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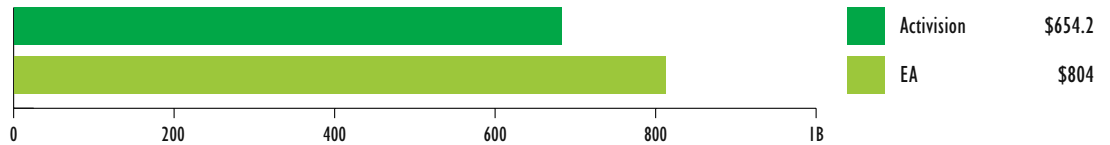
THE GAMING ISSUE



CAN VIDEOGAMES
SAVE THE MUSIC
INDUSTRY?

VIDEOGAME COMPANY SALES (M\$)

Source: DFC Intelligence (May 2008)



MARC CANHAM,
Composer,
Nimrod Productions

THE COMPOSER WITH

As a composer, how do you view this area?

I find games challenging as a composition task because of their interactive nature. Unlike score music, you never really hear it as you did in your head. You tend to write in chunks of music ranging from 10-seconds to one-minute pieces. The interactivity of the games means the music chops and changes. You can test out music in games to see how it flows, but you'll never really recreate the flow and movement of the person actually playing the game.

How many incarnations would music go through to fit?

You'd be surprised how many times we don't actually get to review our music. Because we have done a lot of interactive music in the past, we tend to get it right; but that's only through trial and error. For the latest game I worked on – Far Cry 2, which is due out in October – the developer was based in Montreal; they were a very intelligent team, and I would say that not all games development teams are intelligent. They got me out there on several occasions to discuss the creativity and watch the implementation in the early stages. We recorded that score at Abbey Road so there was no chance of recording it and then coming back and saying, "Shit – this doesn't work". I did mock-ups using orchestral samples to give them a flavour of how the overall sound would work – although this is obviously never as good as the real deal.

How important are budgets for you?

Budgetary issues can hamper what you do. But that's because the games companies never factored it in. Music is still referred to in this world as the 'bastard child of videogames' because it is the end thought process of a lot of producers; and I find they don't often have the language to talk about music in a very professional way. Companies like EA, Ubisoft, Sony, and Microsoft were the first to adopt more professional practices as they had the money to throw at this sector; they led the way here.

Is money being properly assigned to music in games?

Games are so massive and take so long to make that there can be a team of up to 150 people working on one by the end. They are all making this one product that is backend-weighted; it is only in the last month

that it comes alive and people can test it out. It's such a costly exercise to make a videogame – compared to what you can make an album for or what you can make an independent film for – so the risks are very high for the publisher. That is all reflected in how the budgets are carved up. I'm seeing less games being made now and people saying they are spending more time on the quality of the games; or at least they say they are, although I still see a few turkeys out there.

How do you see the use of existing music in games versus commissioned works?

At Nimrod, we have the composition side, fronted by me, and also the 'soundlike' side. There is a third wing where we provide music supervision. For the Driver: Parallel Lines game, I actually worked with people like Public Enemy and Arthur Baker to generate new material with them and produce them; this was to ensure that the company hiring me wasn't taking a massive risk as they knew they'd get something that fitted. On top of that, I did a 60-minute score. It was an interesting mix of existing music, new material being generated by well-known artists, and an original score. Licensing is exceptionally important for the right projects. You do get some games where there is a mass of music that's just like a radio station in the background – something like a racing game where tracks fit a certain tempo; but you're not really telling a story and there's no narrative to follow.

How do rights work here when you create music?

I'd love to be on a royalty – especially if the game sells 60M units! I'd be retired by now! It doesn't work like that, unfortunately. It's very much as case of buy-out agreements. Your notoriety in the industry dictates your fee and if you have a name that either suggests, to the client, reliability and quality, or, for the consumer, a great soundtrack, then your value increases.

Can games be sold on the composer's name?

I don't think music ever shifts a product like that. It can enhance a product and make it good, and subconsciously make it better in the mind of the person playing it; but if you have a crap film or a crap game and put some great music on it, it is still a crap film or game and it won't help it sell any more units.



Is this opportunity just not being seized properly?

I think it's disgusting of some games companies to commission all this music and then do fuck all with it. We are very happy working with an aggregator to get our music on iTunes and releasing soundtracks online as we do them. Some of them end up selling 70,000 copies and some have only sold 1,000. But that's not the point of it for me; the point for me is to just get it out there. Games companies are now more nervous about selling copies of their games than they are about selling copies of the soundtrack.

What can music bring to a game?

Not every project we do is interactive and is more a case of looping pieces of music. The problem is that it's so disruptive with the game play that you don't really tell a story through it very well due to the fact that you can suddenly jump into interactive music. Sometimes the simpler you keep it, the more effective it is. If music is written well, is produced well, and sounds great, the power of it – fingers crossed the interactive engine is on your side and is playing the right music at the right time – can be as big as it is in film. Music here shouldn't be any less powerful than it is in film. You just have to work with the devil of interactivity and hope that it all pans out.

How complex is music to put in games?

The guys in the studios – who programme my music into the game and tie in the interactivity properly so it all plays at the right time and in the right place – have to deal with the biggest jigsaw puzzle in the world. They are essentially my editors. Your fate is very much in their hands; until I actually play the final game when it's out, I tend to not know exactly what they've done with the music. It is quite a leap of faith.

Can music make games more artistic and creative?

Games are only now turning the corner into becoming what I would consider emotionally- and creatively-charged objects of entertainment. They can be very shallow – and the majority of games are very shallow in regards to what they actually convey as an artistic message. We are now going into the artistic world of videogames. Now that technology is only going to make very small incremental improvements

with regards to what we can do (because the current generation of consoles are so powerful), we will get people with a film director mentality rather than a games director mentality making games. The games industry needs people who are visionary film directors and not geeks who are good at programming. You need people who don't necessarily have a handle on the technical aspects of it all but who are just worried about the message. We are on the verge of getting into a very creative and artistic phase. We are on Day 1, but we're evolving into doing it very well. We're at the stage now where we can move into being more artistic.

Do music consumers engage with music differently on games than they would engage with music on a CD?

Games have the opportunity to be the most powerful way of getting music across to people. The problem we have is that games companies are really bad at talking about music and bigging it up. This industry should be leading the way in how we promote entertainment products and all the different elements tied up in a game in order that people get it, understand it, and enjoy it. But they don't put out the soundtrack; they don't even put the music on the adverts.

Is it really the case where the games industry doesn't fully trumpet the creative use of music in its games?

It takes a lot of people who are not at the front to scream and shout about it to even have a ripple of interest for the music. There is money to be made on soundtrack sales – and games companies can use this to help recoup their sound budget. This is something that frustrates me on every project where you have to knock on the door 100 times to even get a little bit of coverage or website exposure to get the message across that there is a soundtrack and it's really good. Sometimes you get a message through and it goes in the right direction, but it doesn't happen enough in my opinion. It's a time-consuming job to get product out there, let people know about it, and do it all in a coordinated and organised fashion. The games people are so slow to pick up on it and they are so absorbed in the graphics. The musical standard is now overtaking the graphical standard. We're in a position now where there is a lot of good product out there but very few people know about. ●