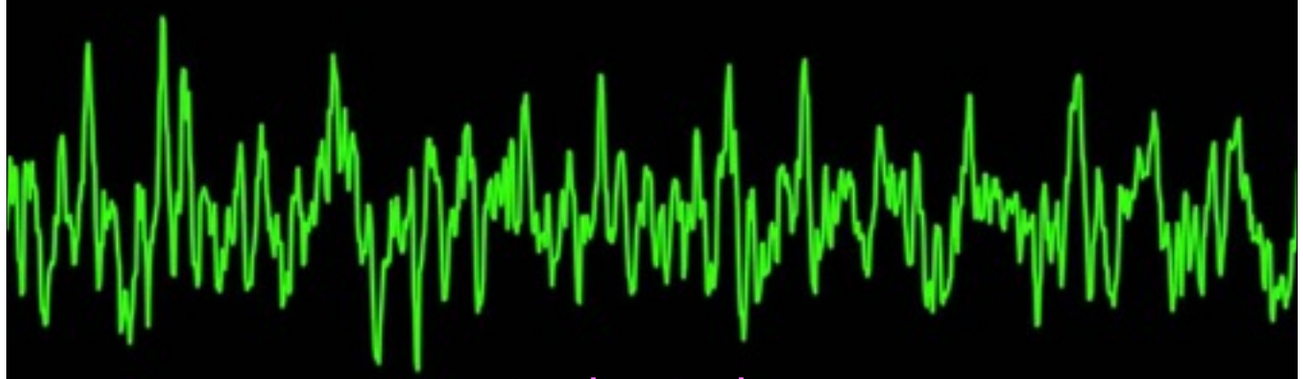
Getting the best bang for your voice-over buck



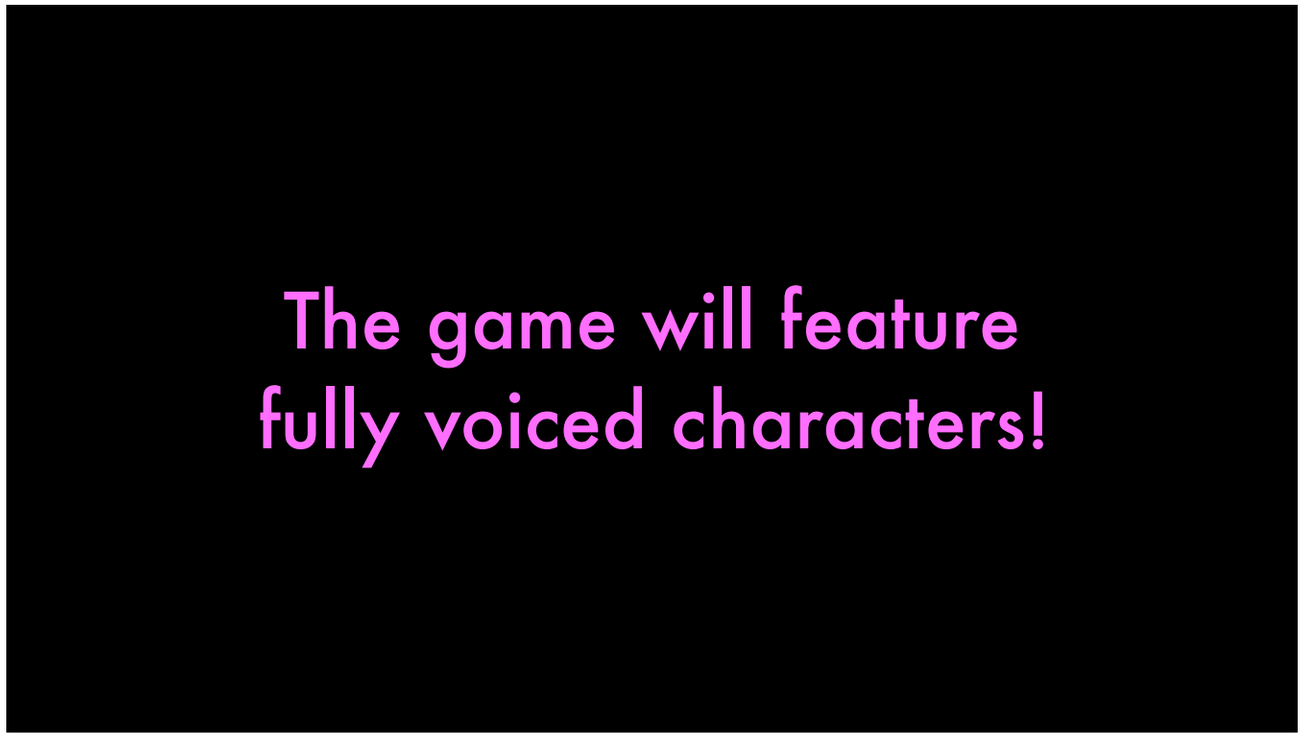
Stephen Barlow
@barlow_vo
Voice actor/Writer/Director, Kelvin and the Infamous Machine

Me

- My name is Stephen Barlow, and I do freelance creative writing and voice-over work here in the Bay Area
- Last year I wrote, cast, directed, and provided my voice for a game called Kelvin and the Infamous Machine, a comedic point-and-click adventure in the style of Monkey Island or Day of the Tentacle. It was developed by a small indie studio in Argentina named Blyts.
- This is my only “substantial” game credit so far! So why am I up here talking at GDC?
- Because the voice-over production for the game went remarkably well. Several voice actors spoke very highly of the audition process (especially the audition *packet*), and multiple reviews for the game highlight the voice acting as some of the best they’ve *encountered* in a game.
- So, I’m here to share what I think contributed to these delightfully positive results!
- And for those of you who attended the VO round table with Andrea Toyias yesterday, you will hear a decent amount of overlapping advice during this session. Which I think is highly preferable to *conflicting* advice, so, great!

You’re making a game.

So!



Great!

The performances shall take
their rightful place in the
pantheon of...

ACTING TALENT!

Let’s take a look at some screenshots of some games with wonderful voice-over. Notice how quickly and clearly you can hear the voices from these games. Games like…

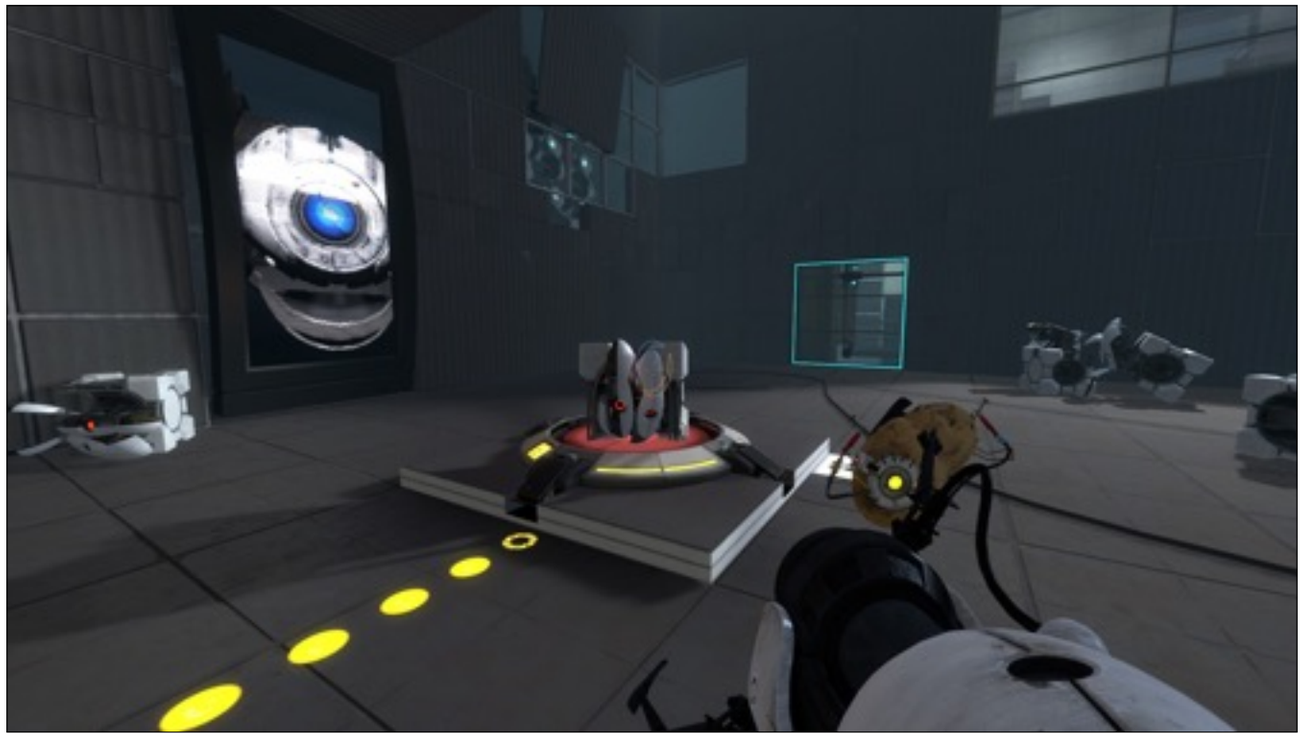
HL2

Bastion

Bioshock

Gone Home

GTA V



Portal 2

Uncharted

Walking Dead

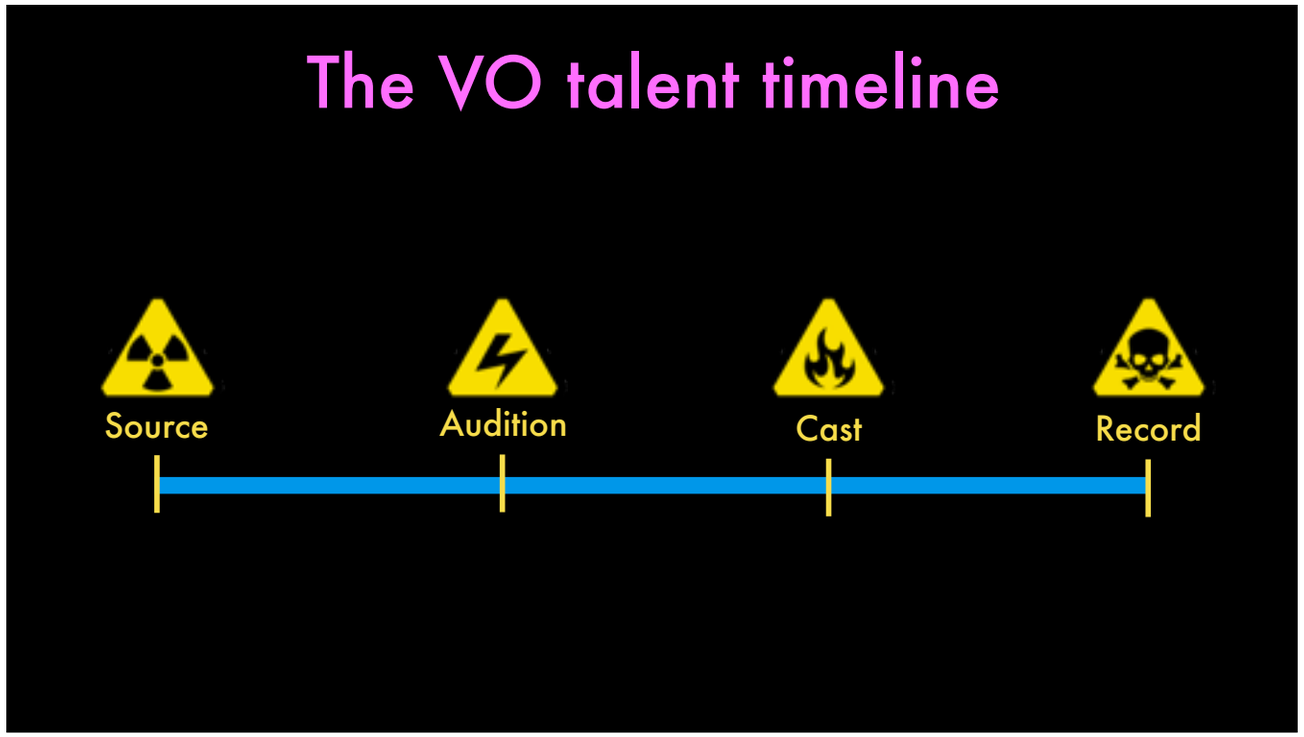
CLOSE
She's actually sick.
She's a college professor.
I'd rather not talk about it.
I'm not sure where to go from this burned forest.
SELECT REPLY

Firewatch

Pretty memorable, right? These games don’t just feature great voice-over; they’re also hard to imagine *without* that voice-over. It’s a core component of the experience.

So, with these aspirations in mind, you send out your auditions, cast your actors, book recording time, lay it all down, put it in the game, AND…

Great question. For the record, I don’t know where things went wrong in Resident Evil, but they *can* go wrong in a lot of places. And to understand what those places are, we turn to…



The timeline has 4 high-level steps: [BUILD OUT]

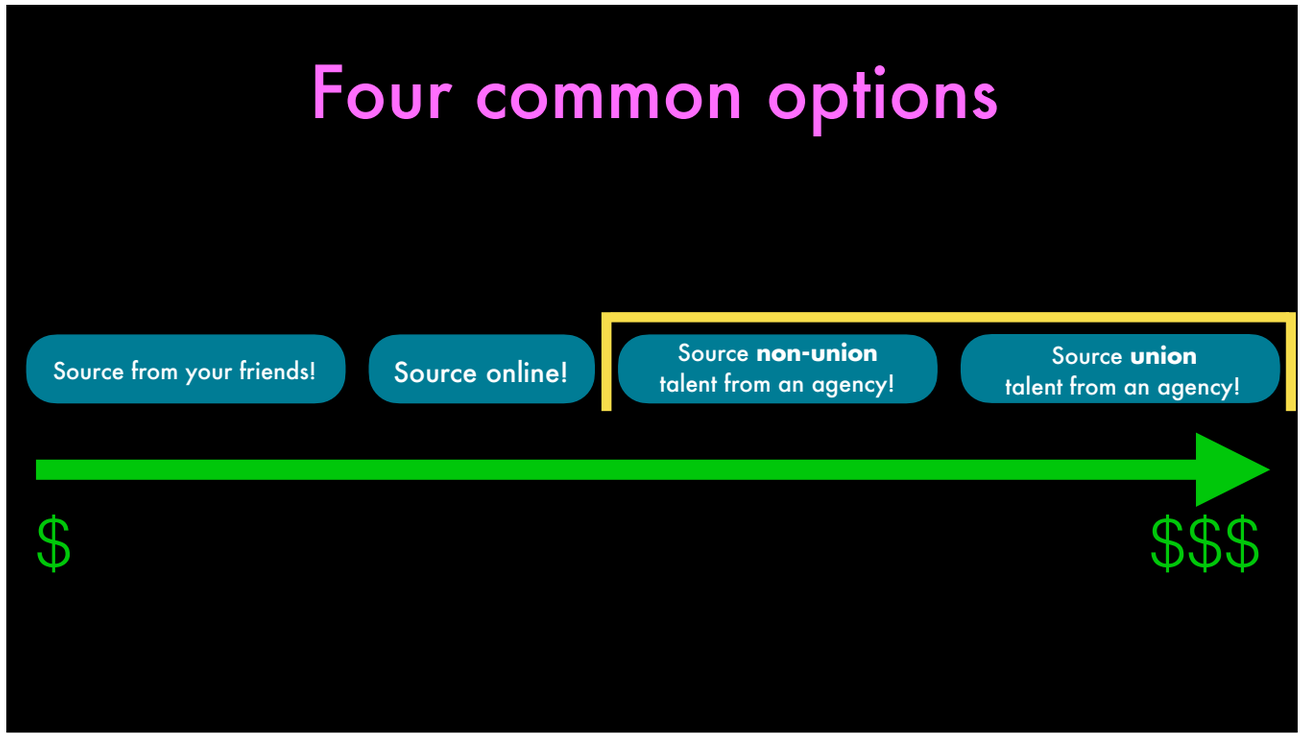
Each step in the process has its own set of hazards associated with it.

We’re going to talk about practical things you can do at each of these steps to help avoid these hazards and get your money’s worth.

Sourcing talent

Step one!

i.e., where do I look to find my voice actors?



There are four common options here: [BUILD OUT]

By the measure of simple hourly rates, the cost of these options roughly goes up from left to right. [YELLOW BOX]
(Although the price difference between union and non-union is fuzzy, and depends on the size of your project. I'll talk about that a little more later.)

None of these options is "wrong", per se. **Assuming you have friends who can act.** Yes, Logan Cunningham knew other folks at Supergiant prior to Bastion, but Supergiant wouldn't have made him the narrator in Bastion if he wasn't gonna be awesome at it.

Also, to be clear, **none of these options is free.** Pay your friends!

When you're deciding which of these sourcing options to use primarily for your project, you base it heavily on the answer to one question:

How many “significant” roles are there?

Significant as in, roles that aren’t “townsperson number 5,” who has two or three short lines.

3 or fewer significant roles

Source from your friends!

Source online!

Source **non-union** talent from an agency!

Source **union** talent from an agency!

3 or fewer significant roles

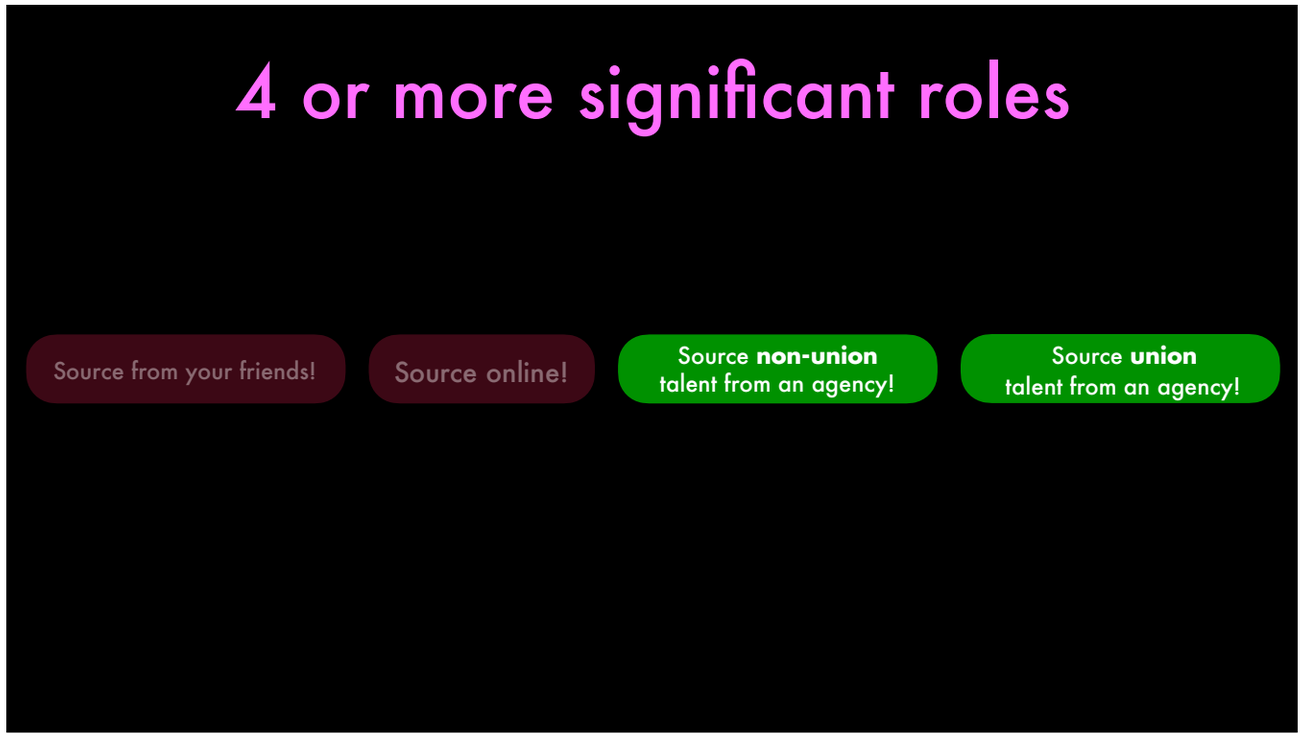
Source from your friends!

Source online!

Source **non-union** talent from an agency!

Source **union** talent from an agency!

Any of these is potentially a viable option.



So why is 3 roles the cutoff?

First of all, unless you happen to know a bunch of represented voice actors, it’s unlikely that you’re friends with more than one or two people who would be well suited to your game.

And as for sourcing online…

voices.com and voice123 are two of the largest sites for self-serve VO casting. There are plenty of talented people on these sites, many of whom are also represented by an agency. However, there are also plenty of not-so-talented people, and there isn't always much of a filter on the auditions you receive.

The primary issue with using these sites for *larger* projects, however, is logistical: The actors you want to cast could live anywhere. It's unlikely that *all* of them will have a home recording setup that's high-enough quality for your needs. Even if they *do*, it means they'll each be recording remotely, which makes standardizing your sound more challenging.

I've been playing a game lately that features great VO performances, but you can tell that different characters in the game were recorded with different hardware in different environments, and it's distracting.

Which leads us to big takeaway #1:

[Read slide]

You ensure a baseline level of quality, and you **dramatically** simplify logistics. Actors are mostly geographically close to their agency, and if they aren't, they're prepared to travel to it for a job they book. This makes booking studio time much more straightforward.

Again, with a *smaller* cast, you're more flexible. Feel free to cast from whatever source is giving you actors that suit your needs the very best. Especially because, when the cast is that small, each voice you select makes a profound difference on the overall experience.

Now…

Union or non-union actors?

Before I discuss this, we need to do a quick segue…

A word on the strike

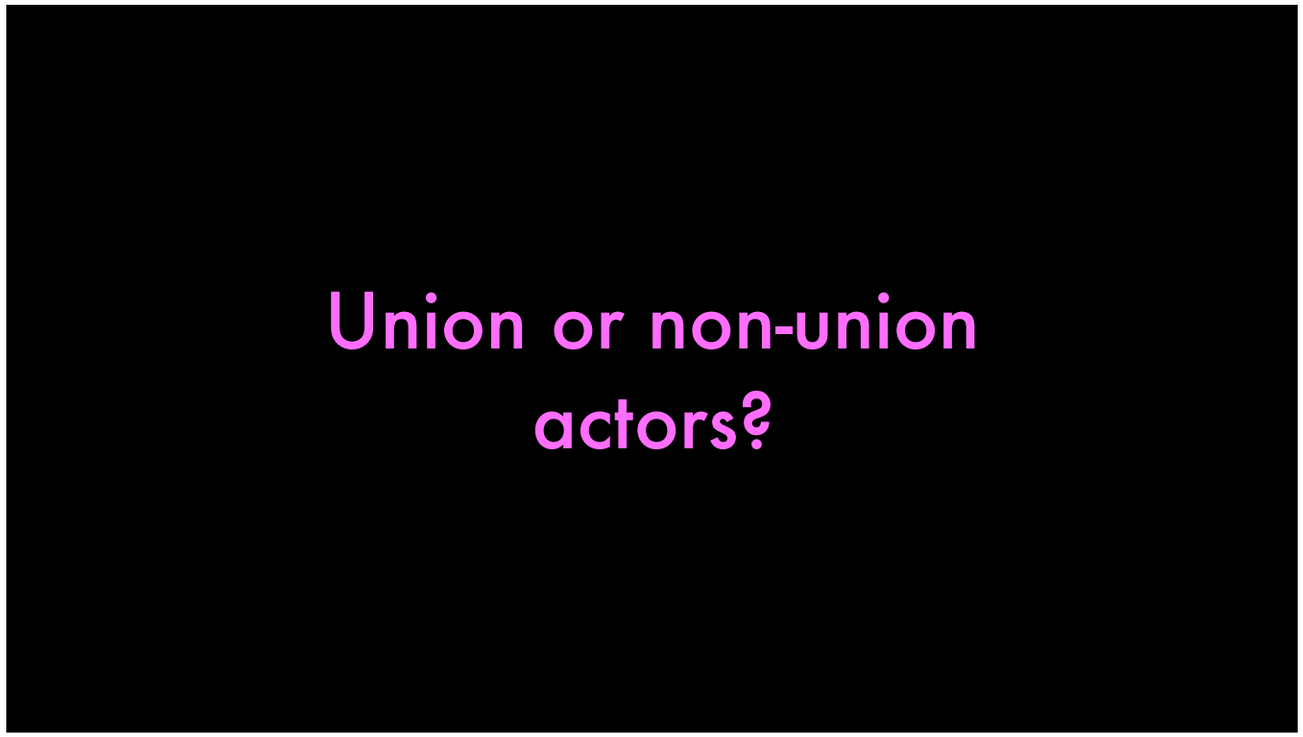
As many of you know, there is an active strike involving SAG-AFTRA and voice acting for video games.

I am not a member of SAG-AFTRA and I am not here to express an opinion about the strike. From a *practical* standpoint, here is the main thing you as developers need to know if you don't already:

The strike has a very specific scope. It only involves a certain set of companies. If you are not making a game for one of those companies, the strike does not impact your ability to cast voice talent. SAG-AFTRA would be happy to hear from you and work with you on putting together a contract that works for your project.

If you work for one of the companies that the strike *does* apply to, you probably already know, but if you're not sure, the list is available online.

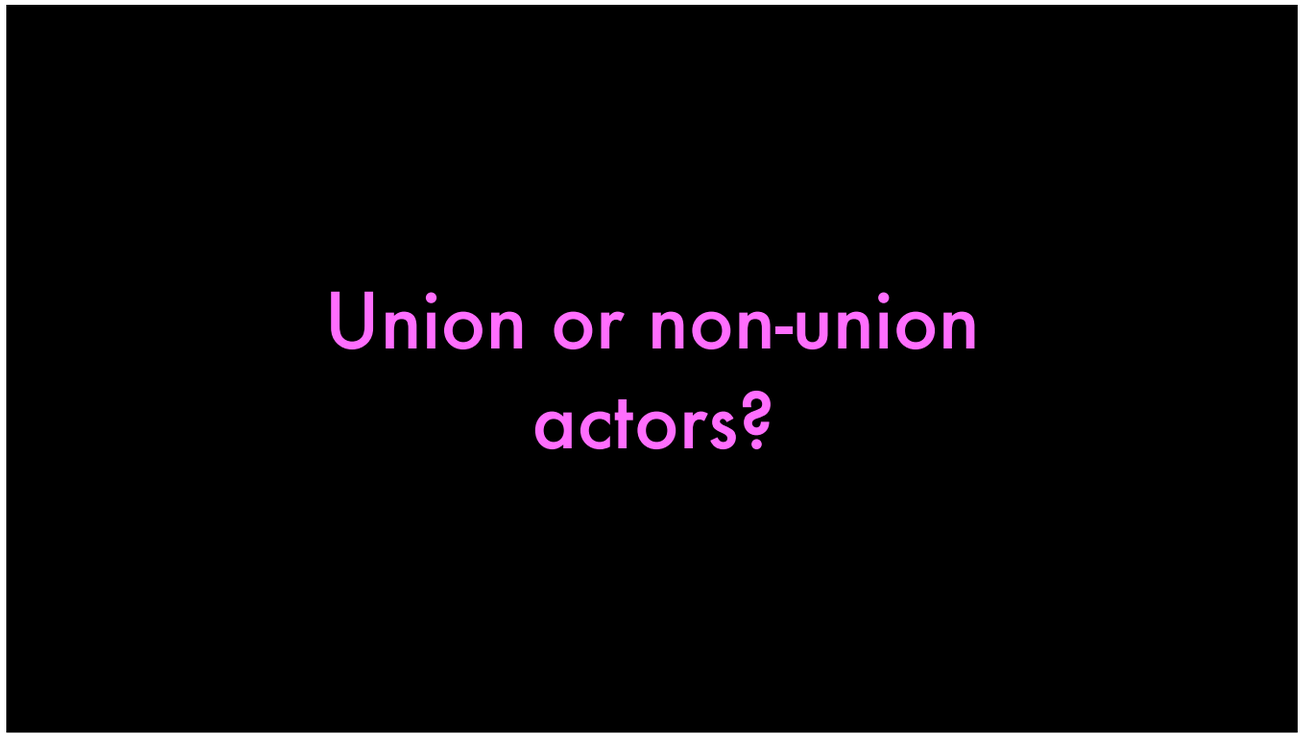
Now, assuming you're *not* making a game for a strike-affected company…



Many of the absolute cream of the voice-over crop are members of SAG-AFTRA, the same union that film actors belong to.

If you absolutely have to have Nolan North or Jennifer Hale or Peter Dinklage in your game, you cast union. And depending on who you cast, you potentially pay a premium to do so. And depending on the nature of the project, that premium can be worth every penny.

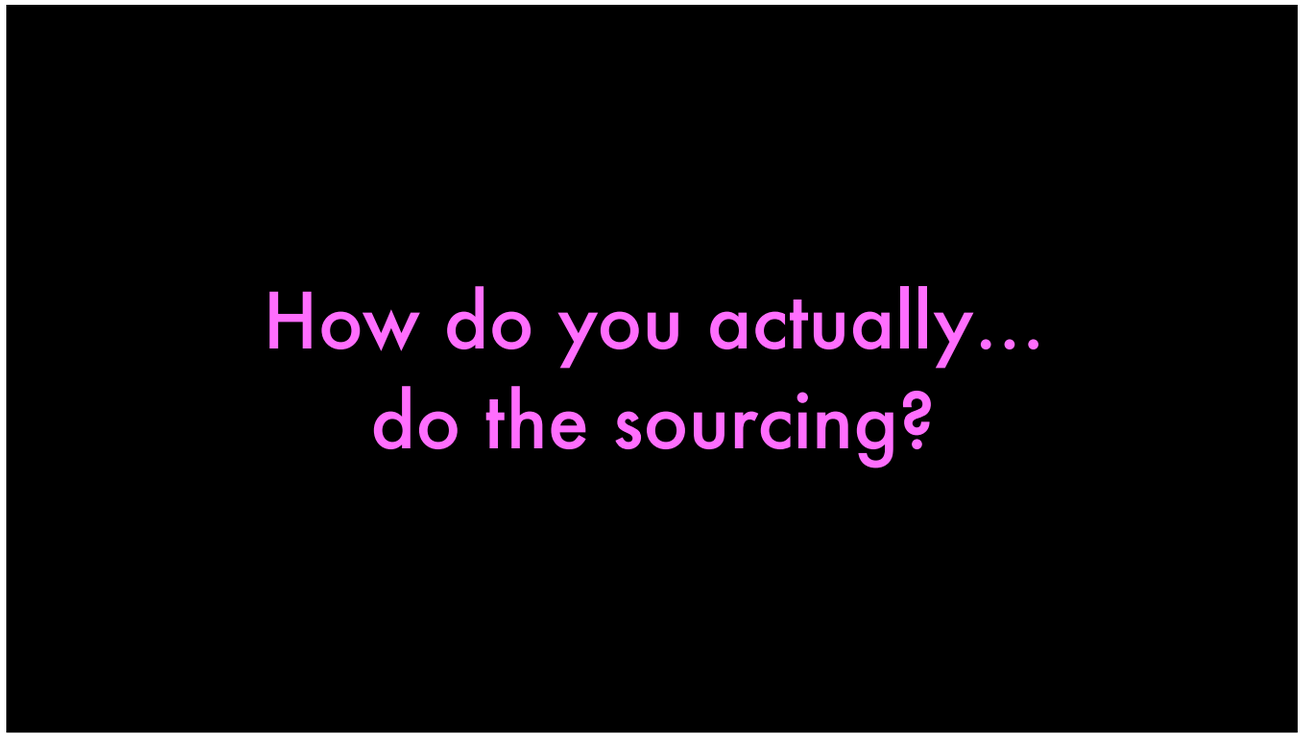
If what you're looking for is capable performances from actors who don't need to be god-tier at everything, non-union is an option. There are a lot of talented folks out there, and the very fact that these folks are represented is a strong positive indicator.



As far as money goes, hourly rates vary somewhat for non-union voice actors, depending on the market and the agency. A common pattern I see in the bay area is around $450 for the first hour, and a reduced rate (say, $200) for each subsequent hour. Again, Your Mileage May Vary, please don't take those values as universal.

Union rates have historically been a little more complicated, but that's changing with work that's happening alongside the strike. Specifically, there is a new low-budget video game contract that is intended to make union talent more accessible to small projects, in particular projects with a total production budget of less than $250,000. With this contract, typical union and non-union rates become pretty similar. I'll have a link to a sample of this contract at the end of the talk so you can check it out.

Okay. Whatever sourcing method you choose, after you *choose* it…



[Read the slide]

Depends on which method you've selected.

Friends

Say “Hey friend, will you audition to be in my video game?” Boom, done.

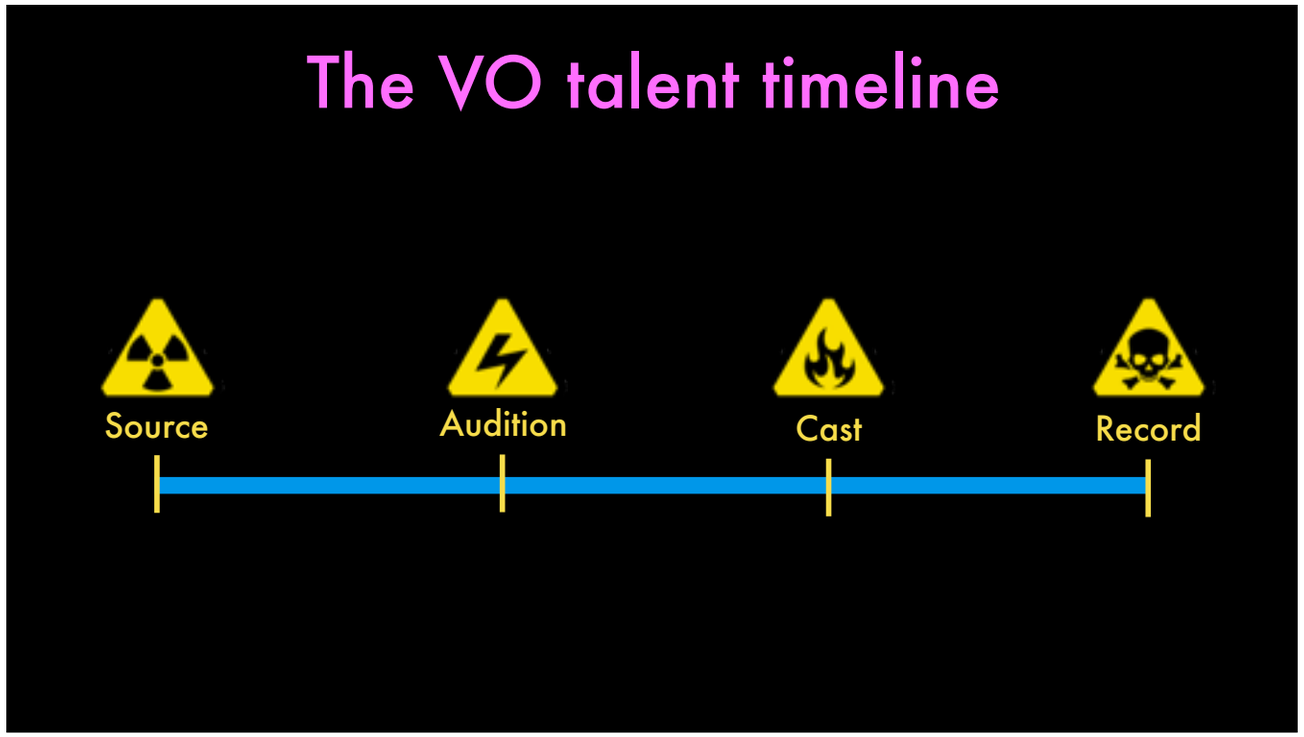
Create a new project in voice123 / voices.com, and specify the parameters for who the project goes out to (age range, number of auditions you want to receive, etc.). You then receive a stream of auditions for the next week or so.

Agency

Either contact an agency directly, or, more recommended, contact an audio production studio that has a preexisting relationship with one or more agencies. For example, for Infamous Machine, I got in touch with Somatone Interactive in Emeryville (which is just across the Bay Bridge). They work regularly with Stars, a talent agency here in San Francisco. You let the studio or the agency know the details of the project, you give them the audition material, and they'll make sure it gets to the right set of actors.

Regarding location, as with nearly all things entertainment, LA has the highest concentration of agencies and production studios, but the Bay Area has a decent number of their own. Bay Area talent agencies have a much higher proportion of non-union actors than LA.

If you're located somewhere that doesn't have much of a talent agency presence, you can feel absolutely free to use production studios and agencies that are not near you. This distance only comes into play when you finally schedule recording sessions and want members of your team present at them, at which point you'll probably want to send some folks out for the duration of the sessions.



So, that’s sourcing. Now, speaking of that audition that the agency fires off to all of its actors…

Auditioning talent

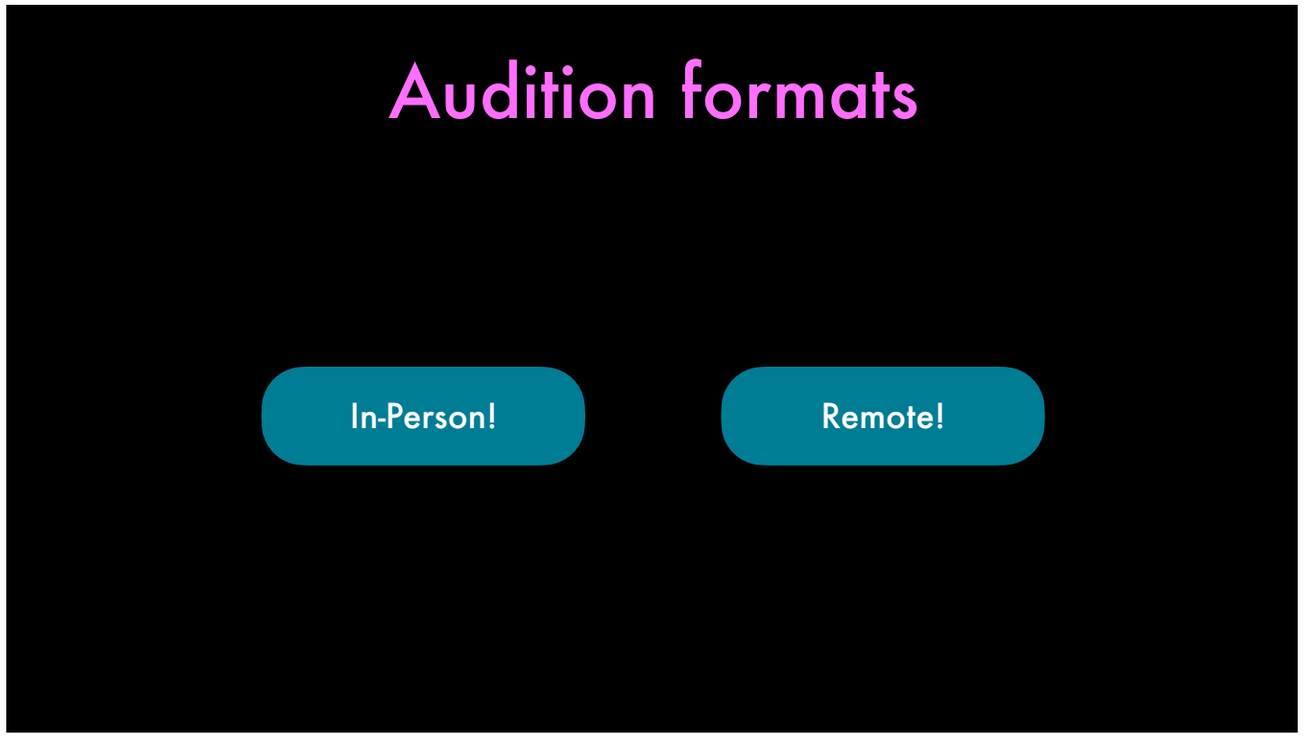
This process is all about giving actors every opportunity to be **exactly** what you need for your game.

Now, if you only take one thing away about auditioning talent, take this:

Here’s the thing. Most voice actors, both on sites like voices.com and with agencies, have one or more *demos*. These are 1-2 minute files that demonstrate the actor’s range across a particular style (games, commercials, narration, whatever).

Some folks, when they’re casting a project, select talent based *purely* on these demos.

If you cast purely on demos, you probably won’t end up with a terrible cast, but you will *definitely* artificially limit your options. An actor who would sound perfect for your frog demon probably doesn’t have a clip in their demo that *sounds* like a frog demon. Plus, some voice actors don’t even *have* demos, or they only have them for other styles of VO.



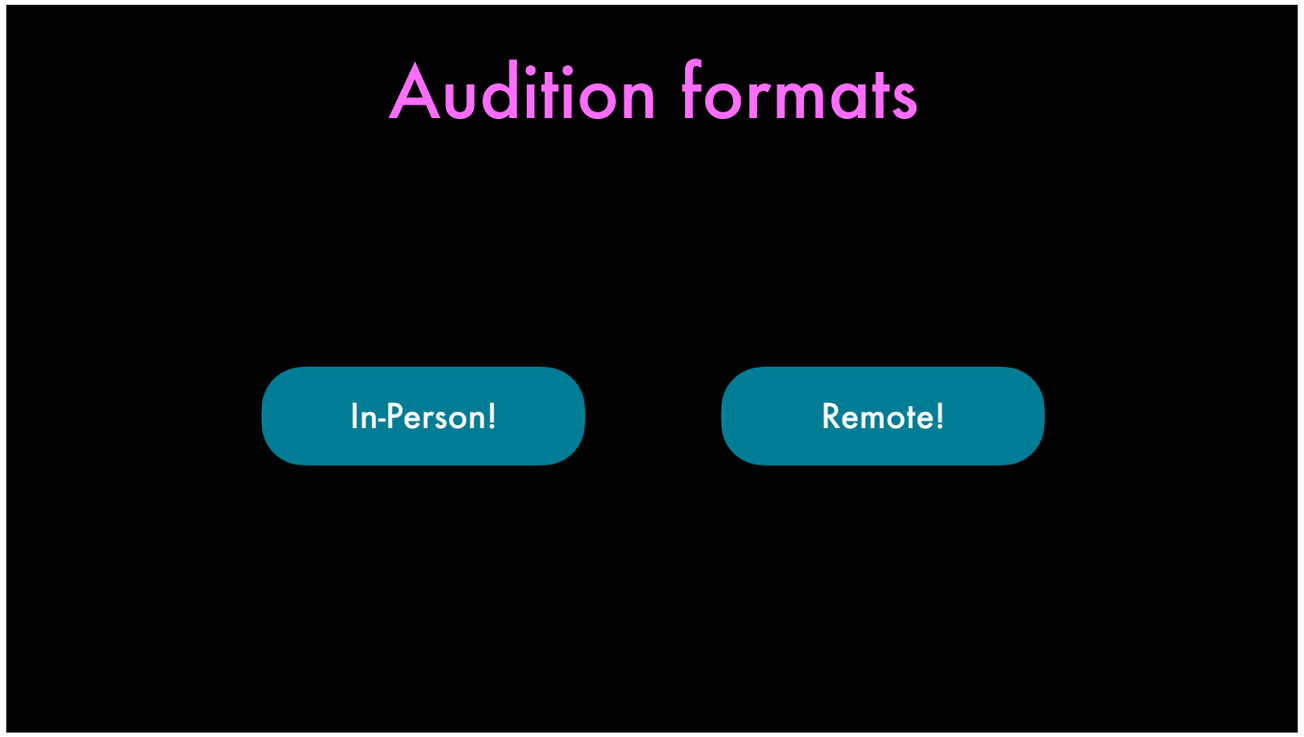
Audition formats! [Build out slide]

Intuitively, which of these is more informative? In-person. You can evaluate things that you can't remotely. Most notably, the actor's ability to adapt to your direction, and your rapport. How well can you work with the person?

However, there are some *real* challenges around in-person auditioning that make it very rare:

Most notably, logistics. For starters, you have to be located near the agency you're sourcing from for this to be practical. Second, if you're scheduling 15-minute audition slots for each actor and your game has 30 roles, actors probably won't be able to give you reads for every character they could do competitively. If they're auditioning from home, this time restriction doesn't come into play.

Second, money. You'll *definitely* want to *record* your in-person auditions so you can review them later. If you don't have your own recording environment, that means booking studio time.



So. I say, if you're located near your agency, and the agency is open to scheduling in-person auditions (which is a big "if"), *and* you're only casting for a small number of roles (maybe 5 or fewer), go for it from the beginning.

If you're casting a larger game but everything else holds true, *start* with remote auditions to cast a wider net. Then, for the most important roles in your game, if remote auditions didn't produce an obvious first choice, conduct a second round of *in-person* auditions among the best performers for those roles.

Also…

Don’t worry if you need to audition remotely.

The majority of voice-over auditions are done from home, at all levels. Even when a union voice actor in LA goes into their agency to audition, they’re almost never doing it with the client in the room.

Virtually every voice actor has a microphone setup in their home that’s sound-dampening-*enough* for auditions. They’re emailed audition information by their agent, auditions are usually due in a day or two, and the actor is responsible for recording their read and sending it in to the agency.

I take classes at a voice-over school up in Sausalito called Voicetrax (yay Voicetrax!), and virtually every class there emphasizes an actor’s need to deliver a strong performance *from home*.

Your job, as the conductor of a remote audition, is to make that limited information as *informative as you can*. Which brings us to…

Name	Lorenzo the Jester
Filename	Lorenzo_(Smith.mp3
Vocal age	30s-40s
Line quantity	Moderate
Description	A snooty, self-important jester who believes the highest form of comedy requires a large vocabulary and a biting wit. He is perpetually at odds with his fellow jester, Groobleu (GROO-bloo), who prefers fart jokes to obscure literary humor any day of the week.
Reference	David Hyde Pierce and/or Kelsey Grammer in Frasier (start at 1:43)
Image	

	[Kelvin sees the two jesters standing in a jail cell]
Kelvin	I feel like there's a joke in here somewhere.
Lorenzo	**Why Groobleu, I believe he's referring to you.**
Groobleu	Well he sure ain't referrin' to anything you're sayin', smart guy.
Lorenzo	**I'm impressed you can even hear what I'm saying over your incessant farting.**
Groobleu	You know me, I'm a Renaissance man.

Kelvin	Hey, you guys are good! Mona's already stopped crying.
Lorenzo	**But of course. We are graduates of the finest fooling academy in the city-state.**
Groobleu	Well I am, anyway. This clown never finished one of his requirements.
Lorenzo	**Oh, please. How much would I really have gotten out of "Intro to Poop Jokes?"**

…the audition packet.

This is a page from the packet I sent all auditioning actors for Infamous Machine. We'll come back to the finished product in a moment.

For now, we have a blank one! Let’s fill it in.

So, what’s the one thing that every audition sheet obviously needs?

Lorenzo

I beg your pardon?

This really isn’t the time for that.

I’m afraid you’re mistaken.

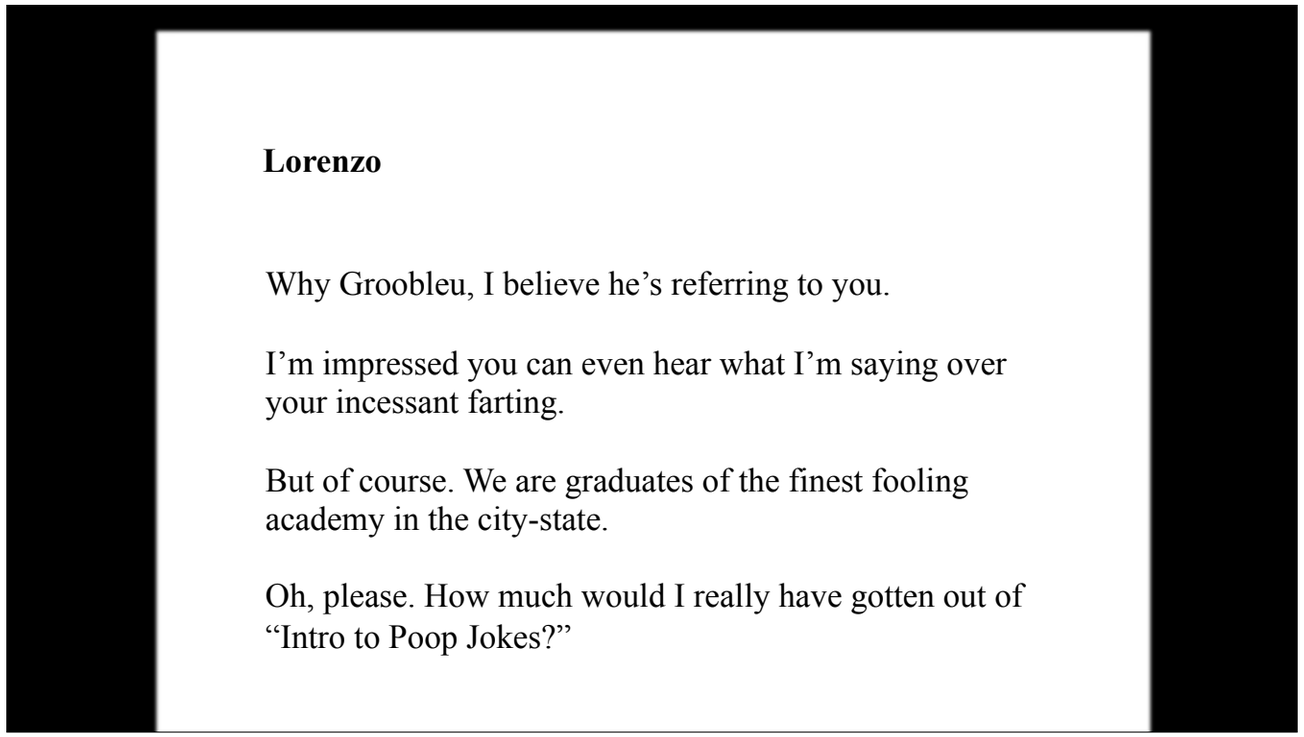
Which way do you think we should we go?

Lines! Okay, let’s say you’re a voice actor looking at this script preparing your audition. Some questions you might ask are: Who is this character? What’s their personality? Who are they talking to? Basic stuff, right?

But these lines make it nearly impossible to tell. They provide almost nothing in the way of hints to the character’s personality, to his relationships, to his current status relative to other characters.

These lines aren’t badly written; they can be in your game, but **don’t** make them the lines that you *audition* with.

Instead…



Okay, *now* who is this character? What is their personality like?

We have this other character in the scene, Groobleu. Looks like Lorenzo takes a shot at him with the “farting” line.

We’re getting closer to a complete picture. An actor will already be much more confident in the choices they make.

But we still don’t have the full context of these lines. What would help us get there?

Lorenzo

Kelvin sees the two jesters standing in a jail cell.

Kelvin: I feel like there's a joke in here somewhere.

Lorenzo: Why Groobleu, I believe he's referring to you.

Groobleu: Well he sure ain't referrin' to anything you're sayin', smart guy.

Lorenzo: I'm impressed you can even hear what I'm saying over your incessant farting.

Groobleu: You know me, I'm a renaissance man.

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Groobleu: Well I am, anyway. This clown never finished one of his requirements.

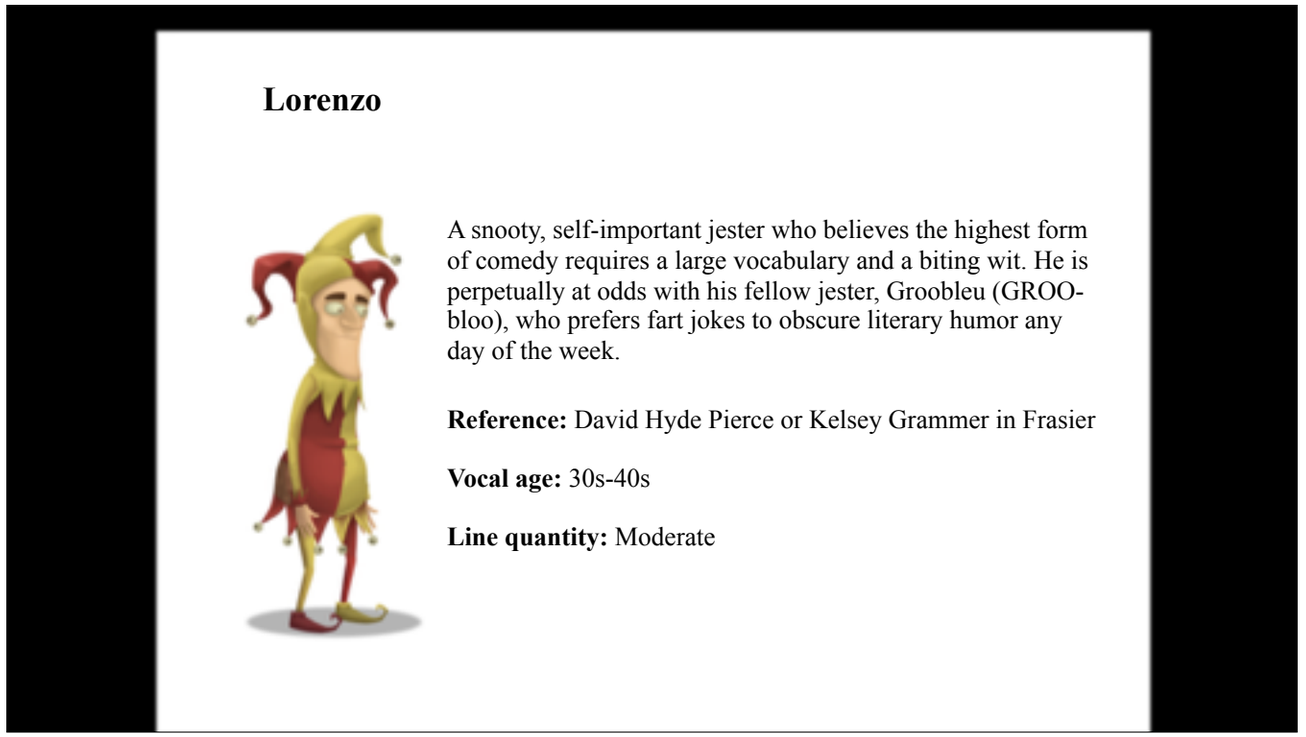
Lorenzo: Oh, please. How much would I really have gotten out of "Intro to Poop Jokes?"

Other characters' lines! Now the actor has a few more critical pieces of information:

* These four audition lines are in fact part of two distinct conversations.
* We get a closer look into the relationship between Lorenzo and Groobleu. They clearly give *each other* a hard time a lot.

There's still this first line, though. It's reads like it's referring to a visual that isn't conveyed in the script. So let's clarify it!

Aha, the two jesters are in jail! This one note provides so much more specificity that actors can latch onto in their performance.



Let's talk about everything BESIDES the lines. You're auditioning for a character in a *video* game. So outside of the lines themselves, what's the first thing you want? A **picture**! ALWAYS provide a picture. Even if your character doesn't have a corporeal form, use a picture of what you imagine they WOULD look like.

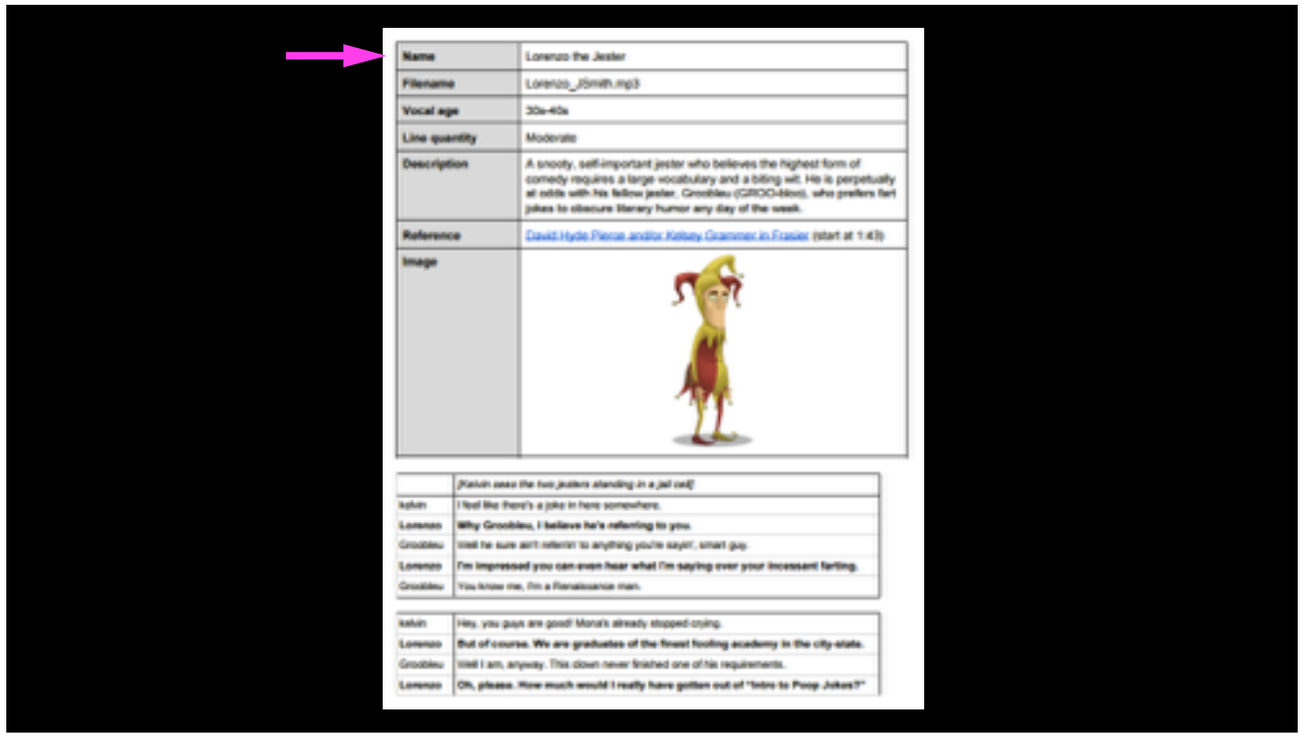
Another something you should always have: a **description of the character**. This is *not* the character's entire life story. It's just enough information to convey the most important personality traits and relationships. Getting too specific here can cause actors to *overthink* their choices and get into their own heads.

Some more great stuff to include:

Character reference. Your character's personality is *definitely* already represented in existing media. Giving an actor an existing template to start from can help them shortcut to a fantastic performance. Once they get into the session you can nudge it to perfection. Whenever possible, make these references links to YouTube that illustrate your intention with the reference.

Vocal age. If you're auditioning a bunch of roles at once, this help actors narrow down quickly which ones they should focus on.

Relative line quantity. Again, if you're auditioning a bunch of roles, some are minor, some are major. Help actors know which roles you NEED nailed, and which ones might be able to be performed by anybody with spare time in the booth. This is particularly important if an actor is on a tight deadline and can't audition every role they're actually right for.



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Lorenzo	**Oh, please. How much would I really have gotten out of "Intro to Poop Jokes?"**

So let's go back to that complete page from my Infamous Machine packet. Here are all the components we just discussed: [ARROW DOWN]

In addition to all the components we're providing, I can't overstate how useful it is to have all of this information in the same *place.*

Real-life commentary from
real-life voice actors!

But don’t take my word for it!

"So many packets come with such minimal information, **almost anything is appreciated**. I find that the best stuff outlines **specifics about the universe** the character inhabits so I understand the 'rules' of the world. Second to that would be **insight about relationships with other characters**."

Jim Edgar
@JimEdgarVoices

"In an audition, the information that helps me most is the character's personality. Brash? Sweet? Laid back? Just a few simple adjectives can give me a fantastic jumping off point for creating the character."

"**The worst auditions are when you're given the script and that's it.**"

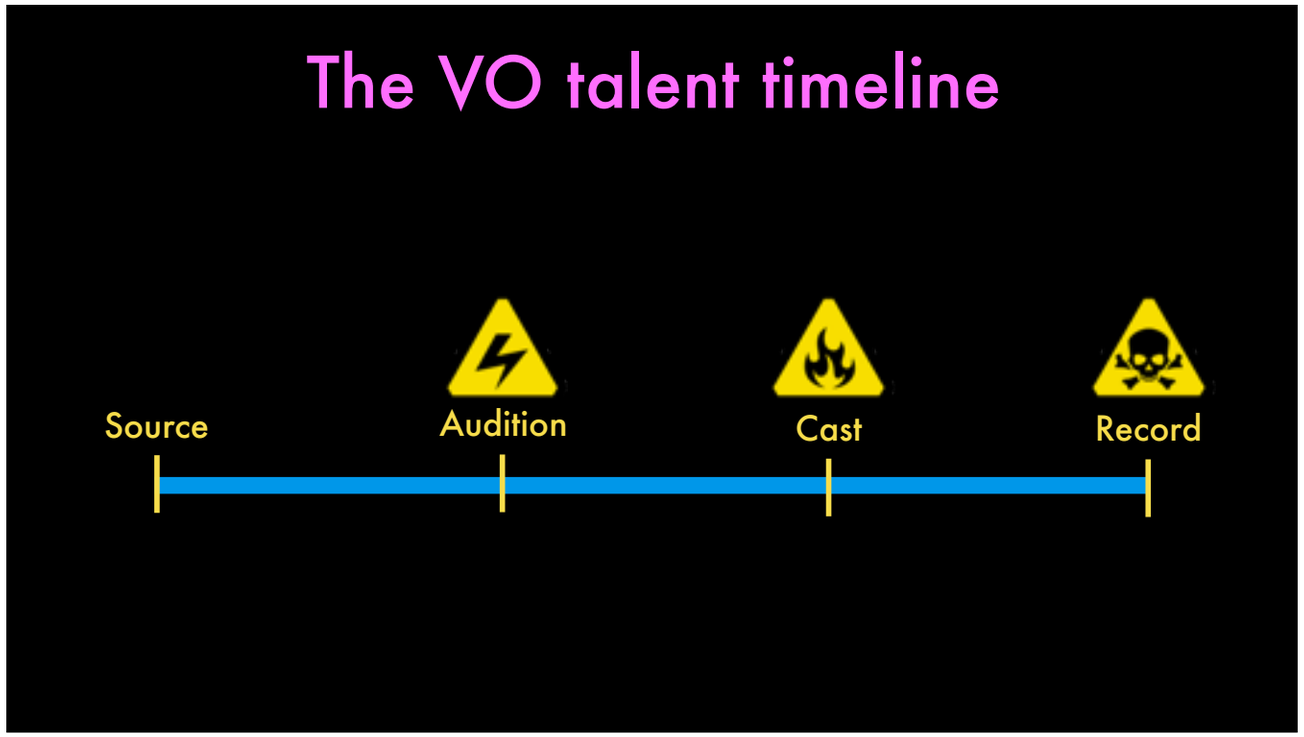
Tamara Ryan
@TamaraRyanVO

Based in SoCal

"The thing that helps me most is a **picture of the character**. It really helps me while reading the lines to see the nuances of the actual being. Are they small/large/ fluffy/whatever. It really kicks it up for me."

Annalisa Bastiani

Played "Mona" in Infamous Machine



All right! We've tailored our audition materials to give our voice actors every possible chance to succeed on their own, which is beneficial for everyone.

Next up, evaluating those auditions and making casting decisions.

Casting talent

Okay! You've sent out your audition packets, and the agency has gotten back to you with all of the files that the actors have sent in. Now you just have to listen through all of them and…

Hoo boy.

Uh…

These are the filenames of 240 auditions for roles in Kelvin and the Infamous Machine. If you're thinking "wow, 240 is a lot of auditions," it's not, because there were **600** audition files for the game and I just got tired of taking screenshots.

Which is to say, if your game has a lot of roles in it, be prepared to listen to a *lot* of auditions.

Now before you start actually evaluating this mountain of files it's good to do a little…

Pre-evaluation math

- Calculate how many **hours of recording** are in your VO budget
- Calculate the **total line count for each role**
- Assume you can record about **70 lines in an hour**
- **Could you afford to cast a different actor in every role?**

Knowing a few values up front will really help as you begin working on casting logistics.

An hour of recording includes actor's rate, studio's rate, and the hourly rate for anyone else you're paying to be present at the session. Your recording studio of choice will help you figure this out.

If you **do** have the budget to cast a different actor in every role, congratulations! Your life got a lot easier. You can just listen to your auditions and more or less cast whoever does the best job for each part.

If you **can’t**…

- Identify **role combos** that a single actor could perform
- Roles should be in a **similar vocal register**
- Roles should be **temporally distinct**
- Total line count of combos should come close to a **multiple of 70**

(Or if you just don’t want to)

An actor should never portray two people in the same conversation.

Handy role combos

- **2 supporting roles** (each about 30 lines)
- **1 supporting role** (30)**, 2-3 minor roles** (10 ea.)
- **1 major role** (120) and **1 minor role** (10)
- **5 minor roles** (10 ea.)

Each of these combos was used in Infamous Machine.

Note that you'll lose time for about 5 lines per hour with every role you add beyond the first.

Casting process, phase 1

1. Sort audition files by character
2. Listen to all files for a particular character in a row
3. If you have a clear favorite audition for the role, note it
   - Also keep track of other competitive performances
   - **Also** also keep track of strong *acting* performances that aren't *vocally* right

You note the folks who performed well but were vocally wrong because it's possible they *didn't* audition for the role they're perfect for, and you don't want to lose them in the pile. If you know at the time exactly which role they'd be good for, note it too.

Quick aside:

[Build out]
* Does it sound like the actor is invested in the world? As opposed to reading words they don't really understand?

* The way the actor reads the lines should imply that they understand the scene. Going back to Resident Evil, part of why those performances sound so odd is because Jill sounds like she's thanking Barry as if he just gave her a cake. Not like he just saved her from getting crushed to death.

* Does the actor sound like they're trying too hard with a dialect or other affectation? That can come through in the game and ruin suspension of disbelief

* Big ogre? Big ogre voice. Wood sprite? Wood sprite voice.

Casting process, phase 2

1. Lock in the highest **value over replacement**
2. Repeat step 1 until, for every remaining role, either:
    - There is no clear single best choice
    - The best choice is locked in for a conflicting role

When I say “value” here, I mean, “Which actor-character combination will improve my game’s overall experience the most? If this person *doesn’t* play this part, my game suffers.”

(Even if one particular actor NAILS “Townsperson 4”, that role probably doesn’t affect the overall experience very much.

Casting process, phase 3

- Fill in the gaps!
- Based on line counts for locked-in actors, do those actors have time to knock out additional roles during their expected hour allotment?
- **Consult role combos** to maximize value from yet-uncast actors
- Now check out actors' demos! Many are on **voicebank.net**
- Don't forget to consider actors for a role who might not even have auditioned for it!

Casting process summary

PHASE 1

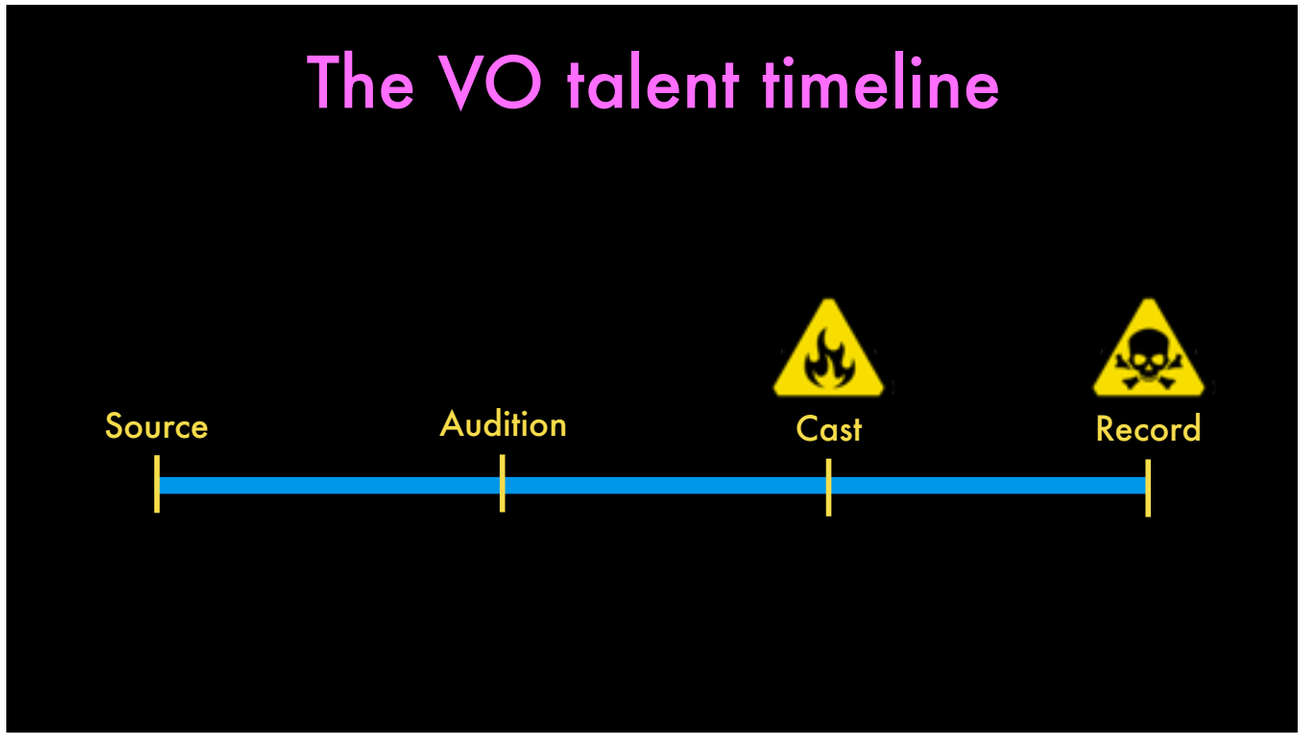
Listen and rank

PHASE 2

Cast your MVPs

PHASE 3

Cast the rest of your team



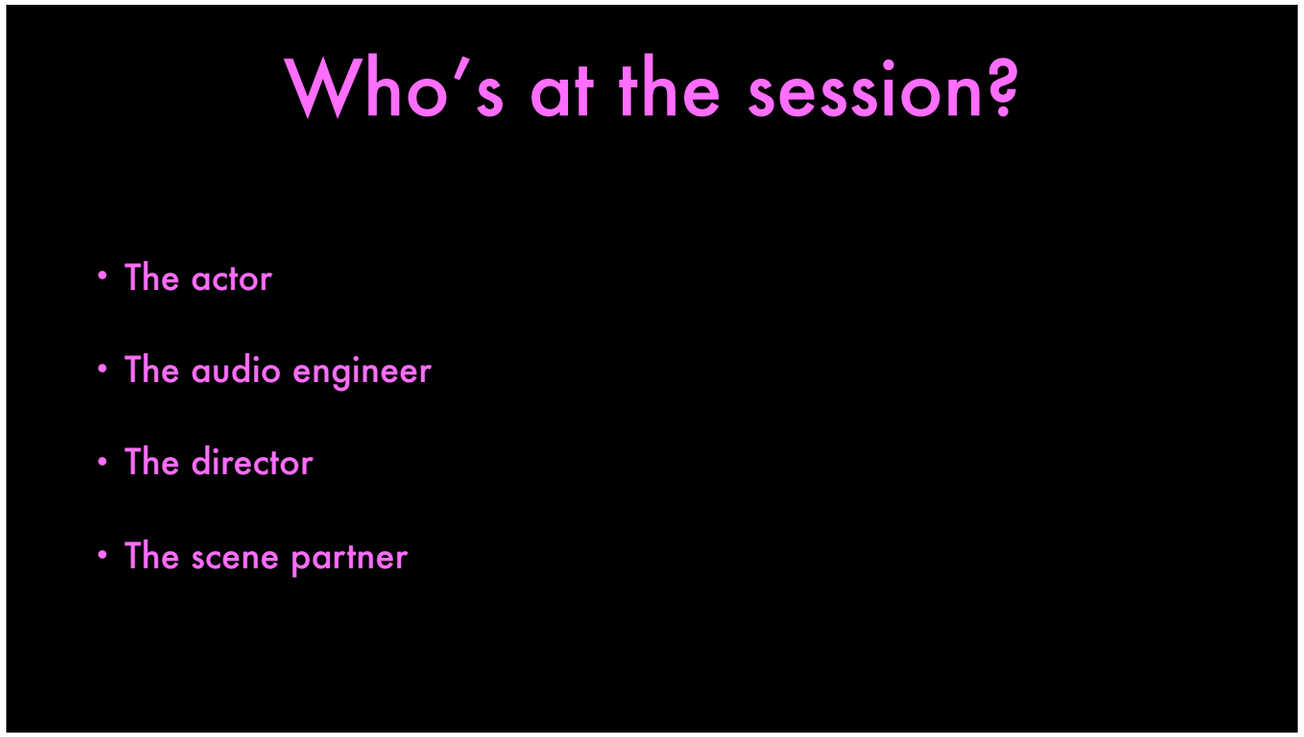
We’ve locked in our cast! Now we just need to, y’know, actually record them. Which brings us to our final hazard.

Recording talent

A lot of what we talked about with the audition packet has a parallel here.

It’s all about providing *context*.

The first, simple question you ask is:



At least four recommended roles: [build out]

These are four roles, but they don't have to be four different *people*. Try to not have one person wear *too* many hats, however—as they lose the ability to focus on any one component. Balance your preferred budget against the limits of individual human capability.

Starting at the bottom, a dedicated "scene partner" can be huge. The point of the scene partner is this: it's a lot *easier* for a brilliant voice actor to *be* brilliant when they have somebody to play off of. This doesn't have to be the actual actor they're talking to in the scene; it just has to be someone who knows the context of the game, *and* has a willingness to *actually act*. Having someone just flatly read lines in a monotone will not help, and will probably harm.

Also the addition of the scene partner assumes you are recording each of your actors one-at-a-time, rather than in an ensemble. If you're considering recording in an ensemble, ABSOLUTELY check out Michael Csurics's talk from yesterday on the VO process for Tacoma. And honestly check it out *regardless*, because it's great and a lot of his advice holds true no matter what you're doing.

If you don't have a scene partner available, but you've already recorded the other actor in the conversation, play those lines to help set the scene for *this* actor. Concept art or in-progress animations are also a huge help.

The *director,* meanwhile, should of course be intimately familiar with the full plot of the game, and the thrust of each scene. Not to mention the pronunciation of all game-specific terminology, and the relationships between all characters and factions.

Lorenzo

Kelvin sees the two jesters standing in a jail cell.

Kelvin: I feel like there's a joke in here somewhere.

Lorenzo: Why Groobleu, I believe he's referring to you.

Groobleu: Well he sure ain't referrin' to anything you're sayin', smart guy.

Lorenzo: I'm impressed you can even hear what I'm saying over your incessant farting.

Groobleu: You know me, I'm a renaissance man.

Kelvin: Hey, you guys are good! Mona's already stopped crying.

Lorenzo: But of course. We are graduates of the finest fooling academy in the city-state.

Groobleu: Well I am, anyway. This clown never finished one of his requirements.

Lorenzo: Oh, please. How much would I really have gotten out of "Intro to Poop Jokes?"

Remember this version of the audition script? All of this should also be in the script at the session. That way:

> The actor, scene partner, and director all have full context for every conversation.
> And you can record lines in **conversation blocks**.

A single line is only good if it's performed well within the context of its surrounding lines. If you're recording lines one at a time, the likelihood that they'll form a coherent conversation gets smaller as the conversation gets longer. Pick up little flubs here and there as you need to, but in general, if a **conversation** can be the atomic recording unit of your session, it should be. This is particularly helpful for comedy, where timing is everything.

Session odds and ends

- Tell the actor what you liked in their audition!
- Be open to improv and other line tweaks
- Finish one character before moving on to the next (except…)
- Save vocally taxing work for the end (make sure it isn't too much!)
- Try not to book an actor for more than 2 continuous hours

Also, of course, be sure to *play* their audition for them, because it's definitely been a while and they might have forgotten what they even did to book the part.

Actors might reveal a facet of a character that makes a particular existing word choice sound straight-up wrong. Don't go into your sessions totally married to the exact lines as written unless you have a very good reason.

The last thing I recorded for Infamous Machine was a high-pitched scream that opens the game, and it's a good thing, because my voice was substantially weaker.

Everybody gets tired, even though some actors might claim otherwise because they want to appear deferential to the client. Break it up as much as you can to keep everyone fresh.

MORE real-life commentary!

"My favorite sessions are ones that welcome **collaboration and play**. Clients already have a vision of what they want (and they've hired me because my audition was close to that). But my best performances have come out of sessions where the client and I have a chance to really **zero in on the character** through discussion and then allow ourselves to play around and improvise and discover new things!"

Erin Yvette
@erin_yvette

Many Telltale titles, and also plays Lise in Infamous Machine

The VO talent timeline

To review!

- Typically for best results, **especially** for larger projects, book represented talent
- Create an actor-friendly audition packet with lines in context
- Cast your highest V.O.R. actors in non-conflicting roles, then fill in
- Provide as much context in the session as you did for the audition

By following these rules, you'll dramatically increase the odds that the VO in your game will stand among the greatest in history.

That’s it! Here are short links to the full casting scripts for Infamous Machine, and to a sample SAG-AFTRA low-budget game agreement.