

feature story

FIOw With a Pro

This is the first in a new series of interviews with GANG audio professionals. Just hot off his latest release "FIOw," I got on the phone with Austin Wintory, a relatively newcomer to the industry, for an interview about that project and what he has in store for the future.

GANG: How long have you been a G.A.N.G. member, and why did you join?

Austin: I have been a G.A.N.G. member for about 6 months. I had gotten a job to do this PS3 title, and some of the team members at Sony who were G.A.N.G. members recommended I check it out. I poked around for about 2 minutes, then got out my wallet!

GANG: So for the record, tell us who you are and where you work.

Austin: My name is Austin Wintory, I work totally freelance in Burbank, CA. Up till now I have done work primarily in film/TV, though I had done a handful of independent video games. Through some good 'ole career luck I wound up working on the PS3 title FIOw. As a consumer, and long time gamer, I'm thrilled to be working in games.

GANG: Speaking of FIOw, how did you get involved with the project?

Austin: I met Jenova Chen, then a master's student at USC, who was, at that time, looking for a composer/sound designer for his Master's Thesis. This project was an online flash title that was being designed to investigate gamer behavior. He (Jenova) wanted to explore new ideas of what gamers might be looking for in their games, whether that was different emotional worlds, or a non-linear experience with a flexible structure. I was a good fit for the project, and we were soon working on coming up with a unique sound pallet for the game.

After the flash version's successful launch, Sony became interested in the game, and wanted to add it to a growing list of PS3 download titles. Jenova and his partner Kellee Santiago had formed their company, ThatGameCompany, and made the deal. Initially, Sony was going to hire their own people to do the game audio. As it turned out since we had already established the sound of the game, and they couldn't find anyone to match it, Kellee went to Chuck Doud and asked if they could just hire me. At this point I was still just going to do part of the game, but then I ended up doing the whole game.

GANG: Can you describe FIOw and tell us why it's spelled the way it is?

Austin: That's just how Jenova spelled it from the beginning! The game basically grew out of this idea that Jenova wanted to create a game that could last for simply 5 minutes, 5 hours, or 50 hours if you wanted it to. The important idea was that a player would experience a reward no matter how much time he/she invested into the game.



The game is intended to be a relaxing experience. One of the things Jenova was very interested in was seeing what people's response would be to this kind of game. He (Jenova) jokingly told me, while we were doing the flash version, that he would only be successful if this was the most addictive, downloaded game on the whole internet. Turns out he was only half-joking. I think he had something like 150,000 players in the first week alone, and that was entirely by reputation and word-of-mouth. I don't think there was any advertising to speak of.

GANG: Can you tell us about the music in the game? What you used for inspiration and what creative factors you added?

Austin: Well when we were discussing the sound for the game Jenova said that orchestral scores (which is my compositional background) were great, but that they had nothing to do with this game. He also didn't want an ambient, soundscape electronic score. Instead he wanted me to create a hybrid of the two. He wanted something that would be rich with the nuance of live music, but not sound like an orchestra.

So, my first goal was to create a pallet of instruments for this game that didn't yet exist. Some of it sounds more electronic than other parts, and some sounds a little more 'traditional.' I messed with some choral samples a bit, but they're probably the least altered sounds. Some people have called the music "New Age-ish," which is not really what I had in mind. But I've also read it described as 'epic and Wagnerian' and that's definitely not it either! I would ultimately try to describe the music the same way I would the game: 'Sort of strange, but at its core it's relaxing.'

GANG: Can you tell us about the sound design in the game?

Austin: The sound design in this game is fundamentally musical. I would send a handful, sometimes fifteen (15) versions of sounds and sometimes they would use one, or sometimes find a way to use them all.

I created these elaborate matrices in order to keep track of all the music and sound effects, so that I could control the emotional experience as much as possible. For example, the music evolves the deeper you go in a campaign, often modulating through various different keys and changing the instrument palette. For the sound design I would plot points on the matrix to come up with various common denominators, so that when I wanted sounds to harmonize with the background I knew which few pitches / keys would work. Likewise, say we needed a sound for when the player was being attacked. I'd pitch it in some dissonant relation to the music track. Since the key of the music often changed, I could put certain sounds in a specific key area so that as you went deeper it got more dissonant, or more constant, etc. It was a bit of a headache to plan it all out, but it was worth it.

In the end I had written something like six or seven hours of music, and over 500 sound effects. I owe tremendous, infinite thanks to Paul Fox

and Monty Mudd over at Sony for helping to make this even possible!

GANG: How big was your team?

Austin: I worked, especially in the beginning, exclusively with Kellee. She would have her internal pow-wow's with Sony and TGC's people, and then get back to me with feedback. Sometimes the first thing I would do would be perfect, sometimes there'd be a half-dozen versions before we found what felt right. The bottom line is that the entire time it remained collaborative. I never felt like Kellee was trying to step all over my creative impulses and I don't think I was ever guilty of refusing to try something new. In fact, I'm almost disappointed when I'm doing a project and it's perfect right out of the gate, and there's no feedback from the developer. The nature of collaboration forces me to be continuously re-thinking my approach, honing and sharpening it. I think it makes the music more creative and original to have some fundamentally non-musical outside influence, like a gameplay element or something.

GANG: What is your setup and how do you work?

Austin: I am a pencil and paper kind of guy so I do a lot of my composing that way. I'm not a huge gearhead like a lot of my colleagues, but I do enjoy toys! I use a G5 and a few slaved GigaStudio rigs as the basis for it all. For a game like FIOw there's a lot of custom sampling involved as well.

GANG: Are there talks of releasing a sound track of the game?

Austin: No, not at this time. I don't think they really feel that the game is big enough to warrant a physical CD release, but in the meantime they are authorized to make a Myspace page with the music from the game.

You can also hear clips from the end credits and overall theme from campaign 1 on my website's listen page.

GANG: Working for such a big publisher, how did you handle meeting all of your obligations? Was there a lot of "crunch" time at the end of the project and if so how long did that period last?

Austin: My stuff kind of came in phases. Most of the team seemed to be in perpetual crunch mode. The project release dates kept moving a little bit at a time, and each time they (the publisher) wanted all this new content as well, but the new release date of course didn't take into account the added content. The flash game was completed spring of 2006; the Sony demo began August 2006 and the game shipped February 2007. I worked on the project pretty much that entire time.

GANG: What has been the most rewarding aspect of working on this project?

Austin: The bottom line is the collaboration. What makes or breaks any experience for me is the nature of the collaboration. A really great experience on a project is always one where I may as well have met the

developer or the director at a BBQ. It's always fun, even when it's incredibly intense at the 11th hour. I need the human interaction to drive the creative impulse.

Most of my projects up until now have used, what I call, a conveyor belt fashion of music making. There is a project moving down conveyor belt. At some point I'm supposed to stamp my music on it, and just send it off. Yes, you get the job done, but it's not as rewarding as working collaboratively on a project.

If you want to hear more from Austin, here are some links:

Austin's Homepage:

www.austinwintory.com

FIOw's "Official" Soundtrack (More tracks forthcoming):

<http://myspace.com/flowsoundtrack>.

ThatGameCompany's Official Website:

www.ThatGameCompany.com.

If you are interested in being interviewed for the series drop me an e-mail at michelle@audiogang.org.

Michelle Sorger, G.A.N.G. Vice President

2007-06-26 18:36:41 by Jerry Lyons

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