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Giving Voice to Video Games

By **TIM GNATEK**

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"I'm watching you, Mary," I whispered mysteriously into the telephone. "I'm watching you right now in the shower." I paused for effect, waiting to hear some reaction.

Finally, a voice on the other end of the line broke the silence. "Do it again, but more breath this time."

It wasn't Mary on the other end of the line, but Lazlow Jones, a co-writer and audio producer for the PlayStation 2 video game Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas, released last week. Mr. Jones, an old friend, had recruited me as a voice for the game, one of hundreds of extras who helped create the drive-through soundscape for a fictional California city - both on the streets and over 11 radio stations, including one all-talk channel, which players can tune to while driving around.

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My role, as a psychotic talk-show caller, seemed straightforward. But struggling through a dozen takes to perfect that one line one day in early August impressed upon me the high expectations levied on today's video game voice actors.



Stephanie Diani for The New York Times
Lani Minella, working in Los Angeles last week, has over 450 video game credits, among them the voice of Rouge the Bat in the Sega game Sonic the Hedgehog.

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The demands are greater in part because the expectations are so much higher. Audio used to be an afterthought. Now it shares center stage alongside the other elements of video games, a \$23 billion-a-year industry.

Bringing on amateurs to read a few lines for a game, something once common in video games, is a quaint, nostalgic act in today's industry. Once, even in the Grand Theft Auto series, game makers relied on amateurs for filling voice roles. "We found our voices in nearby pubs," said David Jones, who created the first Grand Theft Auto, in 1997 in Scotland while working for DMA Design Ltd. "They were local, they were cheap, and it gave an underground feel to the game."

Today, as games have taken on a slicker, more cinematic feel, companies are more frequently turning to cartoon actors, movie trailer announcers and even film stars, with agents in tow. The San Andreas lineup, for example, includes the actors Frank Vincent and Samuel L. Jackson.

"We need audio to carry a lot of the weight because we are trying to convince people this is a huge and vibrant world," said the game's creative director, Dan Houser. "San Andreas has something like 600 different speaking parts, well over 10 hours of radio content and nearly 100,000 voice samples."

Game voices have certainly come a long way since their first utterances in 1980, when the Intellivision classic Major League Baseball first spoke a few synthesized umpire calls and when Berzerk warned, "Intruder alert!" in the arcades.

"Back then it was a novelty," said Tom Sloper, a veteran game producer.

In 1982 Mr. Sloper decided to join in by adding voice to Spike, a Vectrex console game in which a star-faced hero must rescue his girlfriend, Molly. "I decided that it would be fun for Molly to say: 'Eek! Help, Spike!'" Mr. Sloper recalled. As many developers did back then, Mr. Sloper found inspiration nearby. "I think we got someone from the office to speak in the microphone," he said.

Games became increasingly reliant on voices with the rise of CD-ROM and, later, DVD consoles, which could handle many more sampled audio files and deliver real voices rather than computerized emulations.

Thanks to improved technology, voices went from peppering play to appearing in more developed and cinematically cut scenes between levels to the point where characters now weave a spoken narrative throughout the game that is integral to play. In [Sony's](#) 1997 hit PaRappa the

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Rouge the Bat in the Sega game Sonic the Hedgehog.



Stephanie Diani/For the Times
THE OTHER YODA - Tom Kane can mimic the voices of many actors from the "Star Wars" films; he has been an affordable voice alternative for LucasArts games. "I get emotional satisfaction because I'm caring for Yoda's voice," he said.

Rapper, for example, following an animated dog's rap became the very basis of the game.

"People have known voice is cool for a long time, but it's only just become central," said Bob Swartz, a 17-year industry veteran and president of Mastiff Games. "Within the last five years, production standards have gotten better, and people's expectations have gotten bigger."

Hollywood production values have pushed some game companies, like LucasArts, to dedicate an entire department to game speech. "When LucasArts was just starting, we used programmers around the office," Darragh O'Farrell, the company's voice manager, said. "Now, everyone is using professionals. It's expected by the consumer."

Mr. O'Farrell's latest project, the "Star Wars" adventure game Knights of the Old Republic II, the Sith Lords, uses British actors, including former members of the Royal Shakespeare Company, to act out some 15,000 lines of dialogue.

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What sets these professionals apart from amateur walk-ons, and even their colleagues in television, radio and film, is an ability to deliver just the right voice for every type of game, from the cartoonish to the complex, with perfect accent and delivery.

"There's a unique skill," Mr. O'Farrell said. "In a game, it's nonlinear and far more complicated and dramatic. Oftentimes, parts of the script will branch, and the performance has to finish off on a tone that ends on a positive or negative."

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Even grunts and groans are carefully directed. "When you're dealing with the enemy, you're hearing them die a lot," Mr. O'Farrell said. "You don't want a goofy sound heard 500 times an hour."

Thanks to advances in the quality of animation and graphics, which can now render visually detailed game scenes, voice actors are increasingly forced to articulate action-specific sounds.



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Lani Minella, a 12-year video game voiceover veteran with over 450 game credits, said, "Nowhere else do you have to differentiate between being killed with a bullet or a rocket launcher."

Known as one of the most diverse voice talents in games, Ms. Minella's hundreds of roles have included Rouge the Bat in the [Sega](#) game Sonic the Hedgehog, Wirt the Peg-Legged Boy and Adria the Witch in the gothic Blizzard adventure game Diablo. She is considered something of a star even today. Girls send her fan mail for her role as Nancy Drew in the Her Interactive adventure series. "I always respond," she said.

Ms. Minella said her talents are not taught in most voice classes. "No one will teach you how to do an emotive," she said. "If I'm going to be hit, I put my fist in my stomach." She then demonstrated. "It's 'hu-UNH.'" Part hiccup, part gasp and sharply punctuated, the sound was immediately recognizable, yet I found it surprisingly inimitable.

What makes the process even more challenging is that the recording sessions take place over long hours in close quarters. "Some studios turn off the air-conditioning to kill any extra noise, so we're stuck in a closet dealing with oxygen deprivation," she said. "You never get to go to the bathroom. There's never time to warm up your vocal cords, and it's hard to find people willing to do the gut-busting monster stuff."

For their efforts, the actors make from \$150 an hour to \$1,500 a day, she said, but most are paid only for microphone time and have no guarantee of future work once a game is completed.

To increase her marketability, Ms. Minella formed AudioGodz, a company offering directing, writing and casting for the industry.

In finding talent for game companies, Ms. Minella has seen a progression toward a Hollywood way of handling voice, most notably in the trend to use music, sports and movie celebrities as game voices.

Ms. Minella debated whether a star cast alone ever led to an increase in game sales. She prefers to cast by voice ability rather than by fame. "A good movie actor is not necessarily a good video game voice," she said. "They might just be good for marketing."

Professional voices bring another Hollywood dimension to the game industry: unions. Many of the actors, culled from elsewhere in the entertainment industry, are members of the Screen Actors Guild or the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, which have strict rules for

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actors' treatment and pay. Studios looking for voiceover pros must often become SAG or Aftra signatories to secure professional talents, obliging them to use union talent exclusively for that project. Going union is a general assurance of quality, but it can be costly and controlling.

To save on the costs associated with using star talent, studios will often look for lesser-known actors who are talented in mimicry and in enunciating with emotion, even for film-inspired characters that almost cry out for the familiar voices of the stars who played them in the movie.

Tom Kane, a 42-year-old SAG member and game-voice actor, has been one such affordable voice alternative for LucasArts for the last dozen years. Among many roles for the company, Mr. Kane has become known for his ability to imitate the voices of many actors who appeared in the "Star Wars" films and for his dead-on impersonations of C-3PO and Yoda, who were played by Anthony Daniels and Frank Oz.

"You can't make a living just doing games," Mr. Kane said, explaining that most of his pay came from voice roles in movie trailers and television commercials. "No one works on this to get rich."

Mr. Kane said his work in games is a side job done for love rather than money.

"These characters matter to us," he said. "I get emotional satisfaction because I'm caring for Yoda's voice."

Ms. Minella also prefers to seek out less costly vocal actors. "Price, and or performance, is often why we do sound-alikes for famous characters," she said.

At the moment, she tuned her ears to me.

She said that even I could get a start in the business right from my home, with nothing more than a sound-editing program, a preamplifier, a microphone and a high-speed Internet connection to send the sounds to a studio.

Feeling lucky, I allowed her to lead me in an audition.

Ms. Minella persuaded me to try a voice for a new game she was casting based on the novels of H. P. Lovecraft and set in Boston. It was deceptively easy to slip into character using my native New England accent.

Just as I began to get comfortable, however, she asked me to try a Southern accent. I mumbled a few made-up lines, an Appalachian abomination inspired by "The Dukes of Hazzard."

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"Can you do a Houston accent?" she said. "Clip your words. Think military."

After several false starts, I tried but could not escape a deep Southern drawl. Frustrated, I admitted failure.

While game voices may grow in prominence, mine will not be one of them. There are some things better left to professionals.

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