trust and encourage these instincts, and the results are always better for it.

Post-Production (10mins)

Editorial(5mins)

CSURICS: Immediately following the session the assets are uploaded to an FTP were our editorial team begins attacking it. The editing lead is someone I've spent years developing a relationship with and who knows exactly how we like dialogue cut; tight, microscope clean, with natural breaths and peak normalized -.03. When the editor is finished it goes through a QC pass and is transferred via ftp back to us.

Gilbert: The indie's best friend is Audacity, and I use it exclusively. It's free, and pretty easy to learn. When I edit, I have two windows open. One containing the original raw footage and another for a roughcut pass. I listen to each take, and if I like it I copy and paste it into the roughcut file. If I find a take I like better, I remove the previous take from the roughcut file and shove the new one in. By the time I'm finished, I have an audio file full of the takes that I liked.

If you play one of my early games, you would hear the audio levels constantly changing and lots of breath pops. But now? I've gotten the hang of keeping things consistent. I go through each take, master the sound level, and remove or minimize breath pops where I can.

Implementation (5mins)

CSURICS: Once the editorial crew uploads the material to the ftp I give it another QC pass and our implementer back at the office can grab the audio and get to work dumping it in the game. Most of the time we'll already have gone through a scratch or dummy recording round and implemented those placeholder files so we can just pop a 1:1 swap for those files in p4 and our automated build machine will pack the assets on its next cycle. Through years of compulsive pipeline and workflow assessment and iteration I've gotten our turnaround time from the actor's mouth to distributed in-game playback to around 24hrs on a good day with no solar flares birdstrikes.

GILBERT: For the games I make, the sound files have to be set up in a very specific way. I highlight the audio I want to export and save it to an .ogg and give it a number. Then I go into the game's code and attach the number to the line within the script. Then I compile, and I'm done!

Summary (5mins)

GILBERT: I guess if I was to sum up my last five years being an indie dev, it's that you shouldn't let a little thing like "budget" stand in your way. There are lots of cheap or even free tools out there. It's just a matter of finding them and learning how to use them. Being indie means doing the best you can with what you've got, and that applies to audio just as much as anything else.

CSURICS: In my very biased opinion VO is the vehicle by which our games deliver the stories we are trying to tell to our fans. Dave and I couldn't be two more disparate drivers, but at the end of the day we are both heading in the same direction.

So, two very different ways of achieving the same goals. I don't know about you, but I certainly got a little "grass is greener" from listening to Dave. Fewer hoops to jump through, more direct actor interaction, shorter dev to ship cycles. That said I love my job and I wouldn't trade my teams and tools for anything.

So, from the AAA side of things I couldn't agree more with Dave on not letting a little thing like "budget" stand in your way. My one caution – don't forget that the bucket has a bottom. Studio and talent costs add up very quickly. Be confident with the material you bring to the studio and take the time to think

about what you want to get out of the process. This is a massive lesson we can carry with us from the indie side of things. Your team and your publisher will thank you dearly.

Q&A (10mins)

CSURICS: That's it for us; we're going to open the floor up for the most important part of any session: Q and A! Don't forget to fill out your session reviews and say thank you to the CA's for doing an awesome job again, as every year.