Voice Overs

1 Introduction: Voice Recordings

The 3 common types of recording voice for film are Automatic Dialogue Replacement, the Foreign Language Dub, and the Voice Over. Each of these deals with the human voice in relation to visual content, but each from a different perspective - and with different requirements.

Automatic Dialogue Replacement or ADR requires a lip sync to the visual, a recreation of the original emotional state, and the original actors of the production dialogue track. It solves the problem of noise, balance, and clarity that might not have been "optimum" during the shoot. I creates a separate audio track for the final dub.

The Foreign Language dub is a compromise at best: actual lip sync is impossible, the recreation of the original emotional state is difficult, and the voice characteristics "should" be similar to the original production cast. It replaces the original language dialogue for localization - while it provides for international distribution, it is problematic to "translate" all of the cultural nuances from the original production (it "loses something in the translation").

The Voice Over does not require lip sync to an on screen character - but it must convey the emotional state required by the visuals in any event. To my mind, it requires a little more "acting" from the voice talent. Also, it requires careful attention to "pace" and timing by both the voice talent, the script writer, and animator or film maker - with the recognition that the placement against the visual has a "subjective" element to it.

2 Getting started: Voice Overs

Understanding the Content:

The content - instructional, narrative, commentary, etc. - is the primary element in starting. It must be broken down into component parts to plan both the script and the visuals. Each element of content must be identified to plan out the corresponding visual and script prerequisites.

The film idiom doesn't allow "page flipping" - it is not a written document but rather strictly linear in presentation. The content must be realized completely in "real time" with a sense of "forward motion" toward comprehension or realization. Web material with the ability to link is more forgiving but this same concept still applies to planning individual links and overall linking design.

The storyboard:

Any visual - animation or film/video - with an intended V.O. has a unique problem - how to pace the visual and the voice over script to provide a comfortable and natural environment for the content.

Starting with either the visual or the script, it is a real necessity to plan out a complete coverage of the requirements demanded by the content. Here, the storyboard works to plan the key elements and develop the pace and timing to provide that "comfortable and natural environment".

It also can expose weak or unaddressed content requirements that might demand additions or deletions to visual or script. It provides a preview of how well the two are working together in transmitting the content - with an emphasis on "together". This is also the point that a decision to include or exclude music should be made - is it necessary and desirable or will it interfere or intrude.

Getting this element of the production process "right" can save much time and money - alleviating the necessity of adding or cutting footage or frames to adjust the pace and timing between the visual and the voice over - or the omission of key content elements.

The Script:

The dialogue should be just that, a dialogue - not a dry recitation of the written word. Two factors here are the actual construction of the script and the voice "talent" - both working together must create a feeling of ease and comfort with the content.

Care must be given to script construction so that only the necessary elements to compliment the visuals are included. As both work together, the script writer must consider the order and pacing of the visuals just as the film maker or animator must consider the order and pacing of the script.

Again, the story board is the environment required for planning. The final sum product of sight and sound must be whole and avoid the pitfalls of redundancy or incompleteness.

The Voice:

The biggest criterion for choosing V.O. talent is the ability to act in a purely vocal setting. The "voice" does not merely read the written word but must provide appropriate emotional content, inflections, phrasing, and personality in conjunction with the visuals.

In short, the voice talent creates a natural and appropriate vocal accompaniment to the production - it is an essential part of creating a sense of human interaction. Here, the type of voice needs consideration - does the production need: male or female (does it matter), child or adult, warmth or coldness, innocence or sophistication...

3 Recording

Since the V.O. does not lip-sync to an on frame character, two production techniques are possible. The voice can be recorded first and then the film/animation cut to this dialogue track or, the voice talent can record to a production video track.

Recording the voice to a video track is preferable - the talent can interact with the emotional and contextual elements of the visual and a better sense of phrasing and timing is possible. It is at this point that any adjustments to script or visual will become evident - hopefully, the storyboard timings were accurate.

Unfortunately, the recording of the voice is not the end - the layup to video is next. Often, the voice track must be cut into usable "pieces" to better serve the timing to picture - at this point, any EQ requirements and track "cleaning" take place.

Again, the placement of the dialogue track to the visual does have an element of the subjective. Should the visual precede the dialogue entrance - or follow - or share the same entrance. Again, the "naturalness" of the interaction should be the determining factor. The displacement of a few frames may be the difference in realizing this crucial element for a successful Voice Over....