

Vocal Health and Acting in Video Games

FORWARD:

“We had many anecdotal reports from voiceover performers describing both short-term and/or long-term damage to their vocal cords, due to the intensity of the vocal demands put on them in a recording session,” says ACTRA Toronto President David Gale. “We began this survey to better understand the vocal health needs of ACTRA Toronto voice actors who are concerned about their vocal health and safety.”

ACTRA Toronto undertook this survey to address the lack of quantitative data on the subject of vocal health in video game acting. There have been a number of high-profile articles on the experiences of voice actors in video games leading the SAG-AFTRA strike of 2016/2017. While there has been anecdotal evidence that actors encounter vocal fatigue, injury or recovery challenges, this survey provides a larger pool and direct feedback from the actors themselves on their experiences in this area.

The survey results reveal that care of the actor’s voice and vocal health is a concern for ACTRA members.



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The health and safety of ACTRA performers is a high priority and ACTRA will convene a working group to assess how this new information can be used to protect our members and improve the quality of voice over and video game work in Canada.

Background:

Acting for video games is easily the most vocally challenging and potentially vocally dangerous work an actor can take on. Actors are asked to “Bark” or yell aggressively, 100 dialogue lines an hour, or voice “ONOS” (pained reactions) for up to two hours. These include “...shouting, yelling, howling, screaming, screeching, bellowing, wailing, roaring, battle cries, maniacal laughter; or projecting as if over loud ambient noises such as gunfire...” — Joanna Cazden, *Screaming for Attention: The Vocal Demands of Actors in Violent Interactive Games*:

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvoice.2016.02.001>

Most actors who take on this kind of work are somewhat aware of the hazards due to the SAG-AFTRA strike from 2016/17 which received some notice in the press.

PRESS

Washington Post

https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/in-24-billion-video-game-industry-voice-actors-dont-make-enough-to-live-on/2017/10/27/944a0800-98d8-11e7-87fc-c3f7ee4035c9_story.html

LA Times

<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/envelope/cotown/la-et-ct-sag-aftra-video-games-investigation-20160607-snap-story.html>

The loss of income or livelihood from a vocal injury is a real possibility in aggressive/projected voice work or “vocal stunt work”. The growth of the video game industry offers new avenues of employment for ACTRA’s performers. Given the need for vocal violence in this medium, it is safe to assume that the demands on voice actors will only increase as well and potentially lead to an increase of injury. The video game industry is not unaware of these challenges, and we expect that they will be open to discussing best practices for injury prevention.

METHODOLOGY

The digital survey was sent out, in June of 2021, only to ACTRA members who had acted in video games. It polled 610 members of which 264 responded over a two-week time period. The survey was anonymous to protect the participants.

Members were asked a total of 8 questions regarding their experience in video game sessions and their ability to recover, audition, and take on other work after a video game session.

KEY FINDINGS

Vocal extremes are prevalent in video game voice acting.

Almost 3 out of 4 actors (74.32%) said that their sessions included loud/projected, aggressive, or vocally extreme work, very often or almost always.

Many actors experience fatigue during the session.

Almost 4 out of 10 actors (38.13%) experience vocal fatigue or stress during the voiceover session, very often or almost always.

Actors need time to recover after a session.

About 1 in 5 actors (19.14%) reported finding it hard to recover to their normal vocal quality after a videogame voice-over session, very often or almost always.

It can take two days or more for an actor to recover.

More than 4 in 10 actors (42.74%) said that it took 2 or more days for their vocal quality to return to "normal" after a vocally extreme voice-over session.

Actors are aware of the risks and seem to be taking on the work anyway.

More than 1 in 4 actors (27.68%) have thought about turning down a session for fear of the impact it would have on their voice, or work it would cause them to lose.

(See the Key Findings illustration on page 4)

KEY FINDINGS

**74%
SAY**

VOCAL EXTREMES ARE PREVALENT IN VIDEO GAME VOICE ACTING

Almost 3 out of 4 of actors (74.32%) said that their sessions included loud/projected, aggressive, or vocally extreme work, very often or almost always.



**38%
SAY**



MANY ACTORS EXPERIENCE FATIGUE DURING THE SESSION

Almost 4 out of 10 actors (38.13%) experience vocal fatigue or stress during the voiceover session, very often or almost always.

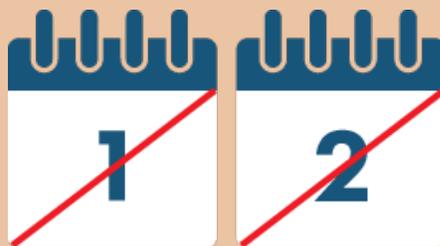
**19%
SAY**

ACTORS NEED TIME TO RECOVER AFTER A SESSION

About 1 in 5 actors (19.14%) reported finding it hard to recover to their normal vocal quality after a video game voice-over session, very often or almost always.



**42%
SAY**



RECOVERY CAN TAKE TWO OR MORE DAYS

More than 4 in 10 actors (42.74%) said that it took 2 or more days for vocal quality to return to "normal".

**27%
SAY**

ACTORS ARE AWARE OF THE RISKS AND SEEM TO BE TAKING ON THE WORK ANYWAY

More than 1 in 4 actors (27.68%) have thought about turning down a session for fear of the impact it would have on your voice, or work it would cause them to lose.



SURVEY FINDINGS

Actors' responses echo the quantitative findings that the work can be vocally hazardous.

Repeating shouts or calls or barks is extremely common and almost always inevitably taxing on the actor's vocal folds/ voice/ instrument.

Often the barks and onos section of a video game record is incredibly strenuous and can be very damaging on the vocal chords.

Actors propose a number of ways to improve the industry and increase best practices.

■ Breaks for actors during sessions are important:

Taking breaks is essential.

I communicate more effectively now if I need breaks.

■ Hire a vocal stunt coach for actors:

Preventative support for vocal training sessions would do a world of good to the general health and preventative maintenance of an actor's voice.

I would like there to be training, akin to dialect coaching, but for video games.

When there has been a vocal coach in the actual recording session, it has made a world of difference.

■ Sessions should be limited to two hours:

If a session is two hours or more, vocally stressful material should only take a portion of that time and the demands on the performer's voice should be factored into the rate.

■ Spread out sessions:

Maybe video game projects should stress the fact that they will require harsh vocal use, and it should be spread out over multiple sessions to lessen potential damage

... taxing voice gigs are always something that require careful consideration and pacing in the schedule.

■ VO Directors Training:

Voice directors should have some training in how to care for the actors' voices and be aware of injury prevention practices.

A battle game I worked on, they were very good about giving long water and rest breaks, but the director just considered it a given that my voice would be destroyed. Everyone's apparently always were. The only direction was louder louder, more more, more growly... if I'd had another gig/audition the next day I'd have been screwed.

A good director will wait till the end of the session and really try and limit the amount you project - but that depends on that particular director. This is something that definitely needs to be part of the session.

Certain game (developers) are more respectful than others on this topic.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given these key findings ACTRA recommends the following:

- **Provide at least a 10-minute break for each hour of vocal stunt work.**
- **Do not book sessions less than 48 hours apart from one another.**
- **Engage a voice coach to prepare actors who have not acted in a video game session requiring vocal stunt work.**
- **Encourage proper vocal health training for voice directors engaged in this kind of work.**

CONCLUSION

ACTRA is proud of the members and their commitment to high quality performances. Performers are precarious workers, who have limited ways of protecting themselves on the job independently. Many in the ACTRA membership fear reprisal for letting an employer know if a voice session is becoming vocally stressful. With information gained from this study, ACTRA can ensure better protections and proactive safeguards are in place before any vocal health and safety is compromised.

CONTACT INFORMATION

For more information regarding this study please contact: Karl Pruner, Director of Communications – info@actratoronto.com

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the performers who engaged in this study, providing valuable information on the state of voiceover in video games.