

The Sound of Change

In-game audio is changing. Periscope Studios MD **Jan Weikmeister** looks at why, and highlights three challenges currently defining the way sound professionals work...



Jan Weikmeister, graduate engineer in media technology, starting in the early 90's with 68000 assembler coding. Coming from a musical background he co-founded Periscope Studio in 2007. As one of its two managing directors he is responsible for business development.

Talking about audio within the industry leads to the following conclusion: everybody agrees that audio is often neglected, having less time and budget than other fields of game development.

Fortunately, most people agreeing with this opinion are equally convinced of the sheer beauty and psycho-physiological power of music and sound. Undoubtedly the full potential of interactive audio is far from being exhausted.

In our opinion there are three challenges worth being highlighted when it comes to the future of game audio. These three aren't necessarily connected and each needs its own approach, but our daily work shows us that we will have to deal with all of them to make our way forward.

CHALLENGE 1: NEW PLAYGROUNDS

The industry has undergone a massive metamorphosis; from core to casual, from retail to digital and from console to mobile. Games are now being produced for an enormous audience that likes to play all manner of games everywhere and at any time. The way these games are being produced and the kind of companies which produce them have shaped an attitude towards audio that sets up quite a task.

Game producers in companies that grow fast due to casual games hype can have less experience, lower budgets and have to produce more products in a shorter amount of time. This often results in crappy music and crappy sound for those games. Apart from that, we're all heavily restricted in terms of memory and device capabilities.

It's not about huge budgets and complex orchestra sessions in this case. It's about ingenuity and fun, and it is these two aspects which have driven us all in the beginning of game development. In those days it was all about finding a way to push as much of your game idea and cool chip tune into that tiny amount of RAM and let it knock your socks off.

Nowadays an army of curious new mobile, social and browser users are discovering gaming as their new field of entertainment – so they don't deserve crappy sound, do they?

The challenge is to cope with this new situation, with these new kinds of games and



an unbiased audience having vastly different expectations than the average gamer did in the past.

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Jan Weikmeister, Periscope

CHALLENGE 2: INTERACTIVE MUSIC

The second challenge is interactivity. When it comes to cinematic gaming experiences like open-world RPGs or interactive movies, interactive soundtracks will be the future of game audio. As we all know, the emotional power music which interacts seamlessly with the player and delivers a feeling of being completely immersed within the game has massive potential. Even though we've seen great aural accomplishments in games like *Bioshock*, *Dead Space* or *Crysis 2*, these wonderful soundtracks presumably cost the developer a lot of time, money and nerves.

On the other hand, we've seen technologies like iMUSE and the Directmusic Producer in Games like *Monkey Island* or *No One Lives Forever*, which delivered results so seamless and gorgeous that people most of the time didn't even realise how adaptive and innovative the soundtrack really was.

Unfortunately this midi-based approach couldn't keep up with the sound quality of professional studio recordings. Interactivity got sacrificed.

CHALLENGE 3: BOUNDLESS AUDIO

As the major productions are getting more and more complex and productions are likewise demanding more and more complex audio, the third challenge is what we like to call 'boundless audio'. To put it in a nutshell, one should have all the single elements of game audio in mind when creating a game or when you produce, compose or design audio for a game. Strangely enough we still have in-game situations where you don't hear what your next quest is because there's an explosion with huge orchestral music playing, and all of us know how disappointing a gaming experience can be when there's thrilling music and powerful sound effects but a bored actor is telling the story.

FUTURE SOUNDS

To sum it all up, at Periscope we believe that the future of game audio will force us as an audio studio to face three major challenges: being able to be creative and experimental with game audio for smaller games, having the knowhow and working intensively with game audio middleware to provide true audio interactivity, and not being able to just deliver music, sound design or voice-overs but deliver the entire package. We are continually working on all these aspects, improving our workflows in order to be competitive and ensuring we will meet the demands of our future projects and clients. The future is closer than you think.

www.periscopestudio.de

