

Career Opportunities

Music to Shoot Aliens By

by Al Kaufman Think back to your favorite video game. Was it Pac-Man? Donkey Kong? Mario Brothers? You got to go on far-reaching adventures, shoot down enemies, and rescue the maiden. But there was always that one drawback, that incessant high-pitched squealing - that beep-beeping and bloop-blooping. It made you want to yank the sound cable out of the game. As games moved on to home computer status, people did the equivalent of plug pulling; they turned the volume all the way down.

But as technology has progressed, those beeps and bloops have been transformed into musical scores that would make John Williams ache to slay a medieval dragon just to hear the fanfare when he succeeded. Then again, it may not be long before Williams *is* doing the composing himself. "In two to five years, computer games are going to be on the same level as movies," says Marc Schaeffgen, a jazz guitarist and co-founder of Midian, which creates music for software companies' programs. "There will be serious composers, and people will be crossing over doing movies and multi-media."

Schaeffgen, whose business partner Dona Glover has ghost written scores for films like *Batman* and *Hellraiser*, predicts that this trend will become an industry standard when studios start releasing video games in conjunction with films, which is what happened for the film *Stargate*. This would be greatly beneficial to game producers, because it would increase their budget exponentially. While right now, composers do all the music for games on MIDI (musical instrument digital interface, which allows instruments to be recorded on computer) keyboards relatively cheaply, they would be able to bring in a full orchestra for about \$250,000. "Once budgets approach movie budgets," says Schaeffgen, "you're going to have a nicely scored game."

Origin, an international computer software entertainment company based in Austin, is starting to approach movie budgets. Origin is the biggest of the 30 Austin and 300 Central Texas software entertainment companies. It is best known for its *Wing Commander* interactive series. *Wing Commander III* alone has sold over half a million copies worldwide, and has been translated into six languages. Perhaps its greatest feature, however, is that it's single handedly resurrected the career of Mark "Luke Skywalker" Hamill, who stars in the games with Malcom McDowell.

Origin's George Oldziej, who also plays with Susanna Sharpe & Samba Police, composed the music for *Wing Commander III*, although he admits to having "no computer background." He received his BA from the Manhattan School of Music and started composing after he picked up a sequencer and MIDI keyboard, and decided to go for his Masters degree. A friend told him about Origin. "I just put together some *Star Wars*-type space demo," he remembers. His score for *Wing Commander III* was so successful that he may end up conducting an orchestra in Munich for *Wing Commander IV*.

While Schaeffgen admits Origin is "on the high end of game development," and other companies cannot afford to do the things they do, the industry is growing so quickly that anything is possible in the future. CD-ROM games, which barely existed only two years ago, are now taking over stores such as Babbage's in the Highland Mall. Games such as Sega's *Beavis and Butt-head* use pop music, which may open the way for musicians to serve as studio hands for video games in just two years. What a soundtrack is now to a movie, so it may be soon for a video game. Musicians are already flocking to computer companies. Britt Daniel, who does sound effects and orchestrates cinematic sequences for Origin, as well as play guitar in the punky band Spoon, has noticed the influx at Origin. "People who were working straight jobs or in crappy little stores are now getting to work here and express themselves. And there will be work for more musicians as the field expands."

The field is already growing and becoming more competitive. Origin composer Paul Baker, who also plays sax in the Tony Campise Band, beat out over 200 other applicants to land his job at Origin, and things are even tougher now. "We get some very good tapes coming in," he says, "and it's like, whew, I'm glad I've already got my job."

But not everyone can do this. "You have to be familiar with MIDI composition or at least be a good keyboard player," says Daniel, who, although never having heard of Origin before he applied for the job, gained experience at UT where he received a Radio-TV-Film degree. "I don't think anyone just waltzes in here and says, 'Hey, I just wrote a punk song, let me compose.'"

This is because computer game scores are more complicated and intricate than any movie score John Williams has ever written. "With a movie," explains Baker, "you get a fixed time. You get more details, such as facial expressions. The music can write itself. While with computer games it's like, 'It's a space battle scene. Go.'"

Since these are games, and the user controls the action, the music must set the mood but also be able to change at a moment's notice. Certain characters have certain themes, and different situations have different music. For just one scene in the upcoming *Prowler* game for Origin, composer Joe Basquez wrote six different pieces of music, which he labeled "normal," "interest," "low combat," "high combat," "victory," and "failure." "There can be abrupt changes at any time," says Basquez. "You have to write music to accommodate that." Not only that, but Basquez, like all computer game composers, writes the music based solely on the storyline. The graphics do not come until later.

Some composers, such as Brent Fariss, who is currently on contract to write the music for *Enclave*, an upcoming medieval fantasy game from local company Maelstrom, have little difficulty working in this manner. "Usually, if I write music, I always see a scene in my head anyway, so everything I write is sort of a soundtrack," says Fariss, who also plays bass in the grunge band Drone. "This time, I'm just told what the soundtrack is. I'm setting moods. And that's one of the best things about music. That's my interest in it."

For Basquez, writing for these games presents a whole new musical challenge, namely, writing on computers. Like most computer game composers, Basquez's background is predominantly as a musician. A drummer since age 13, and a guitarist at 19, Basquez also scored the independent film *Ninth Life*, with Johnny Reno. He picked up a MIDI synthesizer in 1983. When he heard of an opening at Origin, he simply submitted an audition tape. He now enjoys composing on a computer. "The software is like composing on a cassette player. You can go back in and take out the bad notes," he says. "The computer is like your music-ians, except the drummer always shows up on time."

Although many of the composers still perform in their off hours, they are thankful for the jobs they have. Says Basquez, who worked at the Department of Human Services before hooking up with Origin, "The fact that I'm able to compose music eight hours a day and get paid for it is phenomenal." The one thing the composers do not enjoy, however, is the lack of respect they garner. The frustration shows in people like Laura Barratt, who scored Origin's *Wings of Glory*. "*Wings of Glory* is getting all these great reviews in national magazines, but nobody mentions the music," she says. "They love the action, the colors, the zeppelin graphics, but nobody mentions the music."

Origin's Barry Leitch is more concise. "Nobody gives a fuck about computer music. It's disposable music."

The computer companies themselves understand the importance of a good score. Joel Manners, who co-founded Maelstrom last year with Edwin Herrell and Gilbert Austin, calls game music "fantastically important." He says, "Any average moviegoer is aware of the dramatic effect of the right score in a movie, and how ludicrous the wrong score is. It's getting to be the same in computer games. The music adds another dimension of reality."

Baker, who often spends a full day composing one minute of music, feels the lack of respect from the general public comes from the history of the games. "People's first thoughts are of beeps and boops," he says. "So, until games get the same level of prestige as movies, people won't realize what we do." Things are moving in that direction. Origin has already released music from various games on CD, and there is talk of turning some of the games into movies or TV shows, which would enable the composers to write the themes, and thus gain notoriety and esteem from their peers.

That is the plan for Fariss. "The ultimate goal of this is to lead to other things, like film scores. When someone writes a film score, nobody considers that selling out. But computer music isn't highly regarded yet because of the limitations. And you still have some musicians who say, 'True musicians don't use computers. Everything has to be real.' I'd get excited working with real musicians and scoring for real musicians, but it's just not practical. The computer makes it all feasible."

But the computer does have its limitations. Although the general MIDI language consists of 128 sounds, only 16 can be produced at one time. And these sounds are still computer synthesized. A saxophone in *Wing Commander* does not sound as warm as it does on a Branford Marsalis record. Instead, it has a tinny, cheesy quality. But with new digital audio technology, composers can produce CD quality music. For the Origin game *Chopper Assault*, Leitch plugged an electric guitar into an effects generator, which went straight into the computer. Users need a more advanced computer to appreciate the difference in sound, but it's worth it. Game platforms that utilize computer technology, such as 300, come equipped with Dolby Surround Sound. The players now feel as if they've been thrown in the middle of a sweeping David Lean epic, as opposed to listening to a truck backing up.

But it's not that simple. Even with new CD-ROM technology, which lets the composers write music at 44 KHz and 16 bits (CD quality), there is not space on the game disc, which must hold all the other aspects of the game, to store that much information. During battle scenes, where each enemy has artificial intelligence, music quality is reduced to 11 KHz and 8 bits to make room for all the action. It's frustrating for the composers. "It's inevitable," says Basquez, "but we just have to accept it and fight for what we can get." In the meantime, Origin audio recording engineer Randy Buck predicts that within two years time, all music will maintain CD quality throughout the entire game.

The talent is there, and once the technology catches up, these people may finally get the recognition they deserve. And who knows, in a few years, John Williams may be fighting to compose the music for *Wing Commander V*. n