

Ubisoft Game Makers Podcast
Defining Insanity with Michael Mando
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(SUSPENSEFUL MUSIC)

MICHAEL MANDO:

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CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

You're listening to the Game Makers podcast. This is Charles-Adams Foster-Simard from Ubisoft. In this episode, we're welcoming Michael Mando on the podcast. Michael is a Canadian actor and you may have seen him most recently in the role of Nacho Varga in the AMC series 'Better Call Saul'. Michael is also well known for playing the fan favourite character of Vaas in Far Cry 3, a game which originally came out in 2012. And now, just off the release of the latest game in the series, Far Cry 6, Michael and his character of Vaas return to the series once more as part of a special DLC episode called 'Vaas Insanity' which players will have the chance to discover later this November. I reached Michael Mando in LA to talk about the original creation of the character, the work of performing motion capture for Triple-A Games and what players can expect in this upcoming DLC. You can follow Michael on Instagram. He's at @MichaelMando. Hello, Michael, thank you for joining us.

MICHAEL MANDO:

Hello, how are you? Thank you for having me.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

I'm doing very well. I wanted to start off just by asking you, for people who maybe haven't played Far Cry 3, can you just explain who Vaas is in a few words?

MICHAEL MANDO:

In a few words, I would say Vaas is somebody who's lived through a tremendous amount of trauma. Destiny has dealt him the worst cards. And through a lot of psychosis and violence, he's trying to work himself out of it.

MICHAEL MANDO AS VAAS:

Have I ever told you the definition of insanity? You see, insanity is doing the exact same fucking thing over and over and over again, but expecting, expecting shit to change. That is crazy. Ah, the very first time somebody told me that, I don't know, I thought they were bullshitting me. So boom, I shot him. But the thing is, he was right. I'm sorry, but I don't fucking like the way you are fucking looking at me!

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

What do you recall from the first moments when you played Vaas and when you started inhabiting that character during the development of Far Cry 3? Did you have an initial impression?

MICHAEL MANDO:

I remember there was a tremendous amount of freedom which I really loved. You know, I was encouraged to improvise, to rewrite the lines, to come in with different looks. I remember, you know, after lunch there was electrical tape on the table and I decided to tape my fingers. I saw a documentary about Michael Jackson and he put white tape around his fingers because it would attract the attention of the audience while he moved his hand as he danced. And I did that and it was just kind of like a natural impulse to show you how free we were. And the developers ended up incorporating that into the character. So all these little nuggets were coming along the way through improvisation.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

So there was a lot of kind of give and take and it sounds like you had a lot of freedom to bring in certain things and try certain things out, and just experiment?

MICHAEL MANDO:

Yes, tremendous, to the point that there was a scene in the first Far Cry 3 where Vaas pours gasoline. And I did this thing where I sort of started twirling on myself, pouring gasoline and turning around. And the technology at the time had wires attached to the helmets, where the red cameras capture your face. And we ended up not shooting that day and then coming back two weeks later and they had developed the wireless cameras so we could do that scene. It was just like, it was surreal, you know, how the technology was moving.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

In order to do that scene?

MICHAEL MANDO:

Well, I don't know what it was if Ubisoft was developing it and told us it'd be ready in two weeks or they ended up upgrading the cameras. But it was really, you know, we came back to shoot that scene because they didn't want to mess up the performance, which was really an excellent environment for a performer to be in.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Now you're talking about the camera and the technological breakthrough at the time, and I think this was one of the first games where the actor's likeness was really used in the game, like, you were recognisable playing Vaas in the actual game. I'm wondering

what was that like for you at the time and what was it like acting with those new technologies? Did they impact the performance?

MICHAEL MANDO:

You know, it's amazing. People ask me, you know, like the other day we were at the Saturn Awards and I went up to receive an award for 'Better Call Saul'. And on my way there, the driver, my driver's name is Andrew, he's an aspiring actor and he asked me, "How did you make it to this stage in your career? And so much of it has to do with Far Cry. And so, really, it's like a lucky twist of faith, you know, I really had my breakthrough through a video game by accident. And a lot of it had to do with the fact that Vaas had my likeness. And that was all accidental, you know? Now looking back, I say to myself, God, so many things had to be aligned for that to have happened. And things that initially were not positive in a sense that they weren't going to use my performance because the character that the developers had created didn't match my facial expressions.

So they were telling me that the dimensions of my mouth and eyes and the movements of my face looked very unnaturalistic on the face that they had created. So they actually ended up hiring me. We ended up creating the character together through a lot of improvisation and stuff. And then when they tried to put it onto the character that they had created, they realised it didn't work. But during that time, the E3 was about to come out, somebody somewhere said, "Just get that guy to come back in and do whatever he did during the audition or whatever he did during all these rehearsals."

And then the developers said, "Well we can't, we don't have a kind of like an avatar for him." And they said, "Just use his likeness. And then when we'll release the game, we'll have a new, big, bad guy and he'll just be a small character in the game. So when they released the E3, they went up and said, you know, "Vaas is a very small part of Far Cry 3 and you're going to encounter all these amazing characters and these great bad guys. So Vaas initially was never supposed to come back. And if you play the game, Vaas has probably like, six minutes. He's only six minutes in the game.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Well, he's not the big, bad guy, right?

MICHAEL MANDO:

He's not the big, bad guy at all. And if anything, the introduction of the game is to set him up as sort of secondary. You know, when the guy tells him to stop torturing the hostages, and you realise there's a big, bad guy that they're going to introduce to the world. And that was all a twist of faith and so much of it has to do with the fans. They demanded for it. They asked for it. And then the marketing team ran with it. And then we did the 'Far Cry Experience' movie in Thailand with Christopher Mintz-Plasse and

that went viral. And it was just like really truly the closest thing, or the only thing that I have ever known as viral where something just blew up on its own. And everybody had to adjust and realise like, oh my god, we hit lightning in a bottle. But initially, no one had an idea that this would ever turn into that.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Now I want to dig into that a little bit. You mentioned the 'Far Cry Experience', those promotional videos. Those were shot on location. They were not CG, they were really you in character, in full costume and all that. Was the performance for you very different playing the character on location in costume with other actors? Did you get a new grasp on the character doing it that way?

MICHAEL MANDO:

In the 'Far Cry Experience', I felt Vaas was a lot, he was funnier. (CHUCKLING)
It was like I was having such a great time. And I don't know if that's because we shot it in Thailand and it was just so beautiful and I was just so happy to be there, but there was a child-like play to Vaas that I had discovered there.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

And you mentioned the reaction of the fans at E3 and I think it's fair to say, you know, Vaas is one of the most iconic characters in Far Cry. Of course, he was also on the actual cover art for Far Cry 3. Other than your amazing performance, which you know, I would argue is a huge part of it, but why do you think the community reacted so strongly, so positively to this character? What is it about Vaas that people kind of latch onto when they talk to you about it?

MICHAEL MANDO:

You know what it is? The thing about art in general is you don't really know how it's going to be received. And I think the crippling thing is when you want something to do well or when you expect something to do well, it sort of messes up the intuitive, honest nature of inspiration which is, it doesn't really come from us. Inspiration, I mean, as far as I can tell for me, you wake up with an idea of a song or you're driving and someone's playing, you hear music in the background and you come up with a lyric. It's like you never really know where it's coming from. And when you allow inspiration to hit and you express it honestly, I think that's when you have the chances of communicating with people the most.

And with Vaas, it was one of those things where I didn't think anyone was going to see it. I thought this was just kind of like an exercise we were doing. I was having so much fun with Brent George at the time who was the director. And I was just an actor who was coming in from the theatre who was doing this thing and I just enjoyed it. I didn't think, you know, maybe I did and maybe I didn't, but I don't think I thought this was ever going to go anywhere. I can't remember think that, really. I do remember

thinking when I did the Definition of Insanity monologue in 'Going Home', I do remember think that this was special, that there was something there that was really special. And I thought to myself, "This would be a really good character for me to play in something real," you know, not thinking that this wasn't real, you know?

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

I think it's really interesting, it's almost like, it's almost like it's a state of mind of kind of being open to inspiration and open to what the world is throwing at you?

MICHAEL MANDO:

Yes, yeah, so exactly. So and you want to - I do that in my work all the time which is I say to myself, "Don't try to..." because what happens is as you go along as an artist, you develop a lot of technique and you start to understand and you can break things down into so many different technical terms. It's like a musician that knows every chord and every chord progression. You know, actually a good example would be chess where you just learn all these combinations and then it's just about who knows the most combinations by heart. With art, you don't, I think, you want to stay away from that. You don't want it to be just a bunch of tricks that you're pulling out and you're perfectly manipulating the audience. See, an editor would do that.

A director, a cinematographer would do that. A writer would do that. And an actor would do that, especially if those tools are available to you. But ideally, the essence, I think, is to get into a state of flow and throw all that away. And for me, Vaas was a perfect character that did that. And I feel whatever inspiration hit at the time was pure. It was just coming in from the source and people reacted to that emotion of torment, of heartbreak. And at the time, I was going through a breakup and I put it into my work, I guess, subconsciously. And people were feeling that pain, the idea of being torn and I'm sure a lot of subconscious things, you know, that they were identifying with.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Is it hard for you to play Vaas 'cause he's such a tortured character, as well? I wonder if that kind of takes a toll when you have to inhabit that mind space?

MICHAEL MANDO:

No, Vaas is fairly easy in the sense that he's impulsive. Characters that I find more difficult are like the character, Nacho, that I play in 'Better Call Saul' is for me a tremendously, he's a complete opposite of Vaas. I mean, in terms of essence, you know, one is incredibly explosive, the other one is incredibly implosive. You know, Nacho never speaks, never tells anybody what he's thinking. He's playing so many people at the same time, he's a double-agent, et cetera. That's very hard because the energy's always going in. You're absorbing it with your organs and that's tiring. And you got to learn to let that go and I've gotten better over the years. Vaas is fairly

easy in a sense that if I just feel like doing something and it makes no sense, or it reads as it makes no sense, it doesn't matter. He's just living, he doesn't differentiate between what's in his mind and what's in the world. And he's not particularly worried about what people think of him, or how this is coming across. So it's very exciting as an actor 'cause you get to exist in your psyche in the real world, which is exhilarating.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

And so now, what's super exciting for fans and for everyone, for us is that, you know, almost 10 years later, Vaas is coming back in this DLC coming off of Far Cry 6. And you did some new motion capture, right? There was some new scenes for you to do for this DLC experience? So first of all, I mean, I'm curious to know what it was like for you to kind of return to the character.

MICHAEL MANDO:

I didn't want it to just be, just to do it to do it, you know? So when I spoke to David, the director, and Navid, the writer-developer, and I told them Look, I'd be interested in doing this if you guys really cared about it and wanted to tell a story that made sense." So they said absolutely and I said, Well then, in that case, you know, I'd love to get the script and get my notes on it and all that stuff. And to my surprise, they said, "Well, we were actually hoping you would. And I said, "OK, well thank God, because there's a couple of things I'd want to change," and then we got into it and we ended up rewriting the whole thing. And it was just so much fun to be in a collaborative environment like that and I realised how much everyone cared about the character. So that was a fairly kind of like easy yes once I got to figure out who I was working with and that they understood that this isn't just about a character that screams and that, you know, that is crazy. It's about trying to make it about something deeper and trying to give it an arc and a certain sense of responsibility and an existentialism to it.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

I am wondering if you, cause so much time had passed, like, did you have a new understanding of the character? Were you able to bring something new to him? Or did you have a new perspective that you didn't have when you first made him?

MICHAEL MANDO:

Yes, I wanted him to get out of, I thought he would be most dangerous if he was aware of his thoughts. So I think, to me, in other words, there's a secret scene at the end of the downloadable content that, to me, puts Vaas, and to me this is just the tip of the iceberg. And what I wanted to do with the character was put him in the place where he can be controlled chaos and tell that story of how can this guy, once he starts being aware that if he's able to control his chaos, then he becomes someone who's able to plan and a long-term.

So hopefully, that's the arc that we were sort of on that journey of how does he get out of being a result of his feelings and how does he become the generator of his actions as opposed to simply responsive? You know, in other words, instead of his whole life being just a knee-jerk reaction, he'll always being impulsive because that's the nature of the character, but he's able to strategise big plans, big movements.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

I did want to ask you what your favourite part of play Vaas was and if that's changed at all also, in the 10 years.

MICHAEL MANDO:

So the video game is shot in two parts. There's the full-motion capture which means it's like full acting. You're just wearing a helmet and it's all digitised and every facial movement and hand movement and body movement is captured. Then there's a second part of it where it's just voice. So whenever they don't see your face or your body, you're just kind of like a podcast, you're just in front of a microphone and you're essentially reading lines and just imagining what it would be like and what the environment's like.

And that was really fun, too. And then there's a third part which is the live action. The stuff that I like the most is the live action stuff which is closest to, which is acting, you know, kind of like in film and TV because you actually, in the environment, you're in the costume and there are usually other actors there and it can... It's like a tennis match, you get to play off of a lot of different things.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

So I have to ask you because Giancarlo Esposito plays the main villain in Far Cry 6 and does an amazing job and you both are in 'Better Call Saul' together. So I wanted to ask you if you connected together about the experience of joining Far Cry and of playing villains in the same series, as well.

MICHAEL MANDO:

Yes, we did. We had a nice little brief talk in San Diego when we did Comic-Con and I did an internal video sort of welcoming him to the team through all the cities that the game was done, you know, through Shanghai, from Europe, and North America and everything where I introduced him to make a speech to the team and that was really cool.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Thanks very much, Michael, for joining us today.

MICHAEL MANDO:

Thank you so much for having me. It's always a pleasure to work with you guys and to work with Ubisoft.

(SOFT MUSIC)

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Far Cry 6 is out now and the first DLC episode centred around the character of Vaas, titled 'Vaas Insanity' comes out on November 16th. You can get it as a standalone experience or as part of the season pass which includes two more DLC episodes featuring the villains from Far Cry 4 and Far Cry 5 as well as the critically acclaimed Far Cry 3 Blood Dragon' classic edition.

(SOFT MUSIC)

This episode of Game Makers was produced and edited by the team at Engle. I'm Charles-Adams Foster-Simard from Ubisoft. Transcripts of our episodes are available on Ubisoft News. For more from Game Makers, remember to subscribe wherever you get your podcasts. Thanks for listening.