

Develop Column – April

Calling Programmers – YOUR SOUNDTRACK NEEDS YOU!

It doesn't matter how talented you are, how great your studio, or how well produced your audio – poor programming will undermine it all.

Audio coding is a vital development foundation, not a task to be hurriedly delegated to a junior two months before shipping.

I spoke to Jason Page, Audio Manager for Sony Europe, fresh from his GDC presentation. Jason's one of those rare commodities – a content creator and technologist, so I was doubly interested in his views.

JP: "To me, trying to create high quality realism is the biggest difference between PS1 and PS2 audio. The public will no longer be thinking "it's only a game". They don't care how cleverly your chip music was created if it sounds weak compared with their DVD.

With graphics, any new technique such as lens flare or bump mapping eventually becomes the norm for every title. So it is with audio programming and things are developing quickly.

You've got to be in there at the start of the project. It's important to drive stakes in the ground early on regarding CPU, RAM and disk access for sound – shoe-horning everything in later for a major milestone is a recipe for disaster. Put placeholders into the code for everything so you know all things technical are under control – you don't need the final sounds for this...

Implementation systems and tools that allow “scripting” of audio are key. Sound designers need to test things out quickly themselves – you shouldn’t have to recompile the game just to hear one volume change.

I think we definitely need more dedicated audio programmers to handle all this – creatively aware people who value sound. How can you expect a graphics or AI programmer to implement audio intelligently if they don’t understand ADSRs, panning, reverb depth and so on?

You need a close working relationship between content and programming people and a level of trust. It’s definitely not “them and us” anymore. And it takes time! Why do programmers spend days making a nice graphical explosion, but then expect to just chuck in a few sound calls when they get a spare minute?”

JB: Why indeed. Mind you, if you’ve tried to recruit an experienced audio programmer recently, you’ll already know that they’re a rare breed. With demand set to soar, surely any programmer who chooses to specialise in this area is entering a land of opportunity.