



# FULL SEX

IN THE HD ERA IT HAS BECOME ALL TOO EASY TO BE DISTRACTED BY GORGEOUS GRAPHICS MAKING SWEET, SWEET LOVE TO YOUR EYEBALLS, ALL WHILE FORGETTING THE SYMPHONY OF SOUND SEDUCING YOUR EARS...

Words: Toby McCasker

Over the past few years, gaming has exploded into mainstream prominence. It's harder nowadays to find someone who hasn't run through the jungle as Nathan Drake, the hobby so ubiquitous the classification of 'gamer' does very little to set you apart from him or her anymore.

With the popular past-time's ever-growing penchant for mass home invasion comes the need for all of its supporting infrastructure to set astonishing precedents. Budgets are bigger, resources have become vast, and while it's easy to mistake *Gran Turismo 5* for an actual race in progress, the one area of contemporary gaming that has seen the most evolution over the past decade is its sound. Themely 8-bit bleeps and bleeps punched out on a Casio keyboard just aren't going to cut it when you can now see every battle-hewn line on Kratos' face.

"Music is a part of the whole experience," muses Inon Zur, the hugely prolific Israeli composer who artfully took over the *Fallout* series' morose post-apocalyptic from Mark Morgan and conceived the *Dragon Age* franchise's medieval moodiness. "Like the visuals, dialogue, story and gameplay, the music is an integral part of the whole experience and it is created to serve a purpose – it gives the game its human emotion. A good video game score is one that is immersed in the game, seamlessly supporting the drama and the emotions without standing out or being noticeable too much, but you feel it."

Michael McCann – whose score for the upcoming *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* is already causing waves – agrees, riffing on his time spent adding audio to Eidos Montreal's drooled-over cyberpunk threequel.

"For *Deus Ex*, you have a very open world. You can walk around for hours and hours in the same locations, and often return to locations throughout the game. Because of this, audio

**"THEMELY 8-BIT BLEEPS AND BLOOPS JUST AREN'T GOING TO CUT IT WHEN YOU CAN NOW SEE EVERY BATTLE-HEWN LINE ON KRATOS' FACE"**

director Steve Szcepkowski and I decided to look at the music more as a reflection of environment and leave the story-driven music and main character themes to cinematics and specific story points in the game. What I liked about this approach," he adds, "is that it allowed a lot of experimentation in the ambient music; using sounds within the environment as part of the music and creating these very rich, and sometimes emotional music beds that surround you while you play. It's a much less melodic score than much of my previous work but I think it is much more immersive than anything I've ever done before."

While it might sound like these two are starting to deal in the esoteric, Zur and McCann couldn't be more spot-on. The key is a fluid kind of emotion, a quality unique to

game sound design that guarantees a direct connection with the player they're usually not even aware of. It's something that has taken the industry at large a long time to fully realise, perhaps because the concept is so intangible: the greatest of games are inextricably linked to their soundtracks in such a way that, without them, the experience might well fail to ring with the same kind of immortality that only that rare,

perfect synthesis of everything great and small can achieve. It becomes impossible to separate them, with many scores as synonymous with the success of their software as the gameplay within. When someone bemoans the lack of a *Final Fantasy VII* remake, it is Nobuo Uematsu's whimsical 'Prelude' that cracks the code to your nostalgia-vault.

And then there's Norihiko Hibino's 'Snake Eater'. Let's take a moment, shall we?

*What a thrill  
With darkness and silence through the night  
What a thrill  
I'm searching and I'll melt into you  
What a fear in my heart  
But you're so supreme!*

*I'd give my life  
Not for honour, but for you! (Snake Eater)  
In my time, there'll be no-one else  
Crime, it's the way I fly to you! (Snake Eater)  
I'm still in a dream,  
Snake Eater!*

# MAJOR PLAYERS

We've spoken to four maestros here but there are a horde of other talented mofos beavering away behind the tunes to your favourite games



## MICHAEL GIACCHINO

The undisputed king. Giacchino is as well known for his work scoring *Medal of Honor* and *Call of Duty* as he is for laying down high-end audio for *The Incredibles* (and a variety of other Pixar flicks, including *Up* and *Cars 2*) *Star Trek*, and the recent *Super 8*.

## GREG EDMONSON

Sci-fi buffs will remember Edmonson's work from Joss Whedon's always-lamented *Firefly* series; everyone else should know that this is the man whose music brings the *Uncharted* games to adventurous life.

## JACK WALL

Starting with *Myst*, Wall's effortless soundscaping can now be heard uplifting the action of *Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow* and adorning the *Mass Effect* franchise with a Vangelis-inspired sheen.

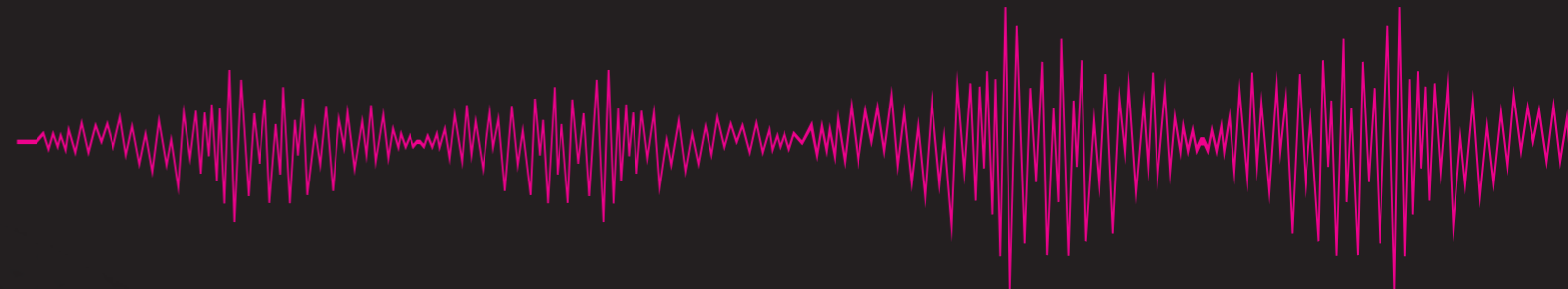
## HARRY GREGSON-WILLIAMS

What would Solid Snake's endless war be like without Gregson-Williams' spectacular brand of future-militant jungle boogie? That title track from *Guns of the Patriots* is some of his finest, most emotive work yet.

## AKIRA YAMAOKA

The man, the myth, the legend. *Silent Hill* just isn't *Silent Hill* without Yamaoka's eerie knack for an even eerier dollop of rusty, creeping atmosphere. Where unsettling ambience is concerned, the gods look to him.

"AS MANY NEW METHODS OF EXPRESSION AS THE NEW AGE OF RECORDING AFFORDS IT, A GAME'S THUNDEROUS BACKING SCORE WOULD BE NOTHING WITHOUT THE RESOURCES TO SET IT IN MOTION"



*Someday, you go through the rain  
And someday, you feed, on a tree frog  
This ordeal, the trial, to survive  
For the day we see new light!*

*I'd give my life  
Not for honour, but for you! (Snake Eater)  
In my time, there'll be no-one else  
Crime, it's the way I fly to you! (Snake Eater)  
I'm still in a dream,  
Snake Eater!*

*I'm still in a dream,  
Snake Eater!*

The English, the hilarious allusions to probable frog-eating, the fact that vocalist Cynthia Harrell somehow managed to sing the whole thing not just without cracking up, but with massive gumption – it's got it all, and it even netted her the 'Best Original Vocal Song – Pop' award from the Game Audio Network Guild at GDC 2005. While it does make scaling all 1,000 vertical miles of that ladder somehow more thrilling than tiresome, the very fact that a piece of music written expressly for a video game can now garner professional accolades provides a retrospective on just how far the art has come and how highly it is now regarded. It's an evolution fellow award-scooper and

*Hitman* composer Jesper Kyd is keenly aware of. A large part of this, he feels, has been made possible by the digital evolution in studio recording. Take it from a man who started his career using only a Commodore 64 and its SID analogue chip.

"The most obvious change is that the music has become CD-based so there is no limit to the number of channels you can have in a song which means the music sounds better now; we can have symphony orchestras and other live musicians which is wonderful. Also, a lot more thought goes into a soundtrack these days. A lot less music was needed back then whereas today we're creating three-hour scores and working with larger productions so there are a lot more considerations."

As many new methods of expression as the new age of recording affords it, a game's thunderous backing score would be nothing without the resources to set it in motion despite the fact it is often the brainchild of one mind. Like Kyd says, game audio can now accommodate entire international ensembles (the fee for which is usually negotiated as part of the composer's salary) – and it often does, adds Zur.

"As the success of the industry continues, the budgets for games have grown and therefore the music should benefit also, which

gives us more opportunities to work with top musicians and record at the best studios in the world. For example, on my current project *The Lord of the Rings: War In The North*, we recorded with the London Philharmonia Orchestra and Choir at Abbey Road Studios."

When this primarily electronic medium finally met the big-budget organic tools of its Hollywood counterpart, evolution within the soundscapes themselves took place. You know it's serious when something inadvertently gives rise to its own creative signature, its own methodology. Kyd points to the unusual results gleaned from hybridising the human and synthetic, noting his work on the *Hitman* franchise and *Freedom Fighters*.

"For the *Hitman: Blood Money* soundtrack I mixed the electronic vibe of *Hitman: Contracts* with the full symphony of *Hitman 2* and came up with a new sound. Whereas *Freedom Fighters* was a mix of electronic music and choir, *Blood Money* was a mix of orchestra with electronics, so I learned a lot from writing these scores. It was a very enjoyable experience because I was given so much freedom to experiment in order to come up with a unique sound. I also feel that the *Blood Money* music is an evolution of the *Freedom Fighters* music because some tracks in *Blood Money* are mostly choir mixed with electronics. ▶



**JASON GRAVES**  
Best known for his innovative, BAFTA award-winning, soundtrack for EA's *Dead Space*.

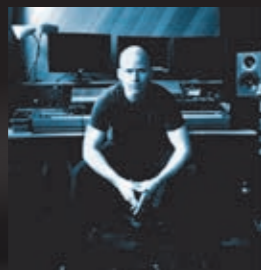
"MUSIC IN GAMES - AURAL SEX, IF YOU WILL - STILL HAS A LITTLE WAY LEFT TO GO BEFORE IT IS TRULY ON PAR WITH THE SHEER SONIC MUSCLE BULKING UP THE BIG SCREEN'S EXPLOITS"



**INON ZUR**  
Zur was studying composition by the age of 10; he's behind *Dragon Age*, *Fallout* and more.



**JESPER KYD**  
Mostly self-taught, Kyd is responsible for the scores behind *Hitman*, *Borderlands*, *Assassin's Creed* and more.



**MICHAEL MCCANN**  
Known for the soundtrack to *Splinter Cell: Double Agent*; now working on *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*.

McCann's recent *Deus Ex* adventures paint a similar picture, hardwiring Kyd's experiments with that liquid emotion we talked about earlier and taking them to their logical conclusion.

"The story incorporates religion, politics, economics and ethics into this conflict, which makes it a very complex and important theme, and one that needs to be expressed musically," says McCann. "To do this, I wanted a constant conflict between acoustic instruments (representing the past - and predominantly done with vocals) and electronic instruments (representing the future). The soundtrack does start off more electronic, but balances out as the different sides of the conflict are introduced. For example, the earlier locations like Detroit are quite electronic, but as you discover more of the story and meet factions that are fighting against scientific innovation, the score takes on more organic elements to represent that side."

The job is, as we've discovered, particularly specialised and generally requires 15 months or more from an individual composer in addition to hundreds of dynamic recorded works. Thus, the men and women behind the digital bombast are now paid accordingly.

However, the pay structure does retain some quirks that hint at its modest origins, McCann admits.

"The salary for a composer is traditionally based on minutes - you make a certain amount per minute and then it becomes a matter of how many minutes of music and how involved the production is. Although the 'per-minute' cost on a AAA game is quite good, there are no royalties or back-end like film and TV. On a widely broadcast TV series, the royalties can very easily add up to more than the original salary. I know there is pressure in the industry to bring this kind of royalty system to the internet and game world, but I think that is a ways off."

A ways off or no, artists specifically renowned for their work in film and television have increasingly found themselves scoring for gamingdom, with famed *Twin Peaks* composer Angelo Badalamenti's chilling strings for David Cage's *Heavy Rain* PS2 precursor, *Fahrenheit*, serving as an early example. A few years ago, this kind of cross-over would've been unheard of. It's a reality that has become increasingly natural as the medium gets cosier and cosier with the legitimacy of Hollywood audio production every year, feels *Dead Space* composer Jason Graves. He would know. Prior to scoring Isaac's terrifying odysseys aboard the Ishimura and beyond, Graves worked exclusively in film and television himself.

"I feel like games have actually become a lot

more cinematic in the last few years, especially where music is concerned. Developers have always been trying to provide the most immersive experience possible, but it seems like we're finally to a point where games are almost being held in the same regard as film.

"From a technical standpoint," he continues, "scoring a film is fairly straightforward. You have a scene that always plays out the same way no matter how many times you watch it, so the music will always sound the exact same. In a game, there could be many different choices and outcomes for any given scene, so I have to be sure to give the developer a lot of emotional choices in my music."

McCann has seen it happening, too. "It's not just a matter of live orchestral scores and major composers like Clint Mansell and Hans Zimmer entering the field that signal progression. I think this was inevitable as games have become more cinematic. I think what's more interesting though is how diverse and experimental game scores are becoming. Looking at Amon Tobin's work on *Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory*, and the scores for *Bully*, *Red Dead Redemption*, and even the hybrid of score and source music in both *BioShock* and *Fallout 3*; there's better work being done here - more innovative production, more thought-out implementation of music than most movies made today."

They're sentiments trebly echoed by Zur. "It's a great area to work in and also evolving with a lot of positive changes; it's becoming a more recognised field. Games are getting closer and closer to movies and the music has a lot to contribute to the emotional impact of the story. But since it is an interactive medium this aspect also needs to be respected; it is an art form in its own right."

Kyd agrees as well, but it's interesting to note that, despite the fantastic distances the medium has travelled from then 'til now, music in games - aural sex, if you will - still has a little way left to go before it is truly on par with the sheer sonic muscle bulking up the big screen's exploits.

"It has not surpassed the production values of Hollywood. It's getting closer, but considering the creative fees and live budgets that are involved with major feature films it's always a challenge to compete with a AAA Hollywood score because the budgets are so much bigger and they are able to hire the absolute best in any genre which really opens up the possibilities.

"That's not to say that you can't achieve a similar quality with a video game score," he grins, "but you have to be highly creative and find ways to be able to compete with the level of a Hollywood budget production."

## RECOGNITION ON RECORD

Game music now earns recognised props from legit organisations the world over. Check out how many ways a budding OST can cement its excellence

### IVOR NOVELLO AWARDS

As of 2010, these guys have included a category for Best Original Video Game Score. In its debut year, Joris de Man's *Killzone 2* went home with it. In 2011, *Napoleon: Total War* got the gong.

### SPIKE VGAS

O! Spike doles out awards for Best Soundtrack, Best Song in a Game, and Best Original Score. *Red Dead Redemption* sauntered off with the latter last year, and deservedly so.

### GRAMMYS

In 2012, the Grammys will include video game music for the first time as part of the Visual Media (Motion, Television, Video Game Music, or Other Visual Media) awards. That didn't stop *Civilization IV*'s Baba Yetu from being the first piece from a game to win the 53rd annual music awards' Best Instrumental Arrangement Accompanying Vocalists, though.

### INTERNATIONAL FILM MUSIC CRITICS ASSOCIATION

Their Best Original Score for Interactive Media award has yet to see any game scores win a major award since the awards began in 2004, although Michael Giacchino showed up as Composer of the Year in 2009.

### HOLLYWOOD MUSIC IN MEDIA AWARDS

Ramin Djawadi's work on *Medal of Honor* scooped Best Original Score - Video Game last year, whilst Inon Zur's stirring 'I Am the One' from *Dragon Age: Origins* did the same in 2009.