

You're a what?

Voice actor

When Tony Oliver was in high school, he and a friend enjoyed muting the television and making funny voices to accompany the onscreen action. One afternoon, his friend's mom told them to stop goofing around, asking, "Do you think anyone will ever pay you for this?" Little did she know that both boys would one day pitch their vocal creativity as professional voice actors.

Voice actors help to bring our favorite cartoon and video game characters to life. They also do voice-overs for radio and television commercials and movie trailers. Even though you don't see them, these actors use the sound of their voice to sell a character's emotions—or an advertised product.

Tony was first introduced to voice acting when he was trying to find work as a stage actor in Los Angeles. He saw a newspaper ad for a voice-acting gig and, after completing that job, was able to land work on numerous similar projects. These jobs were Tony's introduction to a side of show business he hadn't known existed. "In voice acting," he says, "I found this secret enclave of acting you could get paid for that no one knew about."

For professional voice actors like Tony, a busy workday might include multiple recording sessions, each several hours long. Before the session, voice actors meet with the director and are given the script they'll read. Voice actors rarely have an opportunity to read scripts in advance and must be able to produce high-quality material without practicing the lines.

After speaking with the director, a voice actor enters the sound studio where the recording sessions take place. Most studios

consist of two rooms: a recording booth and a control room. In the booth, the voice actor, either alone or with other voice actors, reads through the script line by line. The director and a sound engineer listen from the control room and provide feedback between takes.

For most professional voice actors, getting hired requires versatility in addition to a pleasant voice. Most voice actors use a number of voices and accents for various characters. Some actors have enough voices to play multiple roles on the same project.

New voices take work to create. Tony has found that the best inspiration is usually people he overhears. "A lot of creating new voices is mimicry," he says. "Sometimes, you don't even realize what you have until a director gives you a new character and something you've been playing around with pops out of you."

Even after developing new voices, regular practice is essential. Voice actors must be able to re-create or tweak a voice at a director's request. Practice also helps to prevent strained throats and to maintain vocal range. Tony, a trained singer, gives his voice a musical workout almost every day; other voice actors find different ways to practice.

Becoming a successful voice actor, like other jobs in entertainment, requires strong networking skills. The voice-acting community is relatively small and can be difficult to break into. Frequently submitting demo tapes to directors and auditioning for them is vital, especially for newcomers. "It can be hard getting those first few roles," Tony says. "Directors don't want to take a chance on a voice actor they don't know."

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From ads to animation, Tony Oliver speaks for his supper.

Many professional voice actors have also been trained as stage actors. A background in stage acting, although not mandatory, provides performance experience and teaches voice actors how to develop characters. Like stage actors, voice actors create a character for their audience. Unlike stage actors, however, voice actors can't rely on their physical movements or facial expressions to connect with the audience.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics does not specifically track the employment or wages of voice actors. Voice actors are grouped with other types of actors, including those who work on stage, in television, and in motion pictures. Some voice actors also work in these other mediums.

Although opportunities for voice actors are available throughout the country, work is easiest to find where the studios are clustered. Like the rest of the entertainment industry, most voice actors are concentrated in southern California. But many also work in large cities, such as Houston and New York.

Anecdotal information suggests that voice actors are usually paid by the hour. Typical rates for a recording session are between \$300 and \$500 for the first hour and between \$200 and \$350 for each subsequent hour. Voice actors working on longer projects might negotiate their own rates.

But voice actors freelance, which means they are self-employed and often have inconsistent work schedules. Some long-term jobs are available to actors voicing a main character in a cartoon show for an entire season or series. In most jobs, however, a voice actor's services may be required for only a single recording session. "When business is booming,

you're working all the time," says Tony. "And when it's not, you're on the phone trying to hustle up work."

Still, freelancing allows voice actors to choose the productions and characters they're interested in auditioning for. Tony enjoys this creative freedom. "When work is going well," he says, "I have a lot of control over what's happening in my life."

Being able to make a career out of something he enjoys satisfies Tony. "If it weren't my job, I'd take up acting as a hobby," he says. "I love that I get paid to do something I'd do for free."

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