Foreword

BANG! There, that got your attention. OK, so that’s a fairly bad joke to illustrate just what sound can do for you… namely, GET YOUR ATTENTION! Actually, sound does so much more: it connects your visual input to a frame of reference, the audio-visual contract. So, when we create experiences, either in film, TV, live on stage, or in computer games, we use this cerebral connection between sound and vision to intensify your overall experience. Because, that’s our goal in any of these mediums—to create an experience!

Sound takes up 50% of this experience (maybe not 50% of the budget, but that’s another story). There’s an old adage we audiophiles use when discussing budgets in the hope that a producer might actually listen to us once in a while. If you get a room full of people to watch great graphics with poor sound and then compare it to poor graphics with great sound, they will almost always perceive the latter as the best quality graphics.

Generally producers don’t believe this story, but I have witnessed it in real life. A few years ago I was working on an AAA title–action adventure: cars, guns, gangsters… you get the idea. One evening, the sound designer reworked the “Whacking someone over the head with a pool cue” sound, improving its overall effectiveness with small, subtle, deep thuds, some crunching bone (actually carrots), and a deliciously realistic skin smacking sound (supermarket chicken being hit by a baseball bat). He added his new sound to the game database and went home. The following morning the game team rebuilt the whole game (including the new sound). Later that day many people congratulated the “Whacking someone over the head with a pool cue” animator on his new improved animation: he was somewhat bemused to say the least. He hadn’t worked on that animation for several weeks. I’m sure you can work out what happened, people saw the same animation with the new improved sound and believed they were seeing a better animation. This is how we use the audio-visual contract to our benefit.

OK, so that’s my practitioner's story in, but let’s take a look at game sound and what you need to study if you are interested in this field… and what’s in this book. There are several axes or dimensions to think about. Emotion is the obvious one: fear, anger, hatred and so on, these are all well represented in game sound, from survival horrors to gangster simulations. But what about humour, joy, happiness? Just play Mario Kart, Sonic the Hedgehog, Loco Roco and I guarantee you’ll soon realise that the sound has a great deal to do with provoking laughter, smiles, and an enlightened mood.

So, I’ve now mentioned the breadth of experience our industry creates, but think too of another axis, the history of game sound. From tiny little beeps and bleeps (Pong) to the colossus soundscapes of today’s blockbuster games. A story which starts with a few programmers/musicians/sound engineers trying to get “something” out of a paltry 8-bit chip after the graphics guys have already had their fill, through to my point at the beginning of this introduction–persuading a producer to give you some kind of
serious sound budget. A tale of one guy who does everything (including the voice over) to a small army of specialists from musicians, Foley artists, sound technicians, weapons specialists, vehicle specialists, atmosphere creators, the list goes on. Our game sound pioneers took this journey and, along the way, solved some tricky issues, like repetition—in music, in dialogue, in sound effects—memory management, automated in-game mixing and so on.

I am going to sum this section up by saying there are now many different aspects to game sound: music, diegetic sound, atmospheres, interactive music, development of emotional connection, realism, abstraction, super-realism. What I really like about this book’s approach to game sound is the 5 core sections which give it a unique and very practical way of tying together all the axes I mentioned earlier, namely: Interactive Practice, Frameworks & Models, Emotion & Affect, Technology, and Current & Future Design. In conclusion, then, I hope that you, as a reader, enjoy the discussion and findings discussed here as much as I have.

Dave Ranyard

Dave Ranyard is the Game Director/Executive Producer of Sony’s hugely successful, 20+ million selling SingStar franchise. He has been in the games industry since the mid nineties, starting out as an AI programmer at Psygnosis, and later moving to Sony Computer Entertainment Europe’s London Studio where he has held a number of roles over the past 10 years, ranging from audio manager to running the internal creative services group. He has worked on titles including Wip3out, The Getaway & The Getaway: Black Monday, The Eyetoy: Play series and, more recently, Singstar. Prior to the games industry he lectured in Artificial Intelligence at the University of Leeds where he also gained a PhD in the subject. In recent years, Dave has taken a keen interest in GDC and is currently on the advisory board. Dave is a keen musician and he has written and produced many records over the past 15 years.