

The Guild of Canadian Film Composers is a national association of professional music composers and producers for film, television, and new media.

COMPOSING FOR GAMES by Mike Freedman & Brian Germann XBOX AND BEYOND

Video games have come a long way since the days of Pong. Now, they are faster, sexier and highly addictive.

Video games have rocketed past movies in mass appeal and the market shows no signs of slowing down. In 2004-2005, video games generated over \$10 billion in revenue. And even though only a small number of composers are currently employed in this area, it is a rapidly growing field with many opportunities on the horizon. Composers are finding refreshing and challenging work in this interactive and dynamic medium.

Technical and Musical Aspects of Game Composing

Writing music for video games and multimedia has its own set of unique challenges that are specific to the genre. "The music is interactive compared to working with film and television. The concept of interactivity in games is insane," says Nayan Williams, a Toronto based game composer.

Current video games are much more complex than those of ten years ago. Now, games can be played for hours and hours. Most media composers are used to writing music that is linear, while game composers speak about a



highly complex, non-linear process to composition. As scenes evolve and change, so must the music. The music should be poised to morph, grow and diminish depending on where the player takes the game. "Based on the gameplay, we determine how many levels of intensity will be required for a specific

part of the game," explains Williams. "For instance, say the player enters a dark cave—that's low intensity. But as they move forward they see a corpse lying on the ground—a trigger point for medium intensity, and then the player keeps moving forward until this creature runs out and attacks you—trigger point for high intensity."

Williams points out the two different methods for writing music in video games. "You're either doing cut scenes, referred to as 'in-game cinematics,' which is essentially writing to picture. Those cues are less intense and more ambient," he says. However, writing the "in-game" music is much different. "When working on 'in-game' or 'gameplay,' there is no quick time or pre-rendered material at all. The only thing I'll have to start with is artist's concept such as character or environment sketches, the storyline of the game and some reference material."

Since much of the music is written without being locked to picture, producers will provide reference tracks (instead of temp tracks) to the composer to give them an idea of what they're

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Gaming, continued

looking for. Although in most cases, composers are working with sound libraries, higher budget games have created opportunities for full orchestration with a number of games featuring serious Hollywood composers.

Being a game composer calls for versatility. "I've flirted with reggae, dance, blues, country, rock, to name a few, and the intros and extros are usually in orchestral style," says Robert Marchand, a Montreal based composer for children's CD ROMs.

Game composers also find the genre allows them great creative freedom. There is much opportunity for composers to have input in the musical direction. "The gaming industry" says Williams, "is relatively cutting edge and gives you flexibility in terms of experimenting with different things."

The Business of Game Composing

Video game companies can be separated into two main categories: Developers and Publishers. Larger companies such as Electronic Arts (EA) are both. The function

of the Publisher is similar to a Film Producer insofar as it approves the budget, provides the financing and has final approval and sign-off privileges. They may have an A&R person who licenses the commercial music for use in popular video games. The Developer acts on behalf of the Publisher to design, implement and produce the game.

Depending on the size of the Developer, the composer works closely with the Audio Director, Sound Director or Sound Supervisor to craft the music. Interactive music is key in games today and it requires a composer to think about foreshadowing, transitions, and replaying music with variations to allow for the game's large content requirement.

Graig Robertson, a former staff composer for Radical Entertainment states: "The market is good in Vancouver for composing music for video games. There are gaming companies such as Radical, Rock Star and Electronic Arts that employ both staff and freelance composers."

The current trend is to hire "name-composers." A gaming company may contract a said

composer to write only the title theme. They would pay a large commission in addition to negotiating royalties after "x amount" of sales. The company may then employ its staff composers/less-known composers to write the remaining bulk of the music at a "buy-out" price, which does not include any royalties. According to Robertson, "an in-house composer on salary eliminates the motivation to rush the compositional process, and may not necessarily produce the right fit of music. Although a freelance composer would also try to compose the right fit of music, he would consider the time factor more prevalent as he would likely be paid by the number of minutes of music delivered or a flat fee. So, even though games usually have a huge profit margin, royalties are generally not paid to the composer unless he is a 'name-composer.'"

A Developer works with a master budget given from the Publisher, and assigns sub-budgets for all of the components of the game's development and design. The budget for music production is generally set upfront. Therefore, a composer's best chance to negotiate any royalties would be directly with the Publisher – but this is unlikely to occur.

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Gaming, continued

Robertson recommends obtaining a “revision clause” included in the contract, especially with buy-out contracts, to avoid endless revisions to the musical compositions.

The manufacturing of a video game goes through many developments and a composer can spend anywhere from a few months to over a year working on just one title. Marc Baril, a staff composer at Radical Entertainment, says one advantage of being a staff composer is that it gives him the opportunity to play the game and listen to how his music fits all the various levels. In addition, being in-house allows him to work on the game in its early stages, which can reduce the need for revisions. Baril also notes that working as a staff composer gives him more liberties to make suggestions to the designers on how and when the music should play. “Seeing the music well-implemented is very important,” says Baril. “Game play can last between twenty to forty hours so a composer needs to make repetitions without it sounding repetitive – it should provide variety and balance.”

Baril discussed how the gaming industry is involving composers earlier in the production process. “Projects often get canned for vari-

ous reasons so it’s good to be a staff composer and not have to worry whether a project will make it to the market.” He also offers advice to composers thinking about writing for video games. “Try to give extra value on your first gig by really understanding the game play and how your music could enhance it. This will help you be successful at getting future contracts. It’s not the music production—it’s how it’s implemented in the game.”

Robertson adds that “the video game industry is becoming similar to the film industry in that the unions are becoming more involved. For example, cinematic games that make use of film footage or actor’s voices via sound bytes go through ACTRA. Also, the AFM has revised new rates for music used in media, DVDs and CD-ROMs. And licensing popular music means contracting with the record companies.”

Robertson also notes that while he was at Radical Entertainment, *The Hulk* and *Dark Angel* were the first games they developed that made use of “interactive music.” He goes on to say that “the audio is the only ‘real thing’ in a game as it is created from samples of real live instruments as opposed to

the computer programming which generates the video elements.” Therefore, the idea of taking video games to “the next level” with improvements to the audio by using features such as 5.1 Surround Sound is an example of the importance music has in the future of multimedia. **SN**

Nayan Williams is a Toronto based game composer who has been scoring video games for several years. He has completed six games for both the Microsoft Xbox and PC platforms and is currently working on next generation titles for the Xbox360. Williams worked for Digital Extremes on games such as Pariah and Unreal Tournament. Most recently, he composed for Warpath with Grooves Games in Canada

Robert Marchand is a Montreal based composer, who has spent the past ten years doing music and sound design for interactive, educational CD ROM games for children. He composed for Mia Mouse (Vol. 1-4), which has been distributed in forty countries. Robert is also well established as a composer for film, TV and commercials.

Marc Baril is a staff composer at Radical Entertainment based in Vancouver and has 14 years of experience composing music for video games.

Graig Robertson was a former staff composer at Radical Entertainment and is now a freelance composer based in Vancouver with 10 years experience posing music for video games.

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