

Let the Computer Do the Talking: Text to Speech Programs - 1

by Vanessa Kier

Perhaps you've heard that one good way to catch errors in your manuscript and tell how well your words flow is to read your work out loud. This can be a problem if you're like me and hate the sound of your own voice. Thankfully, there are software programs that will convert your text to spoken word. But how well do they work? Is it even possible to find a program that renders speech that doesn't sound like a computer?

The first place I looked for text-to-speech conversion was under the Accessibility option on my computer. My MacBook Pro (Intel, running Snow Leopard) came with a program called VoiceOver. This program is primarily intended to help the visually impaired. There are a number of voices to choose from, ranging from silly (hysterical, bubbles, cellos) to normal (Alex is the male voice I went with). Once I figured out how to activate the program I tried getting it to read part of my manuscript. Since this program is not set up for editing purposes, the largest chunk I was able to get it to read continuously was a paragraph.

Also, VoiceOver doesn't work in all applications. Since the program I use to compose my manuscripts, Storyist, isn't one of the compatible programs, I had to copy my text into an acceptable program, in this case OpenOffice.org. Once there the voice read my text without problem. However, this would be too time-consuming to use for an entire manuscript.

My old Windows XP machine has an accessibility read-aloud program called Narrator. However, that only spoke aloud descriptions of actions being taken by the computer, window titles, and high-level menu options. I couldn't get it to read text from my story.

Next I tried NaturalReader's free version www.naturalreaders.com. I tried this on my Mac, but they also make a Windows version. This was very easy to use. You get a selection of voices that is slightly larger than the native Mac voices. There is a small window called a MiniBoard that you can use in two ways. You can copy and paste text into this screen to be read aloud. Or you can click on the cursor icon, go into your document and highlight the desired text, then tell the program to play. I was able to successfully have NaturalReader read text from all of my word processing programs, including Storyist.

The paid, profession version of NaturalReader offers the feature of exporting the text reading session into an audio file, which could presumably then be loaded onto an MP3 player or other portable device.

I then tried the free trial version of TextAloud (Windows only) and its Mac counterpart GhostReader (www.nextup.com). In order to choose the text to be read aloud you open the target document from within the program itself. The document contents will be loaded into the main body of the reading pane. It supports both Microsoft Word and OpenOffice.org documents. I opened a fairly small file on my Windows machine and it took a while to open, but this is probably mainly due to the less than robust configuration of the computer. The large file I opened on my Mac loaded quickly.

The voice in TextAloud was okay, but not as natural as I'd like. However, the full version apparently comes with more realistic voices. GhostReader lets you download trial versions of Acapela's voices,

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which are better. Both programs can export the session to an audio file. GhostReader can also export directly into iTunes.

VocaTalk (Windows only, www.vocamedia.com) turns text into podcasts. After you've copied and pasted the text into the VocaTalk window you have the option of adding background music. Also, if you have all three of the voice options checked, the voices will alternate reading paragraphs. The voices weren't particularly good, but you can download packages of more natural sounding voices such as Acapela and AT&T Natural Voices.

So, how realistic are the voices?

Despite the claims of being "natural" voices, all of the voices associated with these programs still had an edge of stilted computer to them. Even the voices touted as being the most natural sounding weren't quite the same as a human voice. I wouldn't want to listen to them for hours in a row, but listening to them read short chunks of my manuscript was tolerable. The voices paused appropriately as punctuation dictated and they did a good job of reading character names. Acronyms, however, were a problem. They read the abbreviation SSU as "sue" rather than say each letter S-S-U.

Are these programs easy to work with?

Yes. All of the programs I reviewed here offered relatively quick and easy ways to get the program to read large chunks of continuous text. The speed of your computer will definitely have an impact if you choose software where you open the entire file within the program.

Are these programs worth the money?

For me, probably not. I consider these programs more of a luxury than a necessity, since hearing my story isn't a current part of my writing process. But for someone who relies on hearing their stories and wants another option besides reading their words themselves or getting a friend to do it, these programs offer a viable alternative.

What about the time factor?

After cost, the biggest problem I see with using one of these programs is time. I don't have the time to sit down and listen to my entire manuscript being read unless I can fold laundry or otherwise be productive while listening. Yet even the most mundane task takes a little bit of my focus away from what I'm hearing. So...if I'm only half-listening to the audio, will I really catch the syntax errors or missed words that is the whole point of this exercise? I'll have to play with this some more to see.

In the meantime, if I'm struggling with a particular piece of dialogue I might give the free program a shot and let it help me get a feel for flow and pacing.

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