The Actor's Nightmare 2.0

By Jim Meskimen

I've been working in a weird realm of show business lately, very new to me: the world of video games…

Actually, even "video game" seems like an archaic, last century way of talking about it, because the "video" part of it is so unimportant. It's all about the GAME.

Basically, when I get hired to act in one of these things, (and by the way, I am contractually bound hand and foot about mentioning anything specific about games, they are such a closely guarded, non-disclosure form requiring, BIG secret) I'm basically hired for my ability to act with my body's joints and hinges. They aren't interested in my height, weight, age, color, girth, hair (luckily) or the length of my nose. They just hire me for my voice, and my ability to operate my limbs and head.

Acting, yes… but in a weird way.

It's almost like a medical procedure. Especially when you walk onto the "stage" with its racks of sensors emitting a low-level light invisible to the human eye to bounce off the performers. It's like being in some kind of alien airline security chamber.

But that's all fine; that's just technology. I can dig that. What I find off-putting and sort of sad is what has been leached out of the actor's overall work experience.

If they remove one more level of artistic involvement from an actor, they'll just be sticking us in an MRI and having us do all our acting from in there, where every molecule of the performance can be recorded, to be manipulated later by faceless players.

Geez, do I sound bitter?

Here's the deal: a lot of the excitement in Hollywood moviemaking used to be made up of much of what has been totally eliminated in the gaming world. Like costumes, for instance; actors love to put on the costumes of characters, the shoes the helmets, the shirts with the big puffy sleeves. If you are lucky, the white cowboy hat. On a game shoot? All gone.

In lieu of costumes, the actor gets ONE outfit, usually communal, always more or less the same: a tight, embarrassingly form-fitting black body suit festooned with velcro straps and tiny round reflective knobs. It's like being a vertical Gulliver covered with Lilliputians clinging from straps.

Sometimes you even have to have a few dozen reflective rubber dots about the size of a picture framing nail head, glued to your face, even on the tip of your nose. If your facial performance is REALLY critical, you have to wear a rig around your head with a mini camera AND a small bright LED light pointing directly at you from about eight inches away. It's like trying to act while being interrogated under a hot lamp by miniature detectives.

All of this ritual inconvenience has evolved in an effort to provide the final game character with an armature that guides his motions in a realistic way, while he runs, fights, and blasts his way thru the particular universe of the game. The character, fully rendered, comes with whatever outfit that he has been designed to wear, and the actor never even gets to touch it– it doesn't exist in this universe, it's a part of that whole 'nuther world.

Props used to be a pleasure to hold, to handle; now when you are required to hold a prop, it's Day-Glo orange, and only approximates what it represents; a cylinder for a rifle, a box for just about anything. The fun props in all their glory exist only in that other universe. That universe that also has all the interesting locations.

Locations in movie making have always held a lot of glamour. Stars would relish in saying things like, "I'm going to Istanbul to shoot Merchant of Venice II". Now even the location is in some file, and they can slide it under your avatar like a barber's dustpan sliding under a pile of hair. Boom, there's the wharf, or the alleyway, or some other sector of some post apocalyptic environment.

(And by the way, WHEN did we all agree that our current culture is a PRE apocalyptic one? Kind of negative, don't you think?)

So, no costumes, no props, no locations… what else was attractive about being an actor?

Oh, well, a little thing called RECOGNITION, the chance for an audience to get to know a performer… well, that's pretty much impossible if one looks totally different from how he looks in this current universe of ours.

For instance if you happen to see me in the game I just worked on, which shall remain nameless (that's actually the title of the game: Nameless. It's about a post apocalyptic time when government employees all mysteriously lose their ID badges) then you will see a totally different looking human being than myself; Someone taller, broader, stronger, meaner… and much less handsome than I.

Who's going to know it's me? Nobody's going to walk up to me on the street and say, "Didn't you play Unidentified Employee #3 in Nameless?"

So, the romantic connection to the theater, that same theater that inspired so many actors to perfect their ability to convey the rich panorama of human emotions, that connection is virtually severed by video game methodology.

All the things upon which actors thrive, costumes, props, locations, recognition, (completely aside from grand ideas, delicious dialogue and lofty concepts not to mention a live audience) ALL these are tossed out in favor of monetizing our performances, and cashing in on our joints and hinges.

Begging the question, what is an actor in the 21st century to do? If so little is really demanded of him, how much is he worth? And if so little is demanded of him, how much of him is wasted? And how much inspiration will actors be permitted to deliver, if the popular stories most consumed by players consist of how quickly soldiers, criminals and zombies can be lethally perforated by pistols, lasers and semiautomatic weapons?

And do we really have no better tales with which to amuse one another than with these relentless and bloody modern version of cowboys and indians?

You think of things like this when you are being fitted into a skin-tight black spandex suit with dozens of small plastic knobs sticking out of your significant physical landmarks.

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