

Wintory's coming

The Grammy-nominated composer on becoming the busiest musician in games

Five years later, the emails, Facebook messages and Instagram posts are still arriving on a daily basis; Austin Wintory happily acknowledges that his work on *Thatgamecompany's* journey was a career turning point. "I feel extraordinarily grateful," he tells us. "I've had composer friends and colleagues who've had very successful careers but have never had an experience like that, where something became so personal to people that it's something they're excited about years later, that they've built into the fabric of their lives."

Wintory was 24 when he signed up to score *Journey*, and 27 when it came out. After the fact, it dawned on him that he'd spent more than 18 per cent of his life so far working on the game, and he suggests he got "freakishly lucky" with the way circumstances led his own musical journey to closely mirror the game's own narrative. "You are probably going to change as a person considerably in that span," he says. "Hopefully, you're a deeper thinker or a more mature person; hopefully there's positive growth. I certainly aspire to that."

Wintory wrote *Journey's* score in sequence, so the themes you hear at the beginning of the game were composed much earlier than those at the end. "And it really was, significantly, an earlier part of my life. I mean, I was recently out of college, and my career was very much in its embryonic stages." As *Journey* began to take shape, Wintory's music became a reflection of his own personal development. "The end-credits aria, *I Was Born For This*, is reflective of the very different place I was at in my life. I

was very lucky that, metaphorically, the game is supposed to feel like one's early life and then one's later life. And I was living a microcosm of that in parallel." As such, he was able to draw on his own life experience for inspiration. "That," he says, "is just insane, dumb luck."

The process was a transformative one for Wintory, teaching him that living a full and varied life would give him a greater range of experiences from which to draw. As a result, his work since has seen him capitalise on *Journey's* success not by trying to repeat the formula but by pursuing more diverse projects. The years since have been an eclectic ride for Wintory, from the brassy, big-band themes of *Leisure Suit Larry Reloaded* to

the earthy, mournful tones of *The Banner Saga* via the playful, piano-led ragtime of *Monaco: What's Yours Is Mine*. Now, he's working on striking multiplayer brawler *Absolver*, about which he's palpably excited (see *Martial* artist).

This, to put it mildly, is a composer willing to take any opportunity to step outside his comfort zone, the challenge of trying new styles is clearly important to him. That stems, in part, from a lifelong passion for the work of Jerry Goldsmith. "He scored hundreds of films and thousands of episodes of television, and the thing I always found so incredible about his work was that through all of these shifts in genre, and surface-level storytelling, he never stopped being Jerry Goldsmith," Wintory says. "His canon of music is extremely stylistically diverse, and yet it's never mistakeable as anyone but him."



When he's not composing, Austin Wintory studies evolutionary biology and astrophysics. For fun, obviously



Where then, we wonder, does he find inspiration when scoring games that might be less directly analogous to real-life experiences, like *Ready At Dawn's* cartoonish arena brawler *Deformers*? "Well, clearly I try to turn myself into a kind of gelatinous blob and let people thrash me around for a bit. I'm all about method composing!" he laughs, before explaining that there's always a raw source of inspiration. Sometimes, it can be just a single word. "In the case of *Monaco*, I remember the director Andy Schatz said, 'I want the game to feel naughty,'" he recalls. "That was the exact word he used, and I loved that, because 'naughty' is like a cousin of mischievous, [rather than] cunning and subversive. This isn't a heist game about master thieves who would step over the dead body of their own grandmother. 'Naughty' suggests a far lighter tone, almost like kids getting away with a little petty crime. And I'm not a thief, but I can channel experiences like that from when I was a kid for a [similar] emotional takeaway."

Though he's become close friends with some of the studios he's worked with (he claims *The Banner Saga* developers could ask him to work on "a *Words With Friends* knock-off" and he'd happily agree) it's the pursuit of new creative avenues that drives him most. "The simplest way to put it is: will this let me write music that I feel like I've never really written before?" he says. "Will this let me explore ideas I haven't previously had occasion to?" Whether that means the music playing the role of narrator or taking more of a backseat to the action matters little to him. "I'm not trying to make games or films this 'vehicle for my musical expression'," he says, self-mockingly. "Being a participant in the process is ultimately my core passion." ■

"Clearly I try to turn myself into a kind of gelatinous blob and let people thrash me around for a bit"



Wintory's soundtrack for Journey was nominated for a Grammy award. "Everything to do with Journey is just one 'I can't believe that's real' after another"



Wintory likens Absolver's principle of friendship through combat to the dynamic between Rocky Balboa and Apollo Creed



Abrú saw Wintory rewrite with Journey's Matt Nava. "The friendships I've developed tend to be with people who make interesting games"

MARTIAL ARTIST

The eclectic influences behind Wintory's Absolver soundtrack



We ask Wintory if he can give us some hints on what to expect from his Absolver score. Ten minutes later he's still talking, covering everything from musical clichés in martial-arts movies to the Darwinian model of evolutionary biology. Director Pierre Terno has, he says, let him be experimental with the score, which means you'll hear banjos played with a Coke bottle cap, but in keeping with the theme of respectful competition there will be "an undercurrent of compassion. That's probably the best I can offer given the adage that talking about music is like dancing about architecture," he smiles.



ABOVE The Banner Saga's score unfolds dynamically during the combat sequences. RIGHT Wintory scored stealth-action game Monaco: What's Yours Is Mine soon after Journey

