



The more things change...

...the more they stay the same. Outsource Media UK's **Mark Estdale** looks at how the audio scene has changed in the past decade, and how it's still fighting the same battles now...

Right: Mark Estdale

Looking back to 1996, when I first started in audio, it's easy to see the massive changes that have taken place in the industry. The biggest single difference is in the amount of audio: increased platform memory and processing power has enabled cinematic audio possibilities for scoring, voice and sound design that are virtually limitless. The main constraints now are budget and time; the biggest constraint then was the number of kilobytes. Plus, obviously, along with size comes a natural increase in overall complexity.

In addition to that, audience expectations have also changed. The gaming audience increasingly expects a truly cinematic experience, and this is reflected in game reviews. The sound element can account for up to 20 per cent of a review and score, and so with raised expectations has come a clear necessity for higher production values. When Outsource Media introduced full voice services to games companies in 1996, based on best practice in film, we frequently got blank looks. Now everyone talks about professionalism, craft and production expertise. What was once seen as unnecessary now is the norm.

APPRECIATION SOCIETY

With this increase in professionalism has, I believe, come a greater appreciation of what we do within the audio community, audience and press – but true kudos is still blighted by a lack of vision for audio within developers themselves. Frequently we find that audio directors are under resourced and under valued. The few teams that we work with that are resourced well generally have board-level executives with an understanding and vision for audio.



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BAFTAs and Develop Industry Excellence Awards recognising audio achievement are positive, but until we can get the message across that audio is important – complete with clearly defined production needs and cost benefit – we won't see true commitment. Once we get commitment, kudos will follow – but, in the end, you can't value something you don't understand. In other media, such as animation, the impact of audio and voice performance is clearly understood, resourced and credited, and the kudos corresponds.

Of course, we have to keep one eye on the future too, and that means more complexity. An audio designer would do well these

days with doctorates in acoustics, 3D physics and maths.

From our tight perspective as an outsource supplier of voice content, the non-linearity and increasing complexity of game dialogue will (and does) require novel production solutions. The key for any production is getting the right information to the right place at the right time.

The models, pipelines and studio technology used for animation and film dialogue are inadequate for games. They simply constrain creativity when applied in our industry. This is a bone my team and I have gnawed for 13 years but it is only now that the work is becoming truly pertinent. We've already redefined both the recording studio and the processes needed to facilitate true excellence in game dialogue production.

The shape of the team has also evolved. It used to be: casting director, voice director, dialogue engineer and dialogue editor, but these days we have tools and technology programmers in the mix. We no longer use paper, and nor do we use classic script formats.

A STITCH IN TIME

Our perennial message to developers – the one that gets the blank looks – is to get the outsource dialogue team hired as early as possible. Dialogue pre-production is key to good results and the optimum time to get a team involved to add the highest value to a production, is at the character design stage.

This fact increases in importance as complexity increases, but we're still waiting for most developers to get the message. Just like 1996.

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