

GAMES MUSIC THE CUTTING EDGE OF MOVIE/GAME CONVERGENCE LIES IN AUDIO RATHER THAN GRAPHICS, SAYS CHRISTIAN SYLT

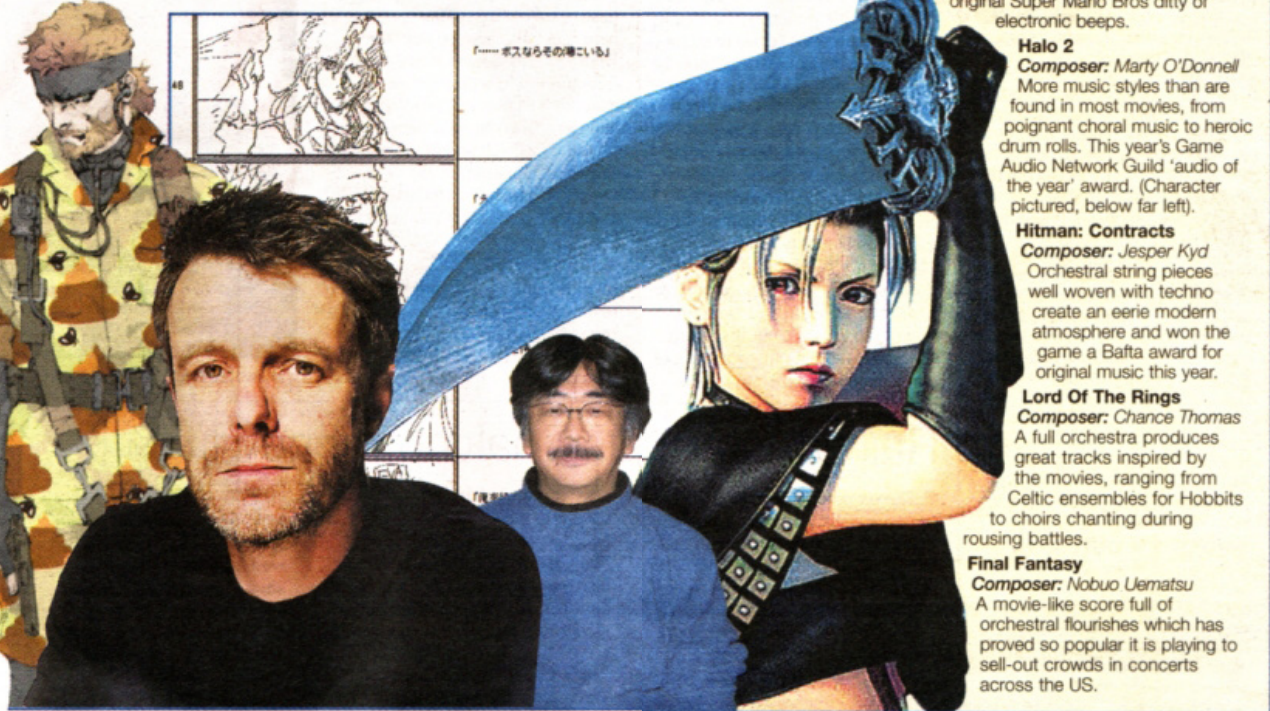
What's the score?

With all those great graphics, it's easy to forget that CD-quality audio has been commonplace in video games for more than a decade. These days, developers aren't just emulating Hollywood's finest visual feasts, they are even employing Hollywood composers.

At the forefront of this trend is the Japanese developer Konami. Its Metal Gear Solid series of games has weighty plots about infiltrating nuclear bases and a suitably sweeping score. The third instalment in the series hit stores in March. The 3million copies sold have made £100million – more than many Hollywood blockbusters bring in.

Heavy metal music

After the original Sony PlayStation premiered in 1998, Metal Gear Solid's director Hideo Kojima armed himself with a multi-million pound budget for each of its PS2 sequels. And to stamp some cinematic authenticity on the game's score, Kojima enlisted English movie composer Harry Gregson-Williams. Gregson-Williams studied at London's Guildhall school of music before moving to the US to work for blockbusters including both Shrek films, Chicken Run and the epic Kingdom Of Heaven. But what caught Kojima's eye was his work on the action films Armageddon, The Rock, Enemy Of The State and The Replacement Killers. Kojima told Gregson-Williams he wanted the Metal Gear music to



Harry Gregson-Williams, with Metal Gear Solid 3 art and storyboard, and Nobuo Uematsu with a knife-wielding Final Fantasy X-2 character

have the same gravitas as his action film scores. 'The process was the same as movies,' says Gregson-Williams. It took six months to compose each game.

'The sound Konami was after was orchestral-sound-meets-electronic, so I was working with an orchestra. Usually, composing is quite lonely. I work with a lot of machines and a computer. The difference is, with a movie, I'm working in sync with the picture. I'm inspired by what I see and the characters and dialogue.' Gregson-Williams explains that 'the effectiveness of music in films is not just the way it sounds, it's about where a certain beat lands in a scene'. But since the Metal Gear music was written in the early stages

of the games' development, he had to write to written descriptions of scenes. 'They sent me these obscure titles of one-minute pieces to write such as "being watched without knowing", or "secretly watching somebody else" or "sneaky tempo".'

Orchestral manoeuvres

Since Konami's team was based in Japan, far from his studio in L.A., Gregson-Williams rarely had face-to-face contact with Kojima. 'It was a little like fishing in the dark,' he says. After sending each of his compositions over the Internet and having no idea in what order they would be used, Gregson-Williams revised them according to feedback from Konami. On movies,

the composer was more used to a director coming to the studio perhaps every other night for three months and 'beating me over the head with a stick'.

And although games have lower budgets than movies, Gregson-Williams explains that this doesn't affect how the music is composed, just how it comes out, since the developer picks up the huge studio and orchestra expenses. He admits: 'Some of the best films I've done have had a very small budget.'

Composing game themes is now treated as seriously within the music industry as films. And Gregson-Williams says that games developers no longer need to hire movie composers to gain credibility:

GAMES WITH TOP TRACKS

The Legend Of Zelda: The Wind Waker

Composer: Koji Kondo
Instrumental tracks styled on sailing songs. Composed by the creator of old-school classic tunes including the original Super Mario Bros ditty of electronic beeps.

Halo 2

Composer: Marty O'Donnell
More music styles than are found in most movies, from poignant choral music to heroic drum rolls. This year's Game Audio Network Guild 'audio of the year' award. (Character pictured, below far left).

Hitman: Contracts

Composer: Jesper Kyd
Orchestral string pieces well woven with techno create an eerie modern atmosphere and won the game a Bafta award for original music this year.

Lord Of The Rings

Composer: Chance Thomas
A full orchestra produces great tracks inspired by the movies, ranging from Celtic ensembles for Hobbits to choirs chanting during rousing battles.

Final Fantasy

Composer: Nobuo Uematsu
A movie-like score full of orchestral flourishes which has proved so popular it is playing to sell-out crowds in concerts across the US.

'Games theme composers will probably start crossing over to films.'

For film composers, doing video games is attractive. Oscar-winning composer Howard Shore, who scored the Lord Of The Rings films and The Aviator, is at work on the music for SUN – an online role-play game out at the end of the year.

And Gregson-Williams won't desert the games industry. He says he hasn't yet been approached about writing the music for Metal Gear Solid 4 but would consider scoring more video-game themes. 'It feels the same to me as if I were to be asked would I consider doing Shrek 3,' he says. 'I'd be a nutter not to do it.'