

FULL CIRCLE: Videogame Music & All That Jazz

by John Broomhall on 07/22/14 09:27:00 am

Reflections on re-imagining the distinctive soundtrack of a classic videogame

Since my first break into the astonishing world of videogames as in-house composer at the legendary publisher MicroProse, it's been my privilege and pleasure to contribute to a slew of groundbreaking, best-of-breed titles. This journey has taken me from composer, to sound designer, to audio director, to head of audio, to game producer and back again. I've gone from creating bleeps and bloops for Tetris Amiga to writing piano, string orchestra, and choir score as co-composer (alongside Lance Hayes) for Xbox One's spectacular launch title Forza Motorsport 5. I have a lot to be thankful for.



Just recently, I've had a cause to reflect that there's really so much we take for granted these days in game music. Our console productions have become massive and the music for today's 'quad-A' top-ten hit will mostly likely have been recorded by an A1 orchestra in a world-class studio, often using the best Grammy award-winning recording talent and musicians on the planet. That was certainly the case with Forza Motorsport 5, which took us from Los Angeles' Sonic Fuel, to San Francisco's Skywalker Sound, and all the way to New York City's Avatar Studios.

What a contrast to creating music in the early to mid 90s when full 'CD-quality' music, let alone the budget for live musicians, was just a dream – sure, you figured it would come, but it seemed a long way

off. Back then, it was hard to foresee that one day we'd no longer ask 'Who can we afford to write the music for our game?' but rather, 'Who is the *right* person?' In reality, the job at hand was half writing music and half trying to make it sound any good at all on the rudimentary midi/synth technology in the back of a PC. Having cut my teeth in regular recording studios, it was quite a culture shock.



However, to my amazement – and in spite of the prevailing technical restrictions – two of my midi game scores in particular have prompted votes of confidence and heartfelt expressions of appreciation from fans all over the world ever since the games were shipped. Why these two? It's hard to put my finger on it, except there was somehow an absolutely innate appropriateness to both the content and the primitive sound – and both titles were created by genius developers who gave me plenty of space, trusting me to do my thing. With the commercial risks of today's humungous console productions it's hard to imagine that happening in quite the same way now.

One of these noted games was the original UFO: Enemy Unknown (known as X-COM: UFO Defense in North America) -- and who wouldn't want that title on their résumé? The other memorable production was the rather wonderful Transport Tycoon. One was a spooky, foreboding bag of gloominess; the other a jolly, upbeat bucket of standalone jazzy, funky, blues tunes – which some diehard fans have subsequently learnt to play, posting videos of themselves performing them live.

Furthermore, hacked Transport Tycoon midi files have been out there for years with many 'unofficial' YouTube versions created by people using their own idiosyncratic hardware for playback. Whilst deeply flattered by the interest, I had always hoped, at some point to produce a set of definitive versions for myself using the latest music tech and live players – an updated Transport Tycoon music set I could really 'hang my hat on.'

Writing the original music for Transport Tycoon was a world away from Forza's superb music production values. Back then, most game players had a nine voice FM soundcard, although sixteen voice GM (General Midi) soundcards were rapidly taking hold. The idea was that there would be a universal instrument set standard for soundcards so people like me could guarantee their music would sound right on any given board. To make the soundcards do anything useful in our DOS (yes, DOS!) games required the audio programming skills of ace coder, Andrew Parton, with whom I was lucky enough to work during those early days at MicroProse. The trouble was, in reality, none of these GM soundcards actually sounded completely alike, so the 'universal standard' was something of a joke to the discerning ear.



Fortunately, the music writing for Transport Tycoon started with a sense of creative freedom. Transport Tycoon and X-COM are both examples of game developments where, as the composer, I enjoyed time and space to drink in the visuals, experience the game play and let the game tell *me* what would work. Transport Tycoon's distinct music style wasn't imposed; it was a natural expression of my experience of the game itself. I remember my boss knocking the door and handing me a disc, saying, "You'll probably be doing the music for this." At that point, I recall the game was under evaluation by the Quality Assurance department who were already talking in hallowed terms of game auteur Chris Sawyer's ninja design and coding skills. I sat and watched (what we would now call) the attract sequence, and it wasn't long before my brain had locked on to a tempo which just felt right. Then came the original first riff you hear and that's when I knew it was going to strongly reflect a sense of time passing and travel and movement in a funky, cool, vibrant way. The fact it came out jazzy was incidental, but it seemed to fit perfectly at once in the game, and the music melded with the player experience. Not only did Chris Sawyer approve, but the UK publisher in chief, Paul Hibbard (also a muso), was shaking my hand.

Very soon after, I had a vacation scheduled. Whilst I couldn't physically take the game away with me, its images and vibe were continually in my mind - so much so, that two or three days later, I awoke at 4am with 70% or more of Transport Tycoon's jazzy, funky riffs and motifs running round my head. I lay there in the dark, desperately trying to retain them all until morning, but in the end, knew I had no choice and crept out of bed, as far away from my snoozing wife as possible, grabbed a dictaphone and started making mini recordings of beats and melodies and riffs as fast as I could in comic hushed tones.

Thank goodness the tape survived the holiday because back at the office, I used it to painstakingly transcribe all those raw ideas to Cubase (music sequencer) and then set about crafting each composition and production, bringing as much of my pre-games regular recording studio methodology and approach to mixing as I could within the confines of the technology.

I'd already learned that writing on better sounding soundcards and then downgrading to a basic Soundblaster or AdLib card was much tougher than going the other way, so I started out on the humble FM cards and, once the tunes sounded as good as possible, I set about upgrading them for the Roland's LAPC-1 and for their General Midi flagship card, the SCC-1. Then, because the other so-called General

Midi soundcards of the day, from Turtlebeach to Gravis Ultrasound, were all slightly different, I tweaked and finessed a separate version of the midi files for each and every one of the main players. That's how badly we wanted the music to sound good on each hardware variant (which, incidentally, is why I'm sometimes a little frustrated by the hacked versions!).

QA was right – the game was a masterpiece and 20 years and several million sales later, the rest is computer game history. Meanwhile, here I am, still working in this brilliant business I love and which has been good to me. One negative of a 24/7 games development existence is that ironically, videogames kind of stole my jazz mojo - that original love of playing live keys sadly relegated to late night post-BAFTA awards hotel lounges or last-night-of-E3 piano bars.



Which is why, in recent years, I've made it my business, quite literally, to brush up my keyboard chops and get out there playing jazz and Blues at every opportunity. It's been an absolute blast and something that's often made me think of how cool it would be to re-visit the music of the Transport Tycoon project – a game so close to my heart – and recreate the soundtrack with today's music technology using live players - without a SoundBlaster or Adlib in sight.

So nothing could have pleased me more than to unexpectedly find myself talking to Mr. Sawyer recently about creating a completely re-booted version of the 22 jazz music tracks for the newly resurrected Transport Tycoon on iOS and Android.

Delighted to be engaged with this long desired labour of love, I set about getting the ancient ye olde Atari Cubase files up and running in Cubase 7 (then the latest version) and found that amazingly, I was still able to read most of the information from the original floppy discs. By a convoluted import/export process via three versions of Steinberg's ubiquitous sequencing software, I managed to get each track up and running.



But I soon realised the original arrangements weren't going to satisfy. After all, I didn't just want to regurgitate the past; I wanted to stamp the tunes with the identity of the musician and keyboard soloist I am today. We've recorded some fantastic musicians who have graced the tracks with their considerable skills - most notably **Patsy Gamble** (saxophones) and **Steve Trigg** (trumpet/flugelhorn). Some of the top lines and solos have remained intact from the original (though often subtly reinterpreted), whilst in other cases, I just said to them, 'You know what? Let's wipe the slate clean - just do your thing,' and they killed it.

It's been a wonderful experience; one that's given me even more incentive to celebrate and highlight the amazing journey that videogame music in general has taken in recent years. Following the worldwide success of live games music events such as Videogames Live, we all now understand that there is a life for videogame music beyond the borders of games, and this is powerful and exciting. Gamers have a very strong connection with game music - much more so than movie music, in my opinion. That's why composer ace James Hannigan and I co-founded www.gamemusicconnect.com, specifically to celebrate and explore the art of videogame music and the extraordinary talent behind it.



No surprise then that Transport Tycoon's jazz, funk and Blues music is likely to get some live public outings too. It's long been an ambition of mine to bring together some of the superb closet jazz musicians lurking around this great industry of ours. So if you happen to be one of them, be sure to let me know. :)

So there it is - Transport Tycoon, full circle. Sometimes, just occasionally, it all comes together.

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