

Direct action

At London voice recording outfit OMUK a new model for talent direction is evolving. **Will Freeman** investigates



Veteran director Mark Estdale believes voice actors need to connect with the moments that the player lives through in the game world

WHILE IT'S easy to be excited by the likes of full performance capture, the good old voice over recording session remains a fundamental and relevant process in the game developer's arsenal.

And, like the role of actors explored on the previous pages, the responsibility of the VO director is also undergoing a significant change.

At least, that's the case at OMUK, where veteran casting and voice director Mark Estdale has built a recording facility like few others. Stood in the booth, the actor looks through the glass to a studio fronted not by an engineer, but a director.

That director is Estdale himself, who believes that there must be a change in directing game voice actors.

"What we're trying to do here at OMUK is, instead of putting games into a traditional model, to bring the performances to life. If you follow the traditional directing and acting model, you'll get the best the traditional model can offer. What I'm trying to do is build a model for recording performance that is suited to navigating the maze that is a game's script; that whole complex, branching, looping madness that it can be."

LIVE FOR THE MOMENT

Core to Estdale's concept is that game scripts are no longer linear narratives still typical of film and theatre.

Take, for example, *Driver: San Francisco*, to which OMUK helped in recording audio for a game script fleshed out by 30 writers over 200,000 words and several hundred characters. For an actor to comprehend that entire world and their place in such a fractured 'narrative' is near impossible, so the director must help the actors focus on the many thousands of moments that make up the atmosphere of the game.

"You now have to help actors unlearn what they have learned about becoming a character," explains Estdale of the changing role of VO directors. "People say that the more you become a character, the more you can assimilate that character, and the more real your performance will be. Well, I think that's bollocks really. All you need to do is help actors connect truthfully with these moments that the player lives inside. There's a different model of acting emerging for games, and that means a new model of directing must also emerge."

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Mark Estdale, OMUK

A CLOSE CALL

Estdale also advocates a method where the director gets as close to the actor as possible. He's happy to admit he'd quite like to be in the booth with the actors if it were feasible, and he has developed a system whereby he can deliver visual and audio assets to the talent instantaneously via linked monitors and speakers.

The actor alone in the booth also has access to an open mic feed from the other side of the glass, meaning he or she is party to all the conversation around the mixing desk.

This holistic methodology that seems to be working for OMUK, which has developed an

immense portfolio that is now close to numbering over 500 titles.

"It's almost a philosophical approach here; a philosophical change," offers Estdale. "A game's director must help an actor move towards working on a kind of instinct. A director needs to get actors to give that subtlety, that naturalness of behaviour, and you do that from the front of the studio; not tucked away behind and engineer. You do it through the make-up of your studio."

And it is the make-up of OMUK's London facility that has allowed the team to realise their vision of what a VO director must now offer. And in this model, the director in this new context is emerging as a role with a significantly increased impact on the creative process of developing a game.

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The OMUK recording studio allows actors to instantaneously see context for their part through the delivery of visual and audio assets