



# LET US PLAY

## GAME SOUND SPECIAL

It's a massive business, but audio for games is still often in-house, under budgeted, and undervalued. Is this changing? AUDIO MEDIA talks to games audio guru James Hannigan about now, and next.

The big picture in the realm of video games is big indeed: global revenue from computer game titles is projected to approach \$40 billion by 2006, making it larger than the film industry in terms of receipts. (A good thing, too – the cost of producing a top-tier game title can approach \$30 million or more, as much as many feature films.)

However, while what's on the screen often takes perceptual centre stage amongst players and pundits alike, what rivals the visuals in bombast and creativity might ultimately make or break a title or even an entire platform: big sound is catching up to big picture in the video game business, and it's impacting the industry's bottom line.

### In On The Act

One indication of this trend is how major record labels, increasingly anxious to find new revenue streams for their music content to offset piracy losses and to promote new artists in a densely crowded entertainment landscape, have embraced video games. In 2004, Vivendi Universal, the label with the largest global market share, used their fashion-forward Interscope marque to release and heavily promote an eight-CD boxed set featuring music from a make-believe radio station that plays in the background of Take Two's wildly successful *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*. In technical terms, it's referred to as "diegetic" or "source" music – audio emanating from the 'game world', as opposed to a conventional score existing as if for an audience outside the game. The music, though, is quite real, including tracks from Willie Nelson, Soundgarden, and Public Enemy.

Electronics Arts recently established a joint venture with long-established song publisher Cherry Lane Music through which EA will sign and develop its own original artists to create new music for its games rather than license existing songs by known artists. The new music will, in turn, be repurposed for applications such as ringtones, ringbacks, film music, and commercials.

Those who create and work with game audio are quickly becoming a legitimate rubric within the entertainment media industry, just as sound designers have for films over the last two decades. The AES now dedicates complex technical papers to establish and encourage uniform standards for game sound, just as the industry did for

surround sound in cinemas two decades ago.

According to the International Game Developers Association (IDGA), top audio engineers, sound designers and composers are earning six-figure salaries in some instances, with an average annual income of \$57,500. Two of the leading entertainment awards institutions, UK's BAFTA and NARAS, which sponsors the GRAMMY Awards, have both recently created awards categories for game audio. As the IGDA's website enthusiastically puts it, "It's been a truism for years that game audio is neglected, overlooked, under budgeted, and otherwise given a short shrift. With the most recent wave of gaming platforms, audio capabilities are more closely matching visual power, allowing for improved sonic standards that we've long enjoyed in other media..."

### Hannigan's Angle

James Hannigan, four-time music nominee and joint winner of a BAFTA Award in 2000 and composer on over 40 games, including *Sim Theme Park*, *Freelancer*, *Republic: The Revolution*, and *Evil Genius*, has wrestled with the ideology of game audio, arriving at some interesting conclusions.

"Games occupy their own part of the entertainment technology universe," Hannigan asserts, and sound is a key strategy for establishing and delineating that perception apart from the contexts of cinema and television. It's not unlike how early movies were filmed from the same perspective as a theatre stage – the analogy that most pioneering filmmakers and their audiences defaulted to.

"With games, we need to consider the 'two-way traffic' of information between the player/viewer and the gameworld – the game's diegetic space," Hannigan explains. "It becomes more difficult to identify the boundaries of the gameworld than we can a film's story world – it is as if the screen itself ceases to become a barrier, and the viewer has become a participant in the story world in a way that combines the worlds of the viewers and the characters they control or influence. Players are neither sealed in a game nor solely watching it."

To Hannigan, how sound is used in a game largely determines how the game is experienced on an emotional level. "Some games challenge the boundaries of where sound effects begin and music ends, where it becomes unclear as to whether music and sound emanates from the gameworld or is added 'on top' for some commentary



A still from Republic: The Revolution (Feral Interactive).

reason," he says. "Music, for example, still often exists in games for narrative support, but this enforces the idea we belong outside the story world as we play, rather than being a part of one. When we recognise that the player is both audience and participant in games we can start thinking of the gameworld as a kind of 'fusion reactor' for sound and music content, free of the tyranny of older forms of classification and rendering it inappropriate to think of each as functioning independently."

### An Expensive Game

But as the stakes edge towards the triple-digit billions of dollars, the realm of the game developer is going to bump heads with marketing departments and mega-corporations that will

seek to use one content form as one more strategy to sell other content – games to sell music, music to sell games, both to sell movies and clothing.

Hannigan views this pragmatically. "I tend to think of licensed music as only one angle in games," he says. "I see markets converging, but still see a role for [original] music in games in the same way it has a place in films – giving games a unique and consistent musical identity. Games like GTA and EA Sports' titles are still fairly exceptional in this way and rely on having some kind of device in the game justifying its use, such as an in-car radio in GTA or through a kind of 'TV magazine' approach in sports games. Overall, I don't think that approach to music represents anything new in entertainment, but it can obviously mean big business and will continue.

"The industry is fragmenting and I think games don't just mean one thing to one group of people anymore – just as music has also fragmented and defines the groups and cohorts people want to be associated with. Some want to make deeper games; others think of games as just fun distractions for people returning from the pub. But by paying attention to the music, in making it good and in understanding the dynamic between music, sound, and the game, the industry weaves the game more deeply into the lifestyle of the consumer. It's a challenge in both the musical and technological domains and where they intersect."

In fact, as games become one more cog in vast multinational entertainment conglomerates, Hannigan sees that as a way to break the process of game development from that of a kind of professional elite to one with more connection to their users, to make the notion of the game as seamless part of everyday life as music already is. "The industry still has a lot of people seeking only to please their peers," says Hannigan. "But the more successful developers increasingly take a more holistic view of games, want technology to be transparent and, ironically, have probably learnt through film the importance of sound and music. So I think it's fair to say that in being just as competent at using sound as the film industry is can be seen as a good starting point. Whether it moves forward to being something unique, making sense only in games, I feel is

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James Hannigan and his company Post Linear Creations are based at Pinewood Film Studios near London.

dependent on whether it's good business to or not, which is why I think outsiders may ultimately re-shape games when they get their hands on the technology required to make them – as these would be people free of any notions of 'gaming tradition'. The same process took place during the collapse of the Hollywood Studio system, when ordinary folks could obtain movie cameras. Likewise, in music, with the advent of accessible recording technology."

### The Human Element

Eventually, Hannigan argues, games will attain the same perceptual status among consumers as films have, in that the public will begin to perceive them as having been made by people instead of just companies. This trend is already underway with games that derive from Tom Clancy novels. "Anything that connects people with the art helps the art move forward," he stresses. "Michael Giacchino, the composer for the game *Medal of Honor*, crossed over into film and scored *The Incredibles*, which is a fairly unprecedented leap into film at such a high level for a first-time blockbuster composer. I myself am represented by Air Edel in London, traditionally an agent for film and TV composers, so it's pleasing to think that one point of such cross-pollination is in the music of games."

### PEOPLE POWER

James Hannigan makes the case for film-like recognition for the people behind games production, and the evolution of a unique production culture for the game design industry.

*Q: Is the game world beginning to see star composers emerge from within its ranks?*

JH: Star composers are emerging, but they're rare. They're still the exception to rule because games adopt the 'in house' model of development, akin to the old Hollywood Studio system. Which I suppose means there is some scope for composers to be marketed as individuals, but the down side is that most of the industry wants an internal solution for everything. Name value counts for little in an industry without much of a human face and that affects everybody, really. Some are getting a name by doing something resembling film music very well, which is to be expected with so many filmic games around. I don't think there are too many composers around who are really doing much for games that couldn't be lifted from them and operate the same way in films or television, but hopefully that will change as the role becomes more specialised.

*Q: Will the traditional role of the producer in music have any relevance in game music?*

JH: Maybe so, although I think composers are increasingly

taking on package deals and composing/producing in a holistic way, mixing and engineering their own work (which many film composers also now do). The production side is integral to the composition in many cases, as music becomes more sound-based and less [melodic]. Also, I think composers and sound designers will increasingly produce music as one from the beginning in many games of the future. I see more convergence of roles in games than we now see in films.

*Q: Will game creators – music, direction and so on – ever attain the status that film directors like Ridley Scott, or composers like John Williams have?*

JH: I don't think they will while the industry presents only a corporate face. I'd like to see it happen, because I think it is people, and not just companies, who excite the public most – as evidenced by the public response to films, music, TV and so on. I think the industry is worried about having to pay famous people, but is missing the value such people could add in a broader sense in making games mainstream.

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