

## Vox Proxy Version 2

**Right Seat Software, Inc.,  
1110 12th Street, Unit A  
Golden, CO 80401  
Tel: (303) 278-2244  
Fax: (303) 278-6967  
Email: info@voxproxy.com  
www.voxproxy.com**

*Price: Vox Proxy Version 2 \$199, Vox Proxy Version 2 with CD Prep \$228.95. Educational pricing available. Upgrades from Version 1 to Version 2: \$99; with CD Prep \$109. AT&T Natural Voices text-to-speech (TTS) speech engine \$60. Additional voices \$25 each.*

*An evaluation version is also available as a free download at [www.voxproxy.com](http://www.voxproxy.com).*

*System Requirements: Pentium II 300MHz or faster, 64MB RAM (128MB recommended), 150MB hard drive (500MB more for AT&T engine), 800x600 resolution or higher, a microphone if using VP speech recognition, Windows 95/98/Me/NT/2000/XP, PowerPoint 2000, or newer.*

## Functionality and Technologies

Anyone who is looking to create a more dynamic PowerPoint presentation may find Vox Proxy meeting his or her needs. The Vox Proxy version 2 is an add-on scripting software package for Microsoft PowerPoint that allows users to have 3-D animated characters that can talk in their presentations. Based on Microsoft's ActiveX and Agent technology, Vox Proxy runs on PowerPoint 2000, 2002, and 2003 under a Windows environment, but not on Mac and Unix/Linux. The Vox Proxy with CD Prep package consists of Vox Proxy, the Vox Proxy Player, and the CD Prep. The Vox Proxy Player is a free program that plays the Vox Proxy PowerPoint presentations for users who do not have Vox Proxy itself. It is similar in concept to the Adobe

Reader for those who do not have Adobe Acrobat, while CD Prep is a utility program that prepares self-starting CDs containing the Vox Proxy Player and presentations. The self-starting CDs can even be played on PowerPoint 97. Vox Proxy comes with TruVoice text-to-speech (TTS) engines in ten languages. The extra-cost AT&T Natural Voices TTS engine is available with a male or a female voice in different languages and accents including United States English, British English, French, Spanish, and German.

Microsoft Agent technology is a set of software services that supports various agents (characters) with interactive personalities under a Windows environment. Vox Proxy contains twenty-five additional characters along with the four original included with Windows. Each character comes with a list of animations that it can perform. Paul, for example, can perform more than 100 different animations such as jump, read, and move. Characters can speak text using a TTS engine that users write for them. The default TTS engine is TruVoice, which is supplied by Microsoft, but the AT&T engine delivers more human-sounding computer speech than the default one. Special tags are also available to customize the intonation of the speech, including emphasis, whisper, monotone, pitch, and speed. Special features are also provided to improve the quality of the speech. For example, a pronunciation dictionary is provided to allow users to control the pronunciations for unusual or foreign words, and speech balloons display the speech on the screen at the same time it is spoken.

To create the Vox Proxy PowerPoint presentations, one must use the Vox Proxy script writer. The Vox Proxy script language is different from scripting languages such as VBScript (Visual Basic) or Perl, since it is more natural-language oriented and thus much simpler for the gen-

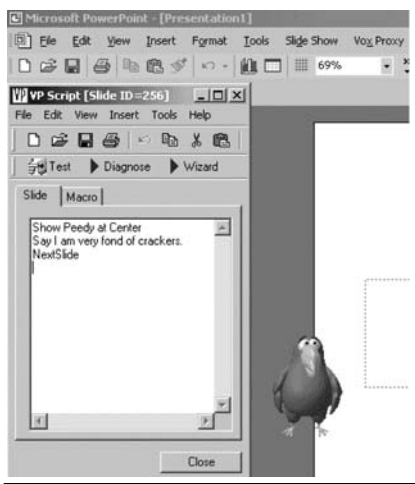
eral user. A Vox-Proxy script is simply a text document containing a list of predefined commands, which control the behaviors of characters, manage PowerPoint control commands such as change slides, and perform other actions such as play multimedia files.

## Interface

The installation follows the general Windows applications installation process and by default will create the directory Vox Proxy under the Program Files directory. The product is embedded into Microsoft PowerPoint and is displayed as a pull-down menu named Vox Proxy next to Slide Show (figure 1). There are two ways to write the scripts within the scriptwriter, which provides a standard Windows interface for users to test and diagnose scripts: either directly entering the text representing the script commands and the speech; or using its built-in wizard to select the commands and only enter the speech. Usually it is much easier to use the wizard to create the scripts, as the easy-to-use wizard provides a graphical user interface (GUI) for users to select commands or enter the speech in order to reduce the learning curve. A sample script, for instance, can be as follows: (a) first show the character named Peedy at the center of the screen; (b) then Peedy will say "I am very fond of crackers"; and (c) move to next slide (figure 1).

## Strengths

The rating of the package is based on software-selection criteria discussed in Mandelbaum and Walton and Taylor, including hardware and software requirements, software quality, documentation and training, and vendor relations.<sup>1</sup> The average



**Figure 1.** Screen Capture of the Vox Proxy

hardware requirements for the product such as CPU and memory (Pentium II machines) are acceptable, but users who want to use the AT&T Natural Voices engine will need better performing machines (as in Pentium III). The product can only run on Windows, since it uses Microsoft technology, and functions as a plug-in for PowerPoint. However, this is not an issue, judging from the dominant market share of PowerPoint in the presentation software industry. It provides multiple-language TTS engines to facilitate different language presentations, but it is not clear whether corresponding multiple-language GUIs are provided.

The software quality is fairly good in terms of capabilities, stability, ease-of-use, and online help. The product seamlessly integrates with the Microsoft technology and the AT&T Natural Voices engine, and also allows users to customize their presentations in desired ways such as adjusting tones, playing multimedia files, and recording their own speeches. The package contains multiple, ready-to-use characters that can perform adequate animations, although the characters are a little robotic in terms of their

appearances and voices. It is recommended to use the AT&T engine—which delivers speech that sounds more human in quality—for serious presentations. All levels of users should feel comfortable writing the script commands without going through significant training because the script syntax is more natural-language oriented. Moreover, the scriptwriter displays the commands and contains multiple, built-in tools such as test and wizard (figure 1). The built-in wizard can be extremely helpful for novice users, while the test tool allows users to test whole scripts as well as a single script command.

The documentation is comprehensive and excellently written, providing adequate information for both novice and skilled users. Various documents are provided along with the CD and also can be viewed on the Web, including FAQs, Bug Alerts, and links to related Web sites. The training tutorials are clear and concise enough for general users to have the software up and running within an hour.

Various short reviews and comments from known and anonymous users are found from secondary sources such as newspapers and a variety of Web sites. It seems promising that the Vox Proxy enables users to present their topics in fun and dynamic ways, since these comments are almost all positive for the product's functionality and the company's support.

## Weaknesses

A few improvements are recommended for the Vox Proxy, including providing new features and fixing bugs. The online help contains detailed information for the package, but lacks searching capability for users to quickly locate the desired topic. The package generally

follows design guidelines by *Fundamentals of Designing User Interaction* such as installation and interface, but it does miss a few.<sup>2</sup> For example, it does not allow users to choose installation location.

In addition, the scriptwriter and characters tend to always stay on top of application windows, even though you switch to other applications. This could be annoying for users in multitasking jobs. It is recommended that an option for Always on Top be implemented to solve this problem.

Users should note that there is an ambiguity associated with the built-in wizard within the scriptwriter, although the wizard can be extremely helpful for novice users to create their desired scripts. It is possible that a character may perform something that another character is supposed to do, since the script commands created by the wizard sometimes do not have a subject—the owner of the commands. For example, a character may say something that the other character is supposed to say when using the wizard to create a "say" command. Therefore, it is recommended that users check every command to ensure the presence of a subject. The vendor stated that a future release would display the subject to avoid this ambiguity.

## Conclusion

To summarize, the Vox Proxy may be a little costly for general users, but educational licenses are available for school or university libraries. It is easy to use and effective to deliver dynamic presentations in multiple languages. The software has many add-in features for PowerPoint that may be beneficial for library staff who frequently deliver presentations.—*Yan Han, University of Arizona Library*

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## References

1. Jane B. Mandelbaum, *Small Project Automation for Libraries and Information Centers* (Westport: Meckler, 1992); Robert A. Walton and Nancy Taylor, *Directory of Microcomputer Software for Libraries* (Phoenix: Oryx, 1986).
2. Microsoft Corporation, 2002, *Fundamentals of Designing User Interaction* (Microsoft Corporation, 2002). Accessed Nov. 5, 2003, <http://msdn.microsoft.com/library/default.asp?url=/library/en-us/dnwue/html/part1.asp>.

## eLibrarian

**Digi-Net Technologies, Inc.**  
**1034 NW 57th Street**  
**Gainesville, FL 32605**  
**(877) 404-2428**  
**info@digi-net.com**

*Price: Two price packages available. If licensed, 1 seat @ \$4,500 one-time fee, then \$500 annually. If hosted, 1 seat @ \$250 monthly (paid monthly), and \$200 one-time set-up fee.*

*System requirements: Hardware: 550 MHz Pentium CPU (or equivalent) or faster, 256 MB RAM, SVGA Video Card/Resolution. Co-Browsing: Dual 866 MHz Pentium CPU (or equivalent) or faster—or—1.33 GHz Pentium CPU (or equivalent) or faster, 512 MB RAM. Requires Windows 2000, Windows 2000 Server, Windows NT 4 With SP 4/IS 4 or 5 SSL Certificate, 2 gigs of free space, fully configured DNS. Operating systems: Windows 95, 98, Me, NT 4.0 SP6, 2000, MacOS 8.6 or higher (the Groopz Server will not run on any MacOS prior to MacOS X/Server), Linux 2.0 or higher, Solaris 7 or higher. Browsers: Microsoft Internet Explorer v4.0 or higher, Netscape Communicator v4.0 or higher, America Online (AOL) v4.0 or higher.*

By now, most—if not all—information professionals working in the library industry have heard of chat-reference services. This is a service that uses software in order to either bypass or speed up the transactions that e-mail reference services provide.

With many software vendors emerging, including a fee-based service from Yahoo, libraries have a wide array of options and bells and whistles to choose from. One particular chat software that has emerged is eLibrarian, a product that is marketed and sold by Digi-Net Technologies. Current users of this software include OhioLink (academic consortium of libraries in Ohio), University of Notre Dame, Skagit Valley College, and Health Sciences Library Consortium in Pennsylvania.

eLibrarian is available in two price packages. One package includes hosting by Digi-Net; the institution runs the operator console at its site. Alternatively, an institution may choose to set up and run the server locally. This review was done with servers hosted by Digi-Net.

Installation for this software is relatively simple. The console installation comprises a self-executable file of about 12MB in size and is available for a variety of operating systems. After the installation, accounts for operators will have to be set up. There is no limit to the number of operator accounts you can create or installations you can perform on your institution's computers. There is, however, a limit to the number of operators who can log on simultaneously. For those institutions that might experience a high number of reference questions, having two or more concurrent operator licenses might be a good choice.

After performing the installation and establishing operator accounts, the system administrator will have to embed a JavaScript into the HTML page that will feature this service. The JavaScript displays an image that indicates whether or not the librarian is currently available. Customization for images and colors prior to the service going live can be made by contacting representatives of Digi-Net.

Like the many other chat-software vendors, eLibrarian offers the ability to push Web pages, push automatic

or canned messages, and co-browse. The versatility to handle chat requests originating from a variety of operator platforms was a strength found in eLibrarian. Other strong features included the ability to customize features on the operator's console. Everything from the changing of skins, sounds, notifications, and establishing filters was available for each console installation. If you acquire more than one license, it may be a good idea to limit the authority or access rights that allow for unique customization.

Another strong feature of this software is the ability to query the individual requesting a chat session by asking questions or selecting answers before a chat session has been initiated. Again, this is a feature that is totally customizable and could be tailored to each institutional need. Another unique feature is the ability to smart-route chats depending on where the chat box is located on an institution's page. For example, if a chat box was located on a branch library's page, you can send calls originating from this location to specific operators. Another great feature is the ability to see when a user is on the page your chat box located on. The console will display the type of browser, operating system, time-on-page, and more.

Other features include the ability to route users to exit surveys which are basically HTML forms the institution creates to acquire information on the quality of the chat service. The ability to retrieve chat transcripts from either the main operator or other operators can also be a useful function if you choose to look up questions that needed follow-up. When it gets busy at the reference desk, an operator can also transfer an entire chat session to another operator who may be logged on as a backup. eLibrarian provides the ability to e-mail chat transcripts to users if e-mails are prompted for before a chat session begins. Finally eLibrarian provides an enhanced

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Web access for gathering detailed statistics. Statistics will show, among other things, number and length of chat sessions, and page referral.

Some downfalls of this software included notification, co-browsing, and the copying and pasting of text. Notification can be a major concern for libraries. With only a bell ring, or other small sound, a chat request might be missed, especially when the operator might have other windows open or might have the speakers turned off at the reference desk. A Digi-Net software representative said that plans for making chat requests more noticeable were in the works. Co-browsing runs with the same Hipbone technology that is used in

other live customer service products. It was found that the time it took to initiate a co-browsing session was noticeable and in some cases froze the browser. With the current version of this software you cannot do the simple right-click, copy, and paste of text. Instead you have to rely on the key presses Ctrl+C and Ctrl+V to do these functions. This can be a hindrance when you are trying to copy text or URL addresses to the end user in a chat session.

Having a product that works on multiple platforms, is customizable, and has other unique features are probably the highlights of this software. Customer support seemed very eager to sell the product, but fell

short on communication afterward. When trying to contact tech support or find answers to questions dealing with technical programs, it was often necessary to ask time and time again only to be told that the problem was being looked at. Overall, eLibrarian's strengths did not outweigh the weaknesses for this particular software. According to Russell Garabelis, Digi-Net's Media Relations manager, eLibrarian's software development team is currently working on incorporating an artificial intelligence engine with a knowledge base, voice-over IP, email integration, enhanced co-browsing and enhanced reporting.—Hector Escobar Jr., *University of Notre Dame Libraries*

### Correction

During our editorial revision of Laura Cohen's article in the June 2004 issue of *ITAL*, "Issues in URL Management for Digital Collections," on pages 42–49, we inadvertently made changes that introduced the following errors into the text:

1. The text published on page 45, "An example is the starting point URL to set a session variable and retrieve the file for the FirstSearch database WorldCat [URL is shown]," should read as follows:

An example is the starting point URL for the FirstSearch database WorldCat, <http://firstsearch.oclc.org/dbname=WorldCat;done=referer;FSIP>, which in one particular instance becomes <http://firstsearch.oclc.org/html/webscript.html:%3Asessionid=sp04sw01-48488-ddrpn8iv-6944q4:sessionid=sp04sw01-48488-ddrpn8iv-6944q4> to set a session variable and retrieve the file.

2. In the list of references on page 49, the trailing slash was removed from the URLs in references 9 and 12. In an article that makes the case for inclusion of trailing slashes, this omission was inappropriate.

*ITAL* regrets these errors.

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